# "Nuwe Sionsgesange": Past and Present

**Christina Landman**
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-0738
University of South Africa
christina.landman2@gmail.com

## Abstract

The "Sionsgesange" has been the Afrikaans hymnal of the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church during most of the 20th century. In 1994, this church united with the Black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). However, the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" remains in use in the Coloured congregations of this united church. This article consists of two main parts. Firstly, the history of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" will be described briefly. Secondly, a short analysis of the contents of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" will be made in terms of three categories: the images of God/Christ/Holy Spirit portrayed, the otherworldliness displayed, and the pietistic scheme of sin-soul-salvation confessed. Brief reference will also be made to the language divisions in the URCSA, and the question will be asked whether the different hymnals used in the congregations deepen these divisions. This will be contextualised in the URCSA Karlienpark-Rustenburg congregation, which is situated in what was called the Coloured township of Rustenburg before 1994.

**Keywords:** Nuwe Sionsgesange; Dutch Reformed Mission Church; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa; hymnals in South African churches; images of God; Otherworldliness; sin-soul-salvation

UNISA university of south africa PRESS
Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
Volume 52 | Number 2 | 2026 | #21095 | 17 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/21095
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)
© The Author(s) 2026

*Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/*

# Introduction

## Background

Since the 17th century, missionary work in South Africa has been done by inspired individuals from Europe, as well as European and American missionary societies. These missionaries brought with them the fruits of the Dutch and German Pietism of the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as the American Revivalism of the same time. The local white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa commenced with missionary work relatively late, in the middle of the 19th century and within its preference for racial segregation. Thus, the "mother" church established the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for Blacks in 1951 (or in 1963 according to some sources), and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for Coloureds, that is, people of mixed parentage, in 1881. Both were seen by the white mother church as daughter churches, functioning under its supervision and discipline.

In 1994, the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united under the new name of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). It remains "uniting" since the white Dutch Reformed Church has not joined the unification yet, giving the "political contents" of the Confession of Belhar as the main reason. The Confession of Belhar was formally accepted by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986 when, at the height of apartheid, the DRMC Synod, convening in the then Coloured township of Belhar near the Cape Town Airport, expressed its belief in God who sides with the poor and oppressed.

Important for this study is that the Coloured and Black congregations of the URCSA, and the white DRC, sing from different hymnals, as they have done prior to 1994. The white DRC sings from the "Liedboek," which is based on the "Psalm- en Gesangeboek" of 1978, the Coloured congregations of the URCSA from the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," and the Black congregations of the URCSA from the "Hosanna," which is translated into Sesotho, Setwana, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. Membership of the URCSA is open to all races, and the distinction made here between Coloured and Black congregations is simply to point out that the different hymnals used in the united church may reflect and even encourage division.

# Aim

The aim of this article is threefold. Firstly, a short history of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" will be given from secondary sources that are based on archival material. Secondly, a content analysis of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" will be made according to three categories: (1) the images of God/Christ/Holy Spirit that are presented in the songs; (2) the Otherworldliness as opposed to a Thisworldliness that comes to the fore in the songs; and (3) the pietistic expression of a sin-soul-salvation scheme that is present in the songs. Thirdly, the expansion of the Afrikaans hymns to English and popular songs will

be discussed, and with English gaining the upper hand in the Coloured congregations of the URCSA, the question is briefly asked whether the use of the Afrikaans hymnal may continue to support internal divisions in the URCSA. The URCSA congregation of Karlien Park, situated in what was called the "Coloured township" of Rustenburg in the North-West Province of South Africa, will be used to contextualise the role of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" in a Coloured congregation today.

## Literary Review

Very little has been written on the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange." In 1963, CJ Kriel completed his doctoral thesis, "*Die Geskiedenis van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881–1956. 'n Historiese Studie van Sendingwerk onder die Kleurlingbevolking van Kaapland"* (The history of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa 1881–1956: An historical study of the mission work amongst the Coloureds in the Cape). In this study, he presented a history of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as a church to the Coloureds over the 75 years from its inception in 1881 until 1956. On pages 269 to 272, he provided a brief history of the "Sionsgesange."

