

The Incomplete Circle: Dialectics of Social Structure and Theological Conviction for Greater Unification in the DRC Family (1994–2016)

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Abstract

This essay proposes that despite an ingrained awareness in the Uniting Reformed Church and the other members of the Dutch Reformed Church family that church division was born from socio-political and theological factors, the orientation of all parties to the unification process was to prioritise the theological conviction side and downplay the socio-political, allowing it to function surreptitiously and essentially undermining the possibilities for greater progress. This essay will highlight the discourse of church assemblies indicating the trends and arguments relating to unification. It will secondly draw on the reflections of the Afro-American philosopher Cornel West to cast light on the tasks of any church unification process that strive to enhance both reconciliation and transformation. In the light of the theoretical framework of West, it will proceed to posit certain tasks that the unification process must address in order to make any sustained progress.

Keywords: church unification; social structure; theological conviction; Cornel West; dialectics; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); Belhar Confession

Unification Discourse

In 1994, the founding assembly of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) declared: “Therefore, we pray that the unification of the DRCA and the DRMC will only be the first step in the total unification of the whole family of DR Churches inside and outside of South Africa” (VGKSA *Handelinge van die Stigtingsvergadering en Eerste Algemene Sinode* 1994, 413).

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The Charter of Church Amalgamation of the DRMC and the DRCA specified that: “This process is being directed by our anchorage in the Biblical doctrine, our association to the Reformed tradition and devotedness, and our frank testimony through the Belhar Confession (1986), which is the inspiration for the unification we are now undertaking” (VGKSA 1994, 414).

Similar statements can be found throughout the deliberations of URCSA assemblies and also in declarations between the joint partners (URCSA and DRC). It is immediately evident that the founding synod of URCSA adhered to a vision of more inclusive and broader unification. This vision and conviction gave impetus to the subsequent countless engagements with the DRC and other members of the Dutch Reformed Church family¹ in the attempt to find the illusive unification.

It is also abundantly clear that the URCSA leadership and its dialogue partners were strangely reticent on the historical developments and socio-political context of the unification process. We could speculate that the historical sensibilities of the participants framed the debates on unification and that they assumed that the theological convictions, including the Belhar Confession, already encapsulated the socio-political issues. However, these issues did not feature or surface explicitly in the construction of the unity process. The documents do not testify to a sustained interrogation of the socio-political impact of our history of division. For that interrogation we need to go beyond the official synodical decisions, documents and debates and broaden our research to the many excellent studies by church and extra-church researchers who have focused on a more in-depth and holistic approach.² This research has unfortunately not informed the official documents substantially, as will be demonstrated. We do find in the founding documents intimations and awareness of possible obstacles but very little in terms of constructive strategies, and much less penetrating reflection to address it creatively: “We undertake to deal with the fears and doubts, the hesitations and problems which may wait on the road ahead, with the conviction that under such circumstances we may not abandon each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ” (VGKSA 1994, 414).

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- 1 The Dutch Reformed Church family is a grouping of churches that share a number of confessional standards and polity and has a common history due to its relationship to the mission activity of the Dutch Reformed Church. This history led to the division of the churches on racial grounds. This family includes the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC/NGK), the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA/VGKSA), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA/NGKA) and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA).
 - 2 For the pre-1994 period see the theses by Loff, C. A. 1998. *Bevryding tot Eenwording: Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881–1994*; Pauw, J.C. 2007. *Anti-apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches: A Depth-Hermeneutical Analysis*, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit. Both provide a broad overview. The post 1994 period is covered by Botha, J. and Naude, P. 2011. *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the Road to Acceptance*, Wellington: Bible Media.

This seems to have been the basic stance of the churches—being carried along on the basis of convictions.

Architecture of the Uniting Church

The way the new church was structured, gives us a strong indication of the understanding of the process of unification. In the Reformed tradition of URCSA and the broader DRC family, the local congregation is a full expression of the church. However, the option taken by the founding synod to allow congregations that have been segregated racially for generations, to continue without substantial adjustment, meant that the segregated and deformed identities and overall patterns of self-constitution would simply continue: “*Dat al die bestaande gemeentes van die twee kerke so behoue sal bly en dat almal saam die gemeentes van die een kerk sal vorm; Dat hierdie gemeentes onderling oop sal wees vir bywoning en lidmaatskap*” (VGKSA 1994, 300).³

URCSA clearly opted for a long and slow process of integration. Its starting point was minimalistic and this was carried over to most other critical ministries and assemblies of the church. The presbyteries were required to integrate and the regional synods were restructured geographically. But the distribution of URCSA congregations and members ensured that this broader restructuring could not impact substantially on the church, much less threaten the old segregated order.

