

# The Call for African Missional Consciousness through Renewed Mission Praxis in URCSA

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## Abstract

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) has since its inception always celebrated its prophetic and missional heritage from all the avenues of the black church. However, it remains crucial to reflect whether this can be ascribed only to a few individuals and whether the struggle against injustice was nurtured on “grassroots” level. The black churches in their own right have certainly made significant contributions during the apartheid years. However, the impact of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on the black wing of the church, in terms of its mission thought and practice, will still be felt by the newly established church (URCSA) for some years to come. Therefore, this contribution focuses specifically on the mission praxis that has been apparent in the DRC in the Cape since 1652, but it will also subsequently discuss various historical developments in terms of mission thought and practice within the DRC family until 1994 and beyond—the 25 years since the existence of URCSA. The article will provide a fragmentary historical account aimed at presenting an idea of the thought and practice of mission before and after the establishment of URCSA. This paper argues—as part of a critical reflection on the said period—that URCSA should position itself in such a way that it does not perpetuate the patterns of mission thought and practice of the past. It would be crucial for the church to avoid the objectification of mission, as well as being too comfortable to focus on forming external partnerships, without tenaciously and intentionally establishing a praxis of African “missional consciousness” in URCSA.

**Keywords:** mission praxis; African; missional consciousness; URCSA; mission agency; mission partners; DRC



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## Introduction

Recent developments in the thought and practice of mission are well lauded within academia. Karl Barth was one of the first theologians, during 1932 at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference, who articulated mission as the “activity of God himself” (Bosch 1991, 389). His influence reached a peak at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Conference (IMC) in 1952, where the idea of *missio Dei* surfaced very clearly for the first time. In the South African context, specifically the work of David Bosch (*Transforming Mission* 1991), and Bosch as a South African missiologist, made a significant contribution and assisted us in South Africa to unfetter missiology and mission from its negative connotation. This paper will, therefore, use the criteria of David Bosch (1991) as a theoretical framework to discuss the credibility of the church and to critically discuss the “missionary” paradigm and the call for missional consciousness<sup>1</sup> of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

This paper contends that the church through its structures, its worship and its participation in society, is an agent of God towards the transformation of the world.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, critical to discuss the nature of URCSA to assess its mission “performance”<sup>3</sup> on earth. The performance of URCSA is the subject of discussion in this paper as a means of assessing its expression and embodiment in the South African context.

I answer the question above when I pithily, and often in a fragmentary manner, critically discuss the way in which mission was practised and thought of within the context of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) family between 1652 and 1994. This account specifically concentrates on some historians, including church historians and an autobiographical account of Nico Smith, in which he offers a window into the practice and thought of mission in the DRC in his capacity as an ordained minister.

The article discusses the emergence of a new theological understanding of mission and in this respect focuses on the South African missiologist, David Bosch specifically—to speak to the rejection of the previous paradigms of mission—including the mission praxis of the DRC.

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1 This refers to the idea that a person, specifically in this article, a “pew” member of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), should be able to regard him/herself to be a participant in the mission of God.

2 See the work of Guder, D. L. 2015. *Called to Witness. Doing Missional Theology*. W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

3 I borrow the word from J. N. J. (Klippien) Kritzinger (2017) in his chapter “Mission Theology and the Nature of God” in which he writes: “The Life of a Christian community should therefore be a faithful and impactful performance of the Christian message in a particular context” (Kritzinger 2017, 2).

The next section reflects on the possible effects of previous mission patterns in the DRC family on the thought and practice of mission in URCSA since its establishment in 1994. Since the work of David Bosch, there have been several academic contributions that discuss the imperative change of mission thought and practice. Therefore, there are quite significant contributions in terms of the missional nature of the church and the trends in missional ecclesiology. However, the impact and footprints that the previous mission paradigm (of the DRC) left on the life of the “black” wing of the DRC family, need microscopic attention. In essence the question in this contribution would be: *How can the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) un-shackle itself from its inherited missionary mentality?* This paper will assume that there is reasonable consensus on the missionary mentality before the establishment of URCSA. However, it is important to address how the church would be able to address and respond in its structures, functioning and theology to oppose past patterns and ensure that it does not haunt the church in future.

## **The Practice and Thought of Mission in the DRC Family: 1652–1994**

The “black” church, as part of the DRC family, started as an “object” of mission (Adonis 1982, 77). Adonis (1982, 77) refers to the essence of the mission policy of the DRC in 1935:

Kenmerkend van hierdie sendingbeleid is dat hier van die “Naturelle en Kleurlinge” gesprek word as objekte van die NGK se sending.