In 2016, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel published an article, "*Afrikaans: Voertaal, Kerktaal, Strydtaal in die NGSK en VGKSA*" (Afrikaans: Spoken Language, Church Language, Struggle Language in the DRMC and the URCSA) on the role of Afrikaans in the everyday lives of Coloured people who belonged to the DRMC/URCSA. On pages 149 to 150, she took up the history where Kriel had finished and described the history of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" briefly for the 60 years from 1956 to 2016.

The first part of this article on the history of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" is based on these two sources, the work of Kriel and Plaatjies-Van Huffel.

Marie Jorritsma (2016, 229–247), in an article "Hidden Histories of Religious Music in a South African Coloured Community," explores the Khoisan, Xhosa, and colonial musical influences in the singing of Coloured congregations in Graaff-Reinet, the oldest town in the Eastern Cape Province. Without presenting actual evidence, she presumes that the Khoisan and Xhosa music influenced the vibrant tones of the *koortjies* (choruses) cherished and sung by the Coloureds. Of importance for this study is her presupposition that "the influences of colonization and missionization are perhaps those most strongly heard in the music of this religious community" (Jorritsma 2016, 237). In the second part of this article, in which a content analysis of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" will be conducted, the influence of European-becoming-missionary piety, as well as American-becoming-missionary revivalism, will indeed be explored.

Devandre Boonzaaier and Alethea de Villiers, in 2019, published an article, "The Moravian Heritage of Community Musicking," indicating that its founder, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), a Lutheran of Pietist upbringing, created a unique and original Christ-centred worship tradition, emphasising experience, simplicity and community. Within these parameters, where the need for an Afrikaans

hymnal developed in the 1900s, the "Sionsgesange" of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church was used (Boonzaaier and De Villiers 2019, 1–3). This is further proof of the Pietist roots and contents of the "Sionsgesange," as will be argued in the second part of this article.

In this regard, Willa Boezak (2024) in an article "God, *lyding en stemme van protes*" (God, suffering and voices of protest) mourned the fact that the "Sionsgesange" of the DRMC/URCSA are based on a Western model of alienation: "*Blykbaar was die doel om hemelgerigte gesange, wat op die hiernamaals fokus en die harde werklikheid ignoreer, te komponeer*" (Boezak 2024, 2). Apparently, the aim was to compose heaven-directed songs which focused on life after death and ignored the harshness of reality. Indeed, it will be indicated in the second part of this article, which contains a content analysis of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," how Otherworldly these hymns are.

Finally, Daniël Kuys (2017, 305–317) referred to the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" and its role in presenting division in the URCSA in an article, "The Belhar Confession and Internal Unity." This article will make a brief reference about the following statement by Kuys (2017, 312):

> One of the clear signs that we are not a church internally united is out worship services. Walk into an isiXhosa- or Sotho-speaking congregation on a Sunday morning and you will find the congregation singing from the 'Hosanna' hymnal. Walk into an Afrikaans-speaking congregation and the congregation sings from the 'Sionsgesange' hymnal.

### Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the University of South Africa under the following certificate: NHREC Registration #: (Rec-240816-052), Ref #: 8866.

## A Short History of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)

This section contains the history of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" using two sources. The first is that of C.J. Kriel (1963, 269–272), who describes the history of the "Sionsgesange" until the 1950s. The second is Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2016, 149–150), who extends this history from 1942 to 1994. Both have the synodical decisions of the DRMC synods, which refer to the "Sionsgesange" as their sources.

### C.J. Kriel: 1908–1947/1956

C.J. Kriel received his doctorate from the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 1963 with a thesis entitled (translated) "The History of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, 1881–1956: An Historical Study of the Mission Work amongst the Coloureds in the Cape" (translated). The following is a summary of the first 40 years of this history from 1908 to 1949 (Kriel 1963, 269–272):

1. The 1908 Synod of the DRMC addressed the fact that there was no uniformity in the hymnals used by its congregations. At this stage, at least five hymnals were in use, congregations singing from the white Dutch Reformed Church's *Psalm- en Gesangeboek,* as well as evangelical songs inherited from the missionaries and surrounding mission churches, hymns that were adapted from Dutch, German, and French hymnals. A proposal was tabled that the DRMS should have its own hymnal and that a synodical commission should be appointed for this purpose.

2. Nothing happened until the 1916 Synod, that is, two synods later, with synods taking place every four years. Again, it was proposed that the DRMC should have its own hymnal—and again, nothing happened—until 1942.