URCSA is structured nationally into seven regional synods and one general synod.⁴ The general synod gathers all the executives of the regional synods together with two members of all the presbyteries of the church in an assembly every four years. During the recess of synod, the executives with the newly elected general executive meet annually in a general synodical commission. The active expression of the unity of the new church is clearly very limited. In some regional synods there is the distinct potential to develop a new church formation from the previously segregated churches, simply because of the distribution of different cultural and ethnic expressions. In other regions the former structures persist and little has changed or actively sought to deepen awareness of a new uniting church.

This minimalist method was extended to the restructuring of salaries and the use of language. Even the hymnals and liturgical forms of the former churches were continued, which meant that the majority of congregants could not really celebrate together in a medium accessible to all. Moreover, the stimuli and encouragement for greater growth

3 [Own translation] That all the existing congregations of the two churches will remain as is and that together they will form the congregations of the one church; That these congregations will be mutually open for attendance and membership.

4 The regional synods are Cape Synod, Free State and Lesotho Synod, KwaZulu-Natal Synod, Namibia Synod, Phororo Synod (located in Northern Cape and North-West provinces), Southern Synod (spanning parts of Gauteng, North West and Mpumalanga) and Northern Synod (located in Limpopo province).

together were either absent or very limited. A hoped-for central salary fund did not materialize.

What the leadership perhaps underestimated profoundly, was that a very incremental approach would begin to undermine the original intent and the former separate identities would resurface and re-assert themselves. This is indeed what happened and it has not been constructively managed. This minimalist approach then became the template for the engagement also in the broader unification process with the DRC and the RCA.

While the two former churches, now united in URCSA, were growing arduously towards new forms, or were stuck in old forms, the theological and doctrinal pole was increasingly emphasised. The Belhar Confession became a powerful symbol of what URCSA is aspiring towards. The debates around the Belhar Confession and its place in the new church carried all the baggage of historical memory and theological aspiration.

On the one hand the DRC moved through a number of painful adjustments with regard to the Belhar Confession, first declaring the confession congruent with biblical teaching but the DRC not being ready to own it. The DRC would ultimately come to evaluate the Belhar Confession to be fully consistent with their own reprised theology and one key synod (the Western and Southern Cape) would call for its full inclusion as a needed confession for our times (NGKSA *Akta* 1990–2011). And yet, after many attempts, they have failed to move the congregations and members towards embracing this theological expression. This begs the question why?

Theological Concentration on Belhar

While the DRC was struggling to come to terms with a prophetic witness against its own erstwhile heterodox theology and practice, a section of the former DRCA broke away from URCSA and proceeded with an enervating series of court cases against URCSA. The effect of all these developments was to concentrate the focus on strictly theological convictions. The Belhar Confession became a stumbling block in the eyes of the disaffected with the simultaneous effect that URCSA had to defend the confession and allowed the broader context and even the intention of the Belhar Confession to recede into the background.

The decisions of the URCSA General Synod of 1997, sitting in Bloemfontein, confirm the above developments. The moderation reported as follows:

Die ASK is die mening toegedaan dat die onderhandelinge oor kerkeenheid tans 'n dooie punt rondom die aanvaarding van die Belhar Belydenis as belydenisskrif bereik het. Dit is dus nodig om andermaal te bevestig dat die Belhar Belydenis ononderhandelbaar is as belydenisskrif vir die verenigde kerk.

Die ASK beskou die onvoorwaardelike aanvaarding van die belydenis van Belhar deur die NG Kerk as ononderhandelbare vereiste vir die voortgang van die gesprek oor kerkeenheid. (VGKSA *Agenda, Skema van Werkzaamhede en Handeling* 1997, 26)⁵

However, at the same synod a number of documents were tabled relating to church unification that clarify to some extent the development of reflection on the process. A Regulation for Unification was tabled (VGKSA 1997, 93–96), which indicated that URCSA thought primarily about the theological and administrative requirements of unification. Another important document related to the restructuring of the church for more efficient functioning (VGKSA 1997, 135–141). This document raised the intriguing issue of culture, tradition and identity without, however, exploring it in any depth. It identified as a goal the need to promote knowledge and understanding of the different cultures in URCSA and to foster reconciliation across cultural boundaries. These worthy sentiments unfortunately disappeared from subsequent developments.

A third set of addresses dealt with the implications of unification for the issue of justice: “Those who resist unity have understood better than those who sentimentally pursue unity that post-apartheid church unity has justice implications. This is also true for the unity within URCSA where vast disparities exist between people and congregations on structural, financial and other resources” (VGKSA 1997, 587). The contributor could not pursue the implications of his observations in the context of the synod. Another speaker continued the theme of the implications and grounds of the Confession (VGKSA 1997, 589).