Adonis (1982, 77) further refers to the rationale of such a policy:

Volgens die sendingbeleid is daar geen sosiale, ekonomiese en kerklike gelykstelling tussen swart en blank nie. Op grond hiervan het die Blankes aparte kerke vir die “Naturelle en Kleurlinge” gestig. Die swart kerke wat as gevolg van die blanke sending tot stand gekom het, moet ontwikkel word tot selfstandige kerke en in hierdie ontwikkelingsproses funksioneer die Blanke as voog vir die “Naturelle en Kleurlinge.” Hierdie sendingbeleid konstateer ook dat die “Naturelle en Kleurlinge” maatskaplik en ekonomies apart van die blankes moet ontwikkel en wys daarom rassevermenging volstrek af.

The “black” church, including Africans (Dutch Reformed Church in Africa 1963);<sup>4</sup> coloureds (Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1881); and Indians (Reformed Church in Africa)<sup>5</sup> of the DRC family was, therefore, always regarded as the “daughter” churches whom, as Adonis (1982, 77) states, were strictly under the guardianship of

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4 Oranje-Vrystaat in 1910; NGSK in Transvaal 1932; NG Bantoekekerk in South Africa in 1951 (Cape); NGSK of Natal in 1952. The four churches became one in 1963 under the banner of Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA).

5 This categorisation is only included in this paper with reference to the racial categorisation and classification that was a result of the apartheid policy.

the white DRC. De Gruchy (1979, 41) refers to the nature of these churches in the twentieth century:

There were three ecclesiastical alternatives for black Christians in South Africa by the turn of the twentieth century. They could be members of mission churches, whose membership was wholly black, but which were under the control of white missionaries and their mission boards in Europe, North America, or, in the case of the DRC, South Africa, and which only much later achieved their autonomy.

This guardianship found expression in the fact that the black church was not allowed to oppose the “mother” church in any way, and any attempt to do so would be perceived as being possessed by “*n opstokende bose gees van die antichris*” [an inflammatory evil spirit of the antichrist] (Adonis 1982, 107). The DRC made sure that they keep a watchful eye on the black church and control it through its constitution, and did not allow the church to change the constitution on its own accord. Article 14 of the constitution of 1974 of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) permitted only the Synod of the DRC to alter, amend or to recall the constitution. Adonis (2002, 330) states:

In 1974 lees artikel 14 van die grondwet van die NGSK soos volg: “Die uitsluitende reg om hierdie grondwet te verander, uit te brei of te herroep, berus by die Sinode van die NGK in Suid Afrika, of sy wettige opvolgers.”

Therefore, although the churches within the DRC family were separated, the black churches could not function as independent churches because the DRC argued that they were not yet mature. Consequently, the creativity and innovation of the black churches were stifled by the management, leadership, structures, as well as the constitution that was put in place by the DRC.

The issue of guardianship and control over the black church and its members is woven into the social fabric of the DRC because of the draft of a mission policy (1935) that would ensure and enforce such a subservient relationship between the DRC and the black church. However, the “control” over other black members of the DRC and converts was a phenomenon that took place since 1652 and was how the first cohort of ministers from the Dutch East India Company would work with the natives in the Cape of Good Hope at the time.<sup>6</sup>

The ministers sent by the DRC (in Europe) were tasked to “Christianise” the Cape’s natives and introduce them to Christianity.<sup>7</sup> There are a few words out of the quote

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6 The first DRC minister was Johannes van Arckel. He arrived and established the first congregation on 18 August 1665.

7 Bosch (1991, 454) states in *Transforming Mission*: “The gospel must remain good news while becoming, up to a certain point, a cultural phenomenon, while it takes into account the meaning systems already present in the context.”

of Adonis that project the idea that the natives in the Cape at the time were “objects” of mission. For instance, it is strange that the Dutch ministers in the Cape (since 1652), during their assessment of the natives’ spirituality in the Cape, were exclusively doing it through the lens of an institutionalised religion—which they called Christianity. Surely, it could be argued that the spirituality of the natives in the Cape was not organised back then in terms of the understanding of the Dutch—for instance structures and buildings, their spirituality, and the forms and expression of faith and worship found on European soil. Nevertheless, in the Cape the Khoikhoi and the San for that reason (as mentioned) became “objects” of mission—to introduce and proselytise them into the formalised religion.<sup>8</sup> It is also apparent in the prayer of Jan van Riebeeck, soon after his arrival in the Cape, that they purported to provide a religion that would be taught to those that are “non-Christians” but specifically the natives in the Cape: “. . . om Gereformeerde en Christelike leer onder ‘wilde en astrante mense te verbrei’” (Smith 1980, 5).

Elphick and Shell (1989, 186) clarify that before the dominant discussion on race (black and white) the discourse of religion (Christian and non-Christian) served as an instrument that would be used for separation, subjugation, and discrimination between the Dutch and all other races in the Cape. Therefore, the interest of this article is focusing on the way in which natives and indigenous people in South Africa were not allowed to freely exercise their own religion, and if they should have done so, would not have received equal social recognition and acknowledgement thereof.