3. The Synod of 1942 eventually appointed a "Sinodale Gesangboekkommissie" (Synodical Hymn Book Commission), which reported to the next Synod in 1946, giving guidelines for a hymnal and its publication. The Commission reported to the Synod that the situation of every Coloured congregation, clinging to its own version of a hymnal, needed to be rectified urgently.

4. The Commission also reported to the 1946 Synod that the best option was Pastor E Hartwig's collection of hymns, on which he had been working for 20 years. Previously from the Rhenish Church in the congregation of Carnarvon, he and the congregation joined the DRCM in 1943. He dedicated his life (then as emeritus in "Die Strand" congregation) to compiling a hymnal for the Coloured people, whose singing preferences he knew well. This hymnal was recommended by the Commission because it:

5. combined the best and most beloved hymns from all the hymnals that were in use in the DRMC at the time,

6. was true to the confessional basis of the DRMC,

7. reflected Coloured spirituality, and

8. contained hymns that were in the purest Afrikaans and the loveliest of melodies.

9. The Commission recommended that 28 hymns be added to Pastor Hartwig's original hymnal, a recommendation he agreed to, bringing the total to 402 hymns. This hymnal was accepted by the Synod with smaller corrections.

10. After another three years, the final manuscript with copyright was bought for 1000 pounds from Hartwig. A contract was signed with the South African Bible Society to print 30 000 copies (without notes).

11. The hymnal would be known as the "Sionsgesange."

12. On Sunday, 17 April 1949, the "Sionsgesange" were launched festively throughout the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

13. The 138 congregations of the DRMC embraced the "Sionsgesange," making it their most coveted belonging apart from the Bible.

14. In 1956, the DRMC celebrated 75 years of existence, with the "Sionsgesange" as a symbol of the unity and love in the church.

**Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel: 1947–1994**

Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2016, 149–150) takes this history further with an article entitled "*Afrikaans: Voertaal, Kerktaal, Strydtaal in die NGSK en VGKSA*" (Spoken Language, Church Language, Struggle Language in the DRMC and the URCSA) published in Natie Philander et al. (eds), *Learning from Ma Ingonyama: The life and work of Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel: Minister, Intellectual, Prophetess.* She highlighted the subsequent history of the "Sionsgesange," since 1994 known as the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," as follows:

1. The DRMC Synod of 1946 accepted the Hartwig-hymnal with additions as recommended by the Synodical Hymn Book Commission as the official hymnal of the DRMC. Three years followed in which the hymns and their melodies were edited and tested by professional language editors and musicians. After the inauguration of the "Sionsgesangboek" on Sunday, 17 April 1949, it became a best seller. Between 1949 and 1970, approximately 231 250 "Sionsgesange" were sold.

2. The DRCM Synod of 1982 decided to edit the Afrikaans of the "Sionsgesange" since much of it has become outdated and could not be understood by modern Afrikaans-speaking congregants.

3. Adding new songs on liberation, justice, and peace, and waiting for the white DRC for permission to publish 200 of their hymns from the "*Psalm- en Gesangeboek,*" a draft hymnal with 413 hymns was released in 1990.

4. The "Nuwe Sionsgesange" was launched at the Unification Synod of the URCSA in 1994, that is, the Synod of 12 April 1994, when the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

## A Content Analysis of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange"

Slightly more than a third (154) of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" were taken over from the 1978 "*Psalm- en Gesangeboek*" of the (white) Dutch Reformed Church, which was also the case with the 1949 "Sionsgesange." We have seen in the above that Kriel started his

history of the "Sionsgesange" with the decision of the 1908 Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church that one official hymnal was necessary for Coloured congregations, and that, in the meanwhile, congregations were to use the "Psalm- en Gesangeboek" of the (white) Dutch Reformed Church. The question remains what the Coloured congregations sang from their establishment in 1881 until the "Sionsgesange" was officially launched in 1947, a hymnal that was put together and adapted for "Coloured spirituality" by the pietistic Rhenish Pastor E Hartwig?