It was, however, the more extensive contribution by Prof. D. J. Smit on the theme of Praise, Worship and Identity in URCSA that highlighted crucial issues that have been subsequently marginalised (Smit in VGKSA 1997, 594–622). This address highlighted six key choices made by URCSA at its founding. These choices included: the elements of obedience to Scripture; the visible and institutional expressions of URCSA’s convictions; the key role of the local congregation; the essential place of unity in freedom; the reconciliation in Christ; and lastly, the conviction that God is a God of compassionate justice. Two propositions are directly relevant to this essay. Smit argued: “*Die belydenis van die kerk moet die strukture van die kerk bepaal*” (Smit in VGKSA 1997, 616).⁶ Smit then continued to spell out what this means in graphic language:

Die alledaagse praktyk van kerkverdeeldheid op rasse-grondslag ten spyte van die duidelike Bybelse taal oor die eenheid van die kerk; die totale vervreemding van mekaar ten spyte van ons belydenis van die krag van die versoening in Christus; die volgehoue

5 [Own translation] The GSC is of the opinion that the negotiations around church unity have reached a deadlock regarding the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as a confessional standard. It is, therefore, necessary to affirm once more that the Belhar Confession is non-negotiable as a confessional standard for the united church. The GSC regards the unconditional acceptance of the Belhar Confession by the DR Church as a non-negotiable requirement for the continuance of the discussion about church unity.

6 [Own translation] The Confession of the church must determine the structures of the church.

verdrukking van mense ten spyte van ons geloof in geregtigheid; al hierdie skreiende teenstrydighede het die verkondiging van die evangelie in en deur hierdie kerke ongelooftwaardig gemaak, het Belhar gesê ... Ter wille van die geloofwaardigheid van ons getuienis moes die strukture, die gestalte, die daaglikse lewens van hierdie kerke net eenvoudig verander, in gehoorsaamheid aan die Woord. (Smit in VGKSA 1997, 616)⁷

Smit (in VGKSA 1997) argued for a very strong impact—a determination—by confession on social structure and social patterns of the church. He used language that suggested a far-reaching impact on society and church life. Did Smit overestimate the power of confessing? Did the new church—URCSA—underestimate what is truly necessary to transform a racial order (within the church and beyond) towards a more inclusive and just/egalitarian one?

Smit made a second proposition drawn from the Belhar Confession that demonstrated an insight that has not been taken up enough in the new church:

Die verbondsleer sê dat God ons nie as a-historiese, tydlose, kontekslose, identiteitslose individue wil red, deur ons te isoleer van hierdie verbande nie... Dit is asof ons eie, natuurlike identiteit opgeneem word in die nuwe identiteit wat ons ontvang. Die nuwe identiteit wat ons in die erediens ontvang neem ons natuurlike aard, afkoms, talente, kultuur, as't ware in diens. Natuurlik glo Gereformeerdes dat die natuurlike, kulturele identiteite ingrypend getransformeer word deur die evangelie! (Smit in VGKSA 1997, 618–619)⁸

Smit therefore dealt already in 1997 with two (and more) crucial aspects of the unification process—the issue of the relation between conviction/confession and social structure, and the difficult issue of identity in a context where precisely these alleged racial identities were the basis for the structuring of a vicious and exclusionary social order. He tried to steer a course between the required freedom of a church community and the necessary painful changes needed to move towards a more authentic gospel community. The considerations of Smit were not incorporated directly into the formal decisions and documents of synod. It did form the background of subsequent decisions during the unification quest without, however, being explicitly addressed.

7 [Own translation] The daily practice of church division on racial grounds, despite the clear biblical language about the unity of the church; the total estrangement from each other despite our confession about the power of the reconciliation in Christ; the continued repression of people despite our faith in justice; all these flagrant contradictions made the proclamation of the gospel in and by these churches *incredulous*, declared Belhar ... For the sake of the credibility of our witness the structures, the shape, the daily life of these churches had to change, in obedience to the Word.

8 [Own translation] The teaching about the covenant directs that God does not want to save us as a-historical, timeless, a-contextual, individuals without identity, by isolating us from these relationships ... It is as if our own, natural identities are taken up into the new identity we receive. The new identity that we receive in the worship service takes our natural character, origin, talents, culture in service. The Reformed naturally believe that the natural, cultural identities are fundamentally transformed by the gospel!

With these first two general assemblies of URCSA, the framework of URCSA's approach to unification had been formulated.

At the next general synod in 2001 an important element surfaced in the interaction with the DRC. This was a time when the DRC was slowly inching towards a fuller recognition of the integrity of the Belhar Confession. However, the partners began to explore the model of a new church and in this discussion