The perception of mission during Dutch colonisation was indeed one that did not allow the native culture and religion to become part of the Dutch’s expression of faith and spirituality. Elphick and Shell (1989, 186) discuss how the ministers of the DRC would introduce the Dutch culture, language, customs and Christianity to the Khoikhoi and the San. Elphick and Shell (1989) assert:

Despite the absence of funds for proselytization a number of early Company officials and *predikanten* [ministers], influenced the precedents in Portuguese and Dutch spheres of the Indies, hoped that the Khoikhoi would adopt both Christianity and the Dutch language.

It is indeed clear that the indigenous people’s spirituality was not quite important and appropriate for the DRC ministers during the initial stages of colonisation in the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>9</sup> In Heese’s (1985, 74) historical account it is apparent that in the early years of the Dutch East India Company in the Cape, mission was more about proselyting and evangelisation—it was about “winning souls for Jesus Christ.”

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8 Bosch (1991, 455) argues: “The West has often domesticated the gospel in its own culture while making it unnecessarily foreign to other cultures. In a very real sense, however, the gospel is foreign to every culture.” Bosch (1991, 457) further states: “The relationship between the Christian message and culture is a creative and dynamic one and full of surprises.”

9 Bosch (1991, 453) in *Transforming Mission*, argues that the local community should be the primary agents, not missionaries, who often control the process.

Those souls would be Christians but would also belong, and only then become legitimate members of the DRC. Mofokeng (1988, 35) states: “They [missionaries] have consequently jeopardised the entire Christian enterprise since Christianity has failed to be rooted sufficiently deeply in the African soil, since they have tended to make us [blacks] feel somewhat uneasy and guilty about what we could not alter ... our Africanness.”

Heese (1985, 75) records that the coloured members in the Cape were, since 1795, always in subservient roles and positions within the predominant white DRC and would only later—in the nineteenth century—become more prominent, largely because of the establishment of missionary organisations and other churches that would comprise mainly non-white members.

The understanding of mission is also reflected in the activity of the Dutch ministers and the kind of missionary work performed. For instance, from a rhetorical perspective it is interesting to note the emphasis of Heese (1985, 77), particularly on the number of black people (1 000) that made a confession of faith during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in the Cape of Good Hope. This, in itself, reflects the mission focus of the DRC at the time and their main expression and form of mission—evangelisation. In a sense, it is apparent that in their own missionary activity in the Cape there was no indication of any activities other than evangelisation (the saving of souls) and Christianisation.

Adonis (2002, 330) provides us with some insight in terms of the role of the Dutch ministers sent as missionaries in the black churches in the twentieth century:

Die sendelingamp was ’n belangrike rolspeler in die opbou en werk binne die verskillende sendingkerke. Hierdie amp eger het op ’n fundamentele punt afgewyk van die gereformeerde gebruik. ’n Ouderling of diaken mag slegs as sodanig in die kerk dien indien hulle lidmate is. Hierteenoor was die sendeling nie ’n lidmaat van die Sendingkerke nie, maar het tog as predikante in die onderskeie kerke gedien. Die Sendingkerk het ook geen seggenskap in die toelating en ordening van sendelinge gehad nie. Dit beteken verder dat die sendelinge ook nie onder die tug van die kerk gestaan het nie. Daarbenewens het hulle as voorsitter van die kerkraadsvergaderings opgetree en ook as stemgeregtigde lid van meerdere vergaderings die toekoms van die NGSK (en NGKA) help bepaal.

The mission practice also has much to do with the agent of mission—that it constitutes a message. Therefore, Bosch (1991, 414) contends with reference to Marshall McLuhan: “The medium is the message.” Bosch (1991, 414) argues that the community that evangelises should be a “... radiant manifestation of the Christian Faith and exhibits an attractive lifestyle.” We see the power and exploitation as well as the insensitivity of the Dutch ministers and missionaries and their subjugation of the black church and its members woven into their mission praxis.

It is also significant how the historical account of the mission of the DRC in the Cape rigorously records the indigenous people and slaves' "confession of faith" in the Cape. This raises a rhetorical question on the proportional absence of historical accounts on the number of conversions and "confessions of faith" among the Dutch people and officials in the Cape. The commitment in which mission among black people was done, certainly did not afford the DRC with ample time to do mission work among its own company with the same vigour and passion. De Gruchy (1979, 5) writes: "Around 1857, the DRC began to embark more seriously than before upon missionary work among the coloured people on their doorstep, and [Andrew] Murray's influence gave this mission motivation, direction, and manpower." These and other historical records reflect the notion that mission was to Christianise all Africans with a particular brand of Christianity, and provide them with an answer to a question that they did not pose.

### **The 1935 Mission Policy of the DRC**

The previous section focused on providing an idea of the thought and practice of mission in South Africa by the Dutch since 1652. However, in 1935, the DRC officially adopted a mission policy through its Federal Mission Council. In terms of the above, it might be easy to see the mission policy as one that is far removed from the members of the DRC. Therefore, it is perhaps important to include the thoughts of Nico Smith, a former DRC Minister, on his experience of this policy and its effects.