Without mentioning the "Sionsgesange," G.G. Cillié in his 1982 book, *Waar kom ons Afrikaanse Gesange vandaan?* (Where do our Afrikaans hymns come from?) gave us some hints on what might have influenced the songs in the Reformed tradition in South Africa since the coming of the missionaries in the 17th century. He did not give much attention to the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* but emphasised the German Pietism of the 17th and 18th centuries (Cillié 1982, 27–29). The core of German Pietism was the personal piety of the individual, penance, conversion, and sanctification. German Pietism inspired missionary activity to, *inter alia,* South Africa.

Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2016, 157) mentioned a variety of missionary societies that worked amongst Coloured people during subsequent centuries that were inspired by missionary zeal, emphasis on internalised belief, and revivalism of Dutch, German and British pietism and puritanism. As far as the "Sionsgesange" is concerned, the influence of the Rhenish Mission, which established itself in Wupperthal in the Cape in 1829, may be important. The Rhenish Missionary Society honoured the values of the German Pietism of personal conversion, biblical authority, and revivalism. Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2016, 157) further mentioned that Coloured congregations of the Rhenisch Missionary Society eventually found themselves to be so close to those of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church that, during the early 20th century, many of these congregations became part of the DRMC. They were Concordia and Steinkopf in 1934, De Doorns in 1935, Kommaggas in 1936, Tulbagh, Worcester, Carnarvon, and Stellenbosch between 1940 and 1945, Saron in 1946, Sarepta in 1947, and Rietfontein in 1947. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the Synod of the DRMC in 1947 accepted and approved the "Sionsgesange" which was compiled by a Rhenish pastor, E Hartwig. In the Preface to the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" (1947/1994), Hartwig acknowledged himself as follows:

> *Die gesange en liedere wat in hierdie bundel aangebied word, is die vrug van omtrent twintig jare se intensiewe arbeid van pastor E.Hartwig, destyds leraar van die Rynse Sendinggemeente op Carnarvon, tans pastor emeritus in Die Strand, Kaap Provinsie… Die boek bevat 402 selfstandige bewerkinge van psalms, gesange en liedere: 'n versameling uit Nederlandse, Engelse en Duitse bronne* (The songs in this hymnal are the fruit of 20 years of intensive work by pastor E.Hartwig, previously pastor of the Rhenish Missionary congregation at Carnarvon, now pastor emeritus in Die Strand, Cape Province… This book contains 402 independently adapted hymns from Dutch, English and German sources).

From this, one can deduce that even the hymns taken over from the DRC "Psalm- en Gesangeboek" were adapted by Hartwig according to the values of his own piety and that of the Coloured people for which they were moulded; these values being, as mentioned before, personal conversion, biblical authority, and revivalism.

From another angle, the following can be given as a broader background to the piety of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange." The Enlightenment (*Aufklärung)* emerged in Europe in the latter part of the 17th century and reached its peak during the 18th century. It was an intellectual and rationalistic movement which undermined and mocked religious piety. During this time, religious individuals who were under the influence of the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* and the German Pietism of the 17th and 18th centuries, and were made to feel uncomfortable in their own societies because of the *Aufklärung,* which came as missionaries to South Africa. The influence of their piety-from-the-heart can be detected in the contents of the hymns of the "Sionsgesange" even a century later, when the Dutch Reformed Mission Church for Coloureds was established in 1881, and the congregations started to sing the songs they had inherited from the missionaries. The pre-*Aufklärung* piety in Europe was a reaction against the rigidity of orthodoxy, replacing it with a personal faith in a God who is both majestically on his throne and lovable through his Son. All this is expressed in words of the heart. This missionary piety forms the background against which the "Sionsgesange" would later be produced when the Rhenish missionary E. Hartwig compiled and adapted songs for the "Sionsgesange."

In the following, it will be indicated that this pietistic language of the heart can be seen in the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange," firstly, in the images of God, Son and Holy Spirit used in the hymns. Secondly, this language finds its way to express faith in terms of a longing for the Other World, the heaven waiting for the faithful. Thirdly, the sin-soul-salvation scheme brought by the missionaries finds expression in the self-chastisement of the believer in many hymns in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," and the subsequent thankfulness towards the Lord of personal salvation. This is a piety that accepted the Bible as the ultimate authority, and therefore, there will also be reference to the hymns that are Scripture put to verse ("Skrifberymings") in the preferred pietistic language.