It is very difficult to solicit personal sentiments and experiences from members of the DRC in terms of their positioning behind the thought and practice of mission at the time. Surely, there is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Therefore, though the mission policy (as discussed by Adonis) alone would not be sufficient to argue for the narrow and also skewed notion of mission thought and practice, the autobiographical account of a former DRC minister allows some insight into his own mission thought and practice. This is perhaps a more recent (twentieth century) account of mission thought and practice in the DRC. Smith's autobiographical account is a reflection also on the broader mission praxis of the DRC at the time (the middle and late 1900s).

Nico Smith (2002) tells his own personal story that encapsulates his understanding of mission when he was still a DRC minister. In Smith's attempt to explain his own understanding of mission, he frankly points out how he and his colleagues understood and practised mission. He made the following interesting remarks. He and his colleagues would understand mission as an activity in which blacks were the objects of mission. It was mostly an activity where they would preach to blacks as "if they were unbelievers, irrespective of the fact that most of them already belonged to one or other Christian church" (Smith 2002, 4). He also states that mission in the DRC (maybe just for him?) was only focusing on the "saving of souls" (Smith 2002, 5). Therefore, he (2002, 5) writes:

To me all whites were already Christians and I accepted that they all belong to a church where they were taught to understand the gospel correctly. I regarded blacks as people who did not already understand the gospel and I thought I was superior in my knowledge to the Christian faith.

He recalls his own reflection on his praxis of mission at the time: “Gradually I felt compelled ... to ask myself what the real motive of my mission was. Why had I laboured so hard to make the Venda people believers in the Christian God? Was it exclusively to make proselytes for my own brand of Christianity? Why not care about people themselves?” (Smith 2002, 9)

Smith (2002, 18) argues that, for him, even the concept of *missio Dei* was problematic, as it would not aid him in his mission thought and practice because he misunderstood the concept *missio Dei*. He later understood that *missio Dei* is more than “the saving of souls.” It also constitutes more than the church being the custodian of mission, but that the world and the people are central to God, and that all, including the church, are only participants. Smith (2002, 18) states:

Gradually a new paradigm for mission developed in my mind by changing my understanding of mission as *missio Dei* to *missio hominum*. If the incarnation of Jesus is to have real meaning, Christians will need to become aware of the importance of life, and life in abundance to *all* people in the world. Our mission will thus have to be the locus of the continuing encounter between God and humanity ... *Missio hominum* thus means believers going out into the world to be involved in the affairs of people in their contexts, identifying with them and demonstrating to them God’s concern and love for people. It is thus not in the first instance God at work in the world in a mysterious way but people whose agendas for life have been prescribed to them by God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

Nevertheless, it is indeed worth probing whether this thought and practice of mission at the time did not influence the “missional consciousness”<sup>10</sup> of “pew” members of the church that would translate into the prejudices and biases that are often still rampant in the DRC family. In this regard, Smith assisted us in terms of his own experience:

Tragically enough, the only understanding about the Christian faith that was carried over to the blacks by the white churches was—and still is to a large extent—that Jesus died on the cross for our sins that people might go to heaven. This is why churches in the black townships had very little interest in protesting against the oppression of the blacks. (Smith 2002, 16)

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10 I use this term to refer to the existential questions that members of the black church ask in terms of their “role” and their “position” in the mission of God. This is indeed an issue related to agency.



The statement of Smith goes beyond the notion of specific, “few” prophetic voices, of which himself, Allan Boesak, Nico Adam Botha, Klippiess Kritzing, Takatso Mofokeng and others in the DRC family would be the forerunners. It also goes beyond revising the mission policy but is indeed an issue of “consciousness.” To be specific, it would entail the way members of the black church would understand their role in society.

## **Ramifications to the DRC Mission Policy (1935): DRC Family as Partners in Mission**

Before discussing the historical development of a new understanding of mission, we should acknowledge the work that has already been done in the context of the DRC family to address and work on a new understanding of mission. In this regard, I take note of the deliberations in 1986 between members of the DRC and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The participants formulated a working definition of mission—mission is God’s mission (*mission Dei*) and out of this mission the church is called to witness (*maturia*), which should include the following dimensions: *kerugma* (proclaiming the Word); *diakonia* (service of love); *koinonia* (forming a new community of love and unity); and *dikaionia* (zeal for a just society) (Robinson and Botha 1986, 62). The DRC amended its own mission policy to include the new formulation of the 1986 consultation.<sup>11</sup>

In 2003, URCSA, RCA and the DRC established a joint commission that facilitates activities of witness within the churches of the DRC family.<sup>12</sup> The united structure hosted a conference at Stellenbosch during the eve of Pentecost to build on the 1986 workshop that was held at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Issues such as to “Discern the Africa context,” the “Struggles of the church in Africa” and issues of “Partnership and Unity in mission” were among the topics that were discussed. The result was a declaration, “Our calling to witness in and from Africa,” that was formulated by Johan Botha (2004) with the assistance of Piet Meiring and Gideon van der Watt.

In October 2006, the United Ministry for Service and Witness (UMSW) would be established to merge the service and witness functions into one structure in all the domestic churches of the DRC family. Since that time, the four churches had one constitution, one agenda and joint activities on the General Synod level (Van der Watt 2010, 169). This happened in the background of a new understanding of mission that developed within faculties of theology in South Africa. URCSA has done a great deal in working alongside other external stakeholders. However, it

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11 However, Kgatla and Magwira (2015) argue that this revised mission policy of the DRC had not changed from that of 1930, when the first mission policy was formulated.

12 The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (NGKA) chose not to participate but preferred observer status at the time.

remains critical to also foster good internal stakeholder relationships—in particular with “pew” members in the congregations.

## **A Theological Shift in the Understanding of Mission**

In this section, I briefly discuss what Bosch (1991) is arguing for in the church’s missionary task in the world and society. This is not a comprehensive discussion but merely some “signposts” that will serve as a backdrop for the discussion on the missionary image of URCSA.

It is apparent that Bosch views evangelism as one of the elements of mission. The DRC has indeed focused on one of the elements of mission—evangelisation. Bosch (1991, 411–412) discusses the relationship between evangelism and mission as follows:

Evangelisation is mission, but mission is not merely evangelisation. Mission denotes the total task God has set the church for the salvation of the world, but always related to a specific context of evil, despair, and lostness [as Jesus defined his mission according to Luke 4:8f]. It “embraces all activities that serve to liberate man from his slavery in the presence of the coming God, slavery which extends from economic necessity to Godforsakenness.” Mission is the church sent into the world, to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate.

Bosch (1991) argues that mission is more than evangelisation: “... mission is a multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualisation and much more.” Therefore, he cautions that we should also not define mission too sharp.

Bosch (1991, 355) also addresses the issue of “object” in the context of mission when he proposes a new orientation in theology. He argues that one should “see oneself as a child of mother earth and as sister and brother towards other human beings.” Bosch (1991, 355) argues: “One should think holistically, rather than analytically, emphasise togetherness rather than distance, break through the dualism of mind and body, subject and object and emphasise symbioses.” Then he argues: “In mission we should not view people and nature as ‘objects,’ manipulable and exploitable by others” (Bosch 1991, 355).

Bosch appreciates that the deep-rooted paradigm of mission thought and practice is not easy to shake off and therefore he poses the question: “Whither mission” if there has been so much damage done in terms of “mission” that even the concept of mission is seen as tantamount to concepts of colonialism and apartheid? He compels the church not to cease with its missionary task in the world, but rather to use the following beacons to ensure that the church does not lose its credibility. He argues that the credibility of the church’s mission should be assessed through the salvific events of Jesus Christ. I will in brief refer to these in the next section.

## **The Credibility of the Church as Agents of God<sup>13</sup>**

Bosch (1991, 512) enumerates six Christological salvific events to use as a theoretical framework for assessing whether the church has in its missionary task not “truncated” the gospel.

Bosch (1991, 512–513) refers to the first sign of credibility: Jesus’ incarnation. Bosch regards a church, the theology of which is based on the incarnation, as a church that would not only preach eternal salvation but also preach a Christ who “agonizes and sweats and bleeds with the victims of oppression” (Bosch 1991, 513). He criticises a church that does not “practice[s] solidarity with the victims.”

Bosch (1991, 513–514) refers to the second sign: the cross. The church should embody the cross through “self-emptying, humble service.” The cross is significant because it “stands for reconciliation between estranged individuals and groups, between oppressor and oppressed ... in addition to reconciliation, then, the cross—missiologically speaking—also means a ministry of love of enemies, of forgiveness.” However, Bosch asserts: “It tells us that mission cannot be realised when we are powerful and confident but only when we are weak and at a loss” (Bosch 1991, 515).

Bosch refers to the third sign: the resurrection of Jesus. “The resurrection has the ascendancy and victory over the cross” (Bosch 1991, 515), and argues that, missiologically, this means that the church should proclaim that Christ has risen, but should also “live the resurrection life here and now and to be a sign of contradiction against the forces of death and resurrection—that are called to unmasked modern idols and false absolutes.”

Bosch (1991, 515–516) refers to the fourth sign: Jesus’ ascension. He emphasises God’s reign and Kingship over the earth, and not only in the realm of the church, but also society. Therefore, the church should be “committed to justice and peace in the social realm” (Bosch 1991, 516).