**Images of God in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange"**

The most popular way in which the Divine is addressed in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" is *Heer*—difficult to translate into English, *Lord* would probably be the nearest. Interestingly, *Heer* is used both to refer to God the Father (Gesang 112: "*Die Heer is God en niemand meer*") and to Jesus (Gesang 16: "Jesus is Heer"). For the rest, reference is often made to the triune God, especially in the first 17 hymns, which are dedicated to the Trinity, and where God is the Father, Jesus is the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit is a third person in the Trinity.

God is depicted as Almighty, the One who rules over everything. Emphasis is placed on the fact that God is good; however, God is mainly characterised as holy (*Heilig*).

However, the most popular way of referring to God the Father in the hymns of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" is that of God sitting on his throne. He is surrounded by angels. Every believer longs to be there with God:

> *Eens in die ligglans van u troon*
> *Sal ons verheerlik, sorgvry woon* (Gesang 18:7: Once in the shining light of your throne,
> we shall stay, glorified and without sorrows)

**Images of Jesus**

While God the Father is strong and mighty, Jesus, his Son, has soft power. Jesus is the Saviour (*Verlosser*) who has shed his blood for us. While Jesus is also called King (*Vors*), Lion of Judah and Conqueror (*Oorwinnaar*), he remains the Lamb of God, softly and through suffering showing God's power. Jesus is the Living Word, the Word of God who has come alive here on earth.

Especially during Easter, Jesus is acknowledged as the Man of Sorrows (*die Man van Smarte*), and as Servant (*Dienskneg*) to God's will. His suffering should convince us to repent in order to live (Gesang 96:1):

> *In die nag van angs en pyn,*
> *Christus biddend in die tuin,*
> *Het Hy bloed gesweet – vir jou,*
> *Moes Hy worstel – ook vir jou.*
> *Was sy lyding tevergeefs?*
> *Glo, bely you skuld, en leef!*
> (In the night of fear and pain,
> Christ was praying in the garden,
> He sweat blood – for you,
> He struggled – for you.
> Was his suffering worthless?
> Believe, confess your guilt, and live!)

**Images of the Holy Spirit**

While the Spirit is sometimes depicted as a third person of the Trinity, he is also acknowledged as "God the Spirit." As is confessed in the Confessions of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the Holy Spirit has three functions: (1) The Spirit calls us; (2) The Spirit leads us; and (3) The Spirit consoles us (*die* Trooster):

> *Die Here salf ons met sy Gees*
> *Tot diens en heiligheid,*
> *Tot koning, priester en profeet –*
> *Tot ware Christenwees* (Gesang 180:1)
> (The Lord anoints us with his Spirit
> For service and holiness,
> As king, priest and prophet –

To be truly Christian).

*Otherworldliness*

A distinct characteristic of the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" is the repeated description of God in heaven. God sits on His throne surrounded by angels while light engulfs them.

And it is the yearning of every believer that one day (*eendag/eenmaal*) they will be in the house of the Father (*Vadershuis*), the Lord of Heaven (*Hemelheer*).

There are numerous examples of this, of which a few examples will be given—and the difficulty to translate them in English is acknowledged:

- *Hom wat wit in ligglans op sy rykstroon sit* (He who sits in shining light on His throne from where He rules) (Gesang 2)

- *Om u troon glans skittrend weerligstraal en reënboog, ouerlinge sit hulle krone voor U neer en sing* (Your throne shines with lightning bolts and rainbows, elders lay their crowns down before you and sing) (Gesang 5)

- *U woon in 'n hoë, heilige plek* (You live in a high and holy place) (Gesang 9)

*Sin-soul-salvation*

The missionary heritage of the "*bevindelijke godsdienst*" as expressed by, *inter alia*, the Dutch

Nadere Reformatie and other pietisms, such as German Pietism, include (1) a heavy emphasis on personal sin and guilt; (2) the soul as most important vis-à-vis the body; and (3) the personal surrender to Jesus as the only way of salvation. This sin-soul-salvation belief is highly evident in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange."

*Sin*

Sin and guilt are heavy burdens carried by those who sing the "Nuwe Sionsgesange." Original sin also finds a route into the hymns:

> *Als wat ons aanraak met die hand,*
> *Lug, see, riviere en die land,*
> *Word vuil, besoedel, siek en sterf.*
> *Ons sondes saai 'n diep bederf.* (Gesang 8:4)
> (Everything we touch with our hands,
> In the air, in the sea, in rivers and on land,
> Becomes dirty, polluted, sick – and dies
> Our sins spoil everything deeply.)

Original sin, which has been inherited from Adam and should be fought with fire through the Holy Spirit, finds a voice in Gesang 12:3: .

*U, Gees van vuur en krag!...*
*Brand uit die diep bederf*
*Wat ons van Adam erf*
(O Spirit of fire and power!...
Burn the deep cancer
that we have inherited from Adam)

*Soul*

It is the soul, more than the body, that is fed during the Eucharist, as Gesang 372:3 states:

*Nou word ons siel gevoed met lewensbrood,*
*Ons diepe dors vir goed tot niet gemaak!*
*Hier lê ons af ons ware sondenood,*
*Hier laat U ons u vol vergifnis smaak!*
(Here our soul is fed with bread of life,
Our deep thirst is quenched forever!
Here we leave our sins,
Here we taste Your full forgiveness!)

*Salvation*

Gesang 8:5 tells how the whole of creation is groaning as it waits for the Lord's salvation, strongly flavoured with a belief in the Second Coming of Christ:

*U hele skepping sug, o Heer*
*Wagtend op daardie dag wanneer*
*U na u kinders terug sal kom*
*En heel u aarde nuut sal blom!*
(The whole of creation groans, O Lord,
Waiting for the day when
You will return to your children
And the earth as a whole shall flower!)

Gesang 11:1 simply shows the way to salvation:

*Want ons is nou met U versoen*
*Deur Jesus, onse Here*
(For we are now reconciled with You
Through Jesus, our Lord.)

*Words of piety*

Within this understanding of sin-soul-salvation, specific words appear regularly throughout the "Nuwe Sionsgesange":

- *Halleluja*: This is the first word in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" and occurs regularly in the hymns as a call to praise God. Gesang 19 is based on Psalm 148 in which heaven and earth, angels and people, join in praising God. The first verse runs:

*Halleluja, loof die Heer!*
*Eng'le buig aanbiddend neer,*
*Hemelskare, bring Hom eer:*
*Halleluja, loof die Heer!*
(Halleluja, praise the Lord!
Angels bow before Him, praying,
Host of angels, sing His praises;
Halleluja, praise the Lord!)

- *Goedheid van God* (goodness of God): This phrase acknowledges the goodness of God because God has dispensed God's *heil* (salvation) on believers (again, a difficult phrase to translate into English). The beloved Gesang 43 proclaims the goodness of God's *heil*. Here are parts of the first and fourth verses:

*U goedheid, Heer, kan ons nie peil nie –*
*Wie word daardeur nie die getref!*
*Niks anders bring vir ons die heil nie –*
*Ons wil ons hart tot U verhef….*
*Sou ek, o Heer, U nie vereer nie,*
*Sou ek u goedheid nie verstaan?*
(We cannot measure your goodness, Lord;
How can we not be touched by it?
Nothing else brings salvation to us,
We shall lift up our hearts to You…
Would I not honour You, o Lord,
Would I not understand your goodness?)

- *Herder* (shepherd): This is a popular reference to the Divine; it not being clear whether the reference is to God or Jesus—God being the shepherd of Psalm 23 and Jesus the shepherd of the gospels. Gesang 49 is based on Psalm 23, and this is the first part of verse 1:

*My Herder is die Here God,*
*Hy lei my dag na dag…*
(My Shepherd is the Lord God,
He leads me day and night…)

- *Kruis* (cross): The salvation that has been achieved by Jesus for the believer by dying selflessly on the cross is confessed within a distinct, albeit basic, cross "theology." Also, *Golgotha*, the Place of the Skull, where Jesus lost his life on the cross for the believer to live eternally, becomes a holy place in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," which is often mentioned as a symbol of salvation. Furthermore, because of the binaries of salvation versus going to hell introduced by the missionaries and strengthened by pietism, *Satan* is portrayed as both the physical and symbolic counterpart of Jesus Christ. Satan has powers which can be overcome only with a strong personal belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour. However, it is to be noted that there are only a few references to "Satan" in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" because of the belief that we ourselves are the ones who sin and need redemption, and that our sins cannot, in the first instance, be blamed on Satan—but on ourselves.

1. *O mens, kom na die kruis,*
*Aanskou die smart en hoon.*
*Vir ons hang Christus daar bebloed.*
*Hy dra 'n doringkroon*.
2. *Die Heiland hyg van pyn, geweldig word die stryd.*
*Vir ons verdra die Heer die hel*
*Van Godverlatenheid* (Gesang 101:1–4)
(O come to the cross,
See the suffering and ridicule.
Christ is hanging there for us, full of blood.
He wears a crown of thorns.
The Lord gasps in pain, his struggle is enormous.
For us he goes through the hell
Of being abandoned by God.)

- *Versoening* (reconciliation) as a theme and as a comfort word occurs often in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," where Jesus Christ is thanked through whom the believer is reconciled with God after confessing his or her sins. In Gesang 229:1, the believer as *sterfling* (mortal) asks the *Verlosser* (Saviour) to accept his or her plea for redemption:

*Verlosser, Vriend, ons Hoof en Heer,*
*Neem aan die onvolmaakte lied*
*U deur 'n sterfling aangebied –*
*'n sondaar wat hom tot U keer,*
*'n sondaar wat verlos is,Heer:*
*In U geen sondaar meer!*
(Saviour, Friend, our Head and Lord,
Accept my imperfect song
Which me as a mortal bring to You –

In You, I am no longer a sinner.)

To be noted here is that a strong characteristic of all forms of pietism is the believer's reference to himself as I/me, that is, as an individual. Pietism is an expression of "I" and not necessarily of "we," as we see in the above hymn. However, in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," remarkably, there are more references to "us" than to "I", which may be a characteristic of 19th-century Coloured spirituality in which the singing congregation refers to itself as a community of *Verlostes* (those Redeemed).

- Genade (grace): The grace of God is central to the religious language of Christian Coloured communities and is amply reflected in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange." There is, therefore, no surprise that the well-known "Amazing Grace" is included in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" as one of only 20 English hymns.

**"Skrifberymings" (Scripture put into verse)**

As we have suggested in the above, the hymns of the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" bear traces of German and specifically Rhenish Pietism, which emphasises personal conversion and accountability, has revivalist characteristics, and is squarely based on biblical authority. To be noted in this regard are the hymns in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" which are *Skrifberymings/Scripture put to verse.* Although all of the hymns in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" claim (via Hartwig and subsequent editors) to be based on biblical and confessional content (the church's confessions, of course, also claim to be of biblical content), there are only four that acknowledge *Skrifberymings* in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," all based on the biblical Psalms:

- Gesang 19=Psalm 148 (*Halleluja, loof die Heer!*/Hallelujah, praise the Lord!*)*
- Gesang 22=Psalm 100 (*Juig aarde, juig voor God die Heer!*/Sing, o earth, before God the Lord*)*
- Gesang 30=Psalm 150 (*Prys Hom met trompette*/Praise Him with trumpets)
- Gesang 49=Psalm 23 (*My Herder is die Here God*/ My Lord is the Lord God)

**Contextualisation in URCSA Karlienpark-Rustenburg**

Is the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" losing its popularity in the Coloured congregations of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)? It differs from congregation to congregation, and the situation in Coloured congregations in the Western and Eastern Cape is also not similar to that of congregations in the North Western and Northern Cape. Therefore, the question on the popularity of the "Nuwe Sioinsgesange" will be contextualised here in one congregation, URCSA Karlienpark-Rustenburg, which is situated in the previously Coloured township of Rustenburg, the capital of the North West Province.

In terms of church practices, this is a conservative congregation with most of its members having migrated from Keimoes in the Northern Cape to Rustenburg, more or less 50 years ago, over a distance of about 800 kilometres. They built the church, parsonage and hall themselves. Those who came here in the 1970s are in their seventies now, and a great number of them have passed on in the past few years. Those who left prefer to sing the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" and still have copies of the old (1947) version of the "Sionsgesange."

However, they also love to sing Afrikaans choruses (*koortjies*), and still today, every Sunday morning service (*erediens*) closes with this popular chorus:

*Dit was nie om te oordeel nie.*
*Dit was 'n ander saak.*
*Hy het gekom om ons te red*
*En salig te kom maak.*
*Ons noem hom Saligmaker (3X)*
*Want dis Sy regte naam.*
(Jesus did not come to judge us,
Because that is a different matter.
He came to save us,
And make us blessed.
We call him our Saviour (3X)
Because that is His real name.)

Also popular amongst the older members are Afrikaans choir pieces, which are typical of Coloured spiritual heritage. One such song regularly sung by die Church Choir on Mother's Day is, *Daar is 'n naam so heilig… en die naam is MOEDER!* (There is a holy name, and that name is MOTHER!). The youth does not appreciate these old-fashioned songs. However, older congregants start crying when these songs are sung, deeply touched by the piety portrayed in the song.

As stated above, there are 20 English songs in the "Nuwe Sionsgesange," such as "Amazing Grace" (Gesang 241) and "Because He Lives" (Gesang 123). Because of the youth, popular English songs have been introduced into the services. These are songs such as "Alive, Alive, Alive for Evermore," "What a Mighty God We Serve," "We Bless Your Name, Almighty God," songs that are not new, but much more appealing to young people. When these songs are sung, many of the older people do not sing along.

## Conclusion

The "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange," the official hymnal of the Coloured congregations of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, has a charm of its own, reflecting a deep Coloured spirituality that was inherited from and moulded by missionaries, mainly from the Dutch and German Pietism and embodied by the Rhenish mission. It contains 154 hymns from the (white) Dutch Reformed Church's *Psalm- en Gesangeboek* of 1978 and therefore also reflects the Reformed musical tradition in South Africa, although these

hymns have been adapted by the editor of the "Sionsgesange," the Rhenish pastor, E Hartwig.

The "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange" views God as the One sitting on his throne in heaven as an invitation to sinners to be saved by the Suffering Jesus from this world. In the hymns, sinners confess their dreadful sins and reach out to be saved. The wonder of salvation is thankfully praised, with a deep sense of being an unworthy sinner.

Covertly, the "Nuwe Sionsgesange" today points to divisions in the URCSA according to race; the Coloured hymnal differs from the Hosanna used in the Black congregations of URCSA. The "Nuwe Sionsgesange" also divides the Coloured congregations in terms of age or generation, the young people in the church not feeling comfortable with the hymnal's tone and contents, and especially not with it being in Afrikaans. Finally, the URCSA also loses its young members to independent and newly founded charismatic churches, where URCSA members feel at ease with the singing.

Research done by the author previously has indeed shown that "Praise and worship" is, for congregants, the most important part of a religious service, even more important than the sermon. Is the "(Nuwe) Sionsgesange," which in 1949 was a symbol of unity in the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church, still able to constitute the unity of the Uniting Reformed Church in Africa? Or has it—albeit unknowingly—become a symbol of division between races and generations?

## References

Boezak, W. 2024. "God, lyding en stemme van protes." *LitNet Akademies* 21(2):1–10.

Boonzaaier, D. and De Villiers, A.C. 2019. "The Moravian Heritage of Community Musicking." *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 15(1):1–10.

Cillié, G.G. 1982. *Waar kom ons Afrikaanse Gesange vandaan?* Kaapstad: NG Kerk-Uitgewers.

Jorritsma, M. 2016. "Hidden Histories of Religious Music in a South African Coloured Community." In *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianity*, edited by S.A. Reily and J.M. Dueck, 229–247. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kriel, C.J. 1963. *Die Geskiedenis van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881–1956. 'n Historiese Studie van Sendingwerk onder die Kleurlingbevolking van Kaapland.* D Litt et Phil thesis, University of South Africa.

Kuys, D. 2017. "The Belhar Confession and Internal Unity." In *Belhar Confession*, edited by M.A. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and L. Modise, 305–317. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

Nuwe Sionsgesange, 1994. Wellington: Bybel-Media.

Plaatjies-Van Huffel, Mary-Anne E. 2016, “Afrikaans: Voertaal, Kerktaal, Strydtaal in die NGSK en VGKSA”. In *Learning from Ma Ingonyama: The Life and Work of Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel: Minister, Intellectual, Prophetess*, edited by N. Philander, D. Jacobs, P. Van der Walt, and M. van Jaarsveld, 149–155. Wellington: CLF.