Bosch (1991, 516) states,

God’s reign is real, though yet incomplete. We will not inaugurate it, but we can help make it more visible, more tangible. Within this unjust world, we are called to be a community of those committed to the values of God’s reign, concern ourselves

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13 There are various other scholars in missiology, for instance Darryl Guder (2015), Jurgens Hendriks, Nelus Niemandt (2012), RW (*Reggie*) Nel (2014) who wrote extensively on the “missional church.” I refer to Guder (2015, 74-75) who states that the church is Christ’s witness, “living in continuing community with him in its midst, prepared by his word through Scripture to be sent by him into the world which he loves and for which he died ... In short, to be authentically ‘evangelical,’ our ecclesiology must necessarily be ‘missional’.”

with the victims of society and proclaim God's judgement on those who continue to worship the God of power and self-love.

Bosch (1991, 516–517) refers to the fifth sign: Pentecost. He emphasises the working of the Spirit through the church in terms of “miraculous events and the exhilaration of an unbroken chain of mountaintop experiences, but also the church who continues to proclaim God's mission in the power of his Spirit.” Bosch (1991, 517) argues that, indeed, the era of the Spirit is the era of the church. Therefore, the church is part of the message it proclaims. Through its worship, its fellowship, and its everyday life, the church should walk in the Spirit. However, Bosch (1991, 517) cautions:

It is a distinct community, but not a club, not a ghetto society. The Spirit may not be held hostage by the church, as if his sole task were to maintain it and protect it from the outside world. The church only exists as an organic and integral part of the entire human community, for as soon as it tries to understand its own life as meaningful in independence from the total human community, it betrays the only purpose which can justify its existence.

Guder (2015, 75) concurs: “The community of the word is neither a safe enclave nor a colony walled off from the world, although it is, to be sure, always an alternative community within its context.”

Bosch (1991, 517–518) refers to the sixth sign: *Parousia*. Mission can only be understood when “the risen Christ himself still has a future, a universal future for the nations” (Bosch 1991, 517). In fact, Bosch (1991, 517), in his treatise, argues that Paul's mission “was a response to the vision of the coming triumph of God” (Bosch 1991, 517). Bosch asserts: “In an authentic eschatology the vision of God's ultimate reign of justice and peace serves as a powerful magnet—not because the present is empty, but precisely because God's future has already invaded it” (Bosch 1991, 517).

In terms of the theoretical framework above, it is crucial to probe by asking the question: What is the impact of the mission thought and practice of the DRC on URCSA? In addition, a further question could be asked: Did it leave a lasting “conscious” footprint? This in itself would be imperative but would necessitate more than a conceptual, theoretical study. It would require an unfathomable analysis of the present experiences of “pew” members within the confines of the URCSA congregations. Nevertheless, this raises the issue of an African missional “consciousness” of people in the “pews” of the church and how the church addresses it.

## **Developing an African Missional Consciousness through Pew Agency**

This contribution argues past the mission praxis within the DRC. The mission paradigm in the DRC might have changed, but where does it leave the former “black”

churches? In light of a courageous act of Nico Smith reflecting on his mission praxis, it challenges URCSA to also reflect critically on its role and missional character in light of the history and experiences of the black church of the DRC family. In the absence of personal and courageous autobiographical accounts of new forms of oppression and suppression that might perpetuate within the church, I will still reflect on issues that might raise a red flag in terms of the particular challenge (mission patterns in the DRC family pre-1994) that the church is facing. Therefore, this final part will be a critical reflection in the form of questions rather than answers.

The momentous and historic decision for the establishment of a new church in 1994, in itself speaks to a new way of understanding human beings' role in God's mission; one in which all—including the “world”<sup>14</sup>—would be in equal relationship with one another in participating in the mission of God on earth. This was a decision that meant the structural breakdown of ties with being a church serving as an “object” of mission—through the very policy of the DRC at the time. It provided the new church (URCSA) with its own terms of reference—where there will no longer be spoken in terms of its new emerging history of the “mother” and “daughter” churches but of “sister” churches.

The issue of mission “partners” goes beyond the idea that the church is waiting for the conclusion of the process of unity talks between the churches of the DRC family, but suggests that the church is already participating in God's mission as *missio Dei* is understood—beyond the scope of denominationalism. The establishment of URCSA was, therefore, “prophetic” in itself as it displays the rejection of the very notion that it is not mature. In fact, through its 25 years of existence, it has shown to be mature and to stand up against and for its faith and jettison the idea that there are “objects” in mission.

While the church in its structure as the “black” church could only be “missionaries” if they belonged to the “mother” church, now there should be a new understanding—the church no longer has to wait for its “sending” from any other structure or person other than God that has already sent all people, including the world. URCSA allows for the voice of the marginalised to be God's symbol of injustice, voicelessness, suppression and oppression. This is perhaps the more “celebratory” aspect in this contribution. However, this contribution calls for critical reflection within the structures of the church itself.

Does being a “symbol” of injustice mean that the “consciousness” of the members in the “pews” has been transformed to think and express its missional role in society

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14 This argument is in line with the cautionary note of Smith (2002, 21) that the church and Christianity should continue to domesticate mission as *their* prerogative.

in a new way?<sup>15</sup> Has the shift been taking place within the “consciousness”<sup>16</sup> of members in the “pew” of the church? Surely, this question could only be answered when engaging with the members in the “pews.” Nevertheless, an important question to ask is whether the church, in terms of its functioning, is really opening-up new spaces for members within the church to participate, accept and discover their own respective role and position within the mission of God. This can surely be assessed in terms of the kind of worship, liturgy, the structures, and functioning of the church.<sup>17</sup> Kritzinger (2017, 9) suggests reading the Bible with a hermeneutic of trust to “listen particularly to previously silenced and excluded voices, to foster a global conversation of contextual interpretations.”

It is important that the church reflects on its own theological training, and to ponder if it does provide prospective ministers in URCSA (ministry students) an opportunity to re-image its role within the ministry in terms of the *missio Dei*. This should be specifically addressed in its own theological curriculum and content to which theological students of URCSA are exposed. However, more than this is the Ministerial Formation Task Team’s (MFTT) role in allowing its future ministers to be contextual in their theology. It is to re-image its role as Bosch in his discussion on *Mission as Ministry by the Whole People of God* (Bosch 1991, 467–474) argues, as partners with the members in the “pews” in discerning the mission of God within their context. Bosch (1991, 423) explicates contextual theology as:

...an epistemological break when compared with traditional theologies. Whereas, at least since the time of Constantine, theology was conducted *from above* as an elitist enterprise (except in the case of minority Christian communities, commonly referred to as sects), its main source (apart from scripture and tradition) was *philosophy*, and its main interlocutor the *educated non-believer*, contextual theology is theology “*from below*”, “*from the underside of history*”, its main source (apart from Scripture and tradition) is the *social sciences*, and its main interlocutor the poor or the *culturally marginalised*.

An African missional consciousness finds concrete existence in the mission thought and practice within congregational life. The nature of congregations should allow “pew” members to develop their own position on contextual issues, and matters of

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15 See the reflection of Nico Smith in which he laments the “passivenesses” of some of the black church members during the apartheid years.

16 Here the way “consciousness” is used, is to speak to a “missional consciousness”—the notion that I understood that I am God’s agent in the world and part of God’s mission.

17 It is poignantly so that the General Synod of URCSA has been discussing and debating the issue of homosexuality in the church on Synod level, with little discussion within congregations and members in the “pews.” In fact, the GS decisions since 2005 mostly constitute referrals of the said issue to Regional Synods, Presbyteries, as well as congregations for further discussion, and then to provide feedback to the next GS. This raises the concern that issues on GS level have not sufficiently been discussed on congregational level. The question might be asked: How do “pew” members participate, and how are they being engaged with in relation to issues that concern the growth of the church, whether theologically, structurally, or financially.

doctrine and beliefs. In this way, there might be more emerging new ways of worship than before. This, in the context of expressions of worship, which often goes along with the “soft-spoken” and “moments of silence” during the liturgy—which was one form and expression of worship—that originated in the European context. While this is a conventional means of worship, there might be other expressions of worship within an African context to reflect one’s reverence to God. Mofokeng (1988, 35) arguable states: “Consequent to their [missionaries] activities the African people have accepted a new religion ... they have been introduced to new European cultural values, norms and attitudes and that their entire society has been changed.”

URCSA celebrates its rich diversity through the launching of its new hymnbook (2019)<sup>18</sup> that embraces and allows ethnic diversity to be embraced during congregational worship. Nonetheless, the church should always be cautious and should safeguard its rich diversity, which was born from the establishment of the new church. It would, therefore, serve as a witness to the world in its endeavour for social cohesion, the obliteration of discrimination, and the eroding of all forms of oppression and suppression. Kirsteen Kim (2000, 2) argues that David Bosch (in *Transforming Mission* 1991) does not give sufficient attention and show interest in “indigenous spiritualities” or “the spiritualities of indigenous people.” The church should be a space for those that are different from “us” and those that are “differently-abled” to be part of our worship. The previous mission pattern should serve as a rear-mirror, exactly because URCSA was an amalgamation of various ethnicities, gender and races, and should not only in image or symbols express its unity, but in praxis.

The *Confession of Belhar* (1986) reflects in a sense the church’s own role, as well as its credibility. It is indeed a mission statement in the same way as it is a confession. It reflects the stance and position of the church that was confessed at a time when the black churches were still “mission objects.” Through the *Confession of Belhar* (1986), the black churches ferociously rejected such a notion (objects of mission) and should continue to jettison the notion. However, in a positive sense, we should regard every member of the church as participants and partners in God’s mission. The church should, therefore, acknowledge each member’s agency in the mission of God.

The critical reflection of Nico Smith (2002) on the concept of *missio Dei* is also important in terms of our argument for a renewed mission praxis towards building an African “missional consciousness” of “pew” members in URCSA. Smith displays his uneasiness with the concept, because he argues it might not be too “watertight”—and could still allow the church to construct its own agenda in God’s name! Therefore, Smith prefers that in parallel with *mission Dei*, to also speak of *missio hominum*—as God’s agenda to take people’s interests and their anguish to heart. He

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18 This Hymnbook was officially launched during the URCSA 25th celebration service on 14 April 2019 in Bloemfontein.

argues that *missio Dei* should always emphasise God's involvement with people and their "interests." Is it, therefore, not critical to articulate the mission of God unambiguously: Saying that God's mission is one that has the interests and the welfare of "all" people at heart, not only those who obtained a theological qualification? Is the concept of *missio Dei* not becoming too flexible and "opened" to escape the involvement of the church into the interests and the affairs of people, and to perpetuate and continue exploitation and suppression of people in the church and society?

The issue of being "objects" of mission is important to reflect on in terms of URCSA's approach in theology, that often follows the orthodox approach in which ordained Ministers of the Word claim to have tailor-made their theological response(s), which is not coming from below but from the margins—the oppressed? It is not acceptable to regard oneself as speaking and participating on behalf of other oppressed, but at the same time suppressing the very voices that need to speak for themselves! It can quite easily allow theologians, or even ministers, to become oppressors of marginalised voices. We have those in the leadership structures who also suffered when the black church was still under the curatorship of the DRC, but now have the opportunity to allow for creativity and sensitivity to grassroots "pew" members, so that the church will not be guilty in future of new forms of oppression within its own backyard.

It is salient for the future of the church that it does not create the impression that members are only "containers" and "objects" but participants and agents in God's mission. Therefore, the church should allow for meaningful and respectful "church" spaces in which the broader congregation and "pew" members can serve as "epistemic" communities who are completely involved through active engagement and involvement in the re-thinking (reforming) of the church of Jesus Christ. Bosch (1991, 467–474) speaks of *Mission as Ministry by the Whole People of God*, when he writes: "For almost nineteen centuries and in virtually all ecclesiastical traditions ministry has been understood almost exclusively in terms of the service of ordained ministers." This should not be done as lip service. Therefore, the church should not solely focus on "prophetic" clergy to approach the front stage and public platforms, but should foster and cultivate a new appreciation for the marginalised, the oppressed and the voiceless members within the church. It remains poignant when "pew" members are disempowered by the structures of a church and not given enough space for engagement and dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

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19 A very recent issue is the discussion on the homosexuality debate within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The continuous referral to a commission with little engagement with those experiencing the pain of exclusion and suffering a new form of oppression seems to be evident within the church. There is also little engagement with "pew" members because mostly the "theologians" know the answers to the problem.



We know that power (especially in the church) can still enforce new forms of oppression and suppression. The DRC excluded the engagement of marginalised members and did not regard them as equal partners in its mission endeavour. Bosch states: “Protestant missions as a matter of course exported their dominant clergy pattern to the ‘mission fields,’ imposing it on others as the exclusive legitimate and appropriate model.” I therefore wish to conclude this paper with an extract from Bosch, in terms of the missionary paradigm that should be nurtured within URCSA. Bosch (1991, 380) states, that all should:

... recognize that their (individual missionaries) task is one that pertains to the whole church and insofar as missionaries appreciate that they are sent as ambassadors of one local church to another local church (where such a local church already exists), as witnesses of solidarity and partnership, and as expressions of mutual encounter, exchange and enrichment.

Nevertheless, the space for creativity would be futile in a context where “pew” members themselves are not realising their own position and role in the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the experiences of members from the black church are confronted with some existential questions on: What is my role and position in the Kingdom of God? It raises the issue of agency of the “black” church but particularly its members, those serving and worshipping on the congregational level.

In the above section, I raised some critical discussions and questions, rather than a congregational (empirical) analysis on the missionary nature of URCSA in light of Bosch’s discussion on *Mission as Ministry by the Whole People of God* (Bosch 1991, 467–474). However, this would also prompt the question, “Whither mission?” as Bosch poses when he wrestles with the negative ways in which mission was expressed in the past and how mission could be redeemed from such a past. The question I phrase is a little different, and therefore acknowledges the manner in which URCSA has in various modes and ways showed to be credible in its witness to the world. However, I say this with some reservation, as the church is still in transition and needs to take stock of its limitations and its degree of progress or lack thereof in terms of being a missional church.

## **Conclusion**

The churches of the DRC family who unified (DRMC and DRCA) to form one structure (URCSA) have been seen not solely to demonstrate visible unity, but that in very practical terms they accept each other as equal partners in the mission of God. URCSA also fosters new external relationships on an unofficial basis with the Witness Ministry of the DRC. However, this paper raises some critical questions beyond the evidence of “object” and a more positive development, namely the partnership between churches within the DRC family. The paper argues for more than “partners” but promotes praxis of “missional consciousness” of members at the

“grassroots,” making them actively involved in the discussions, construction and shaping of the church—whether in its theology, its doctrine, or its confessions.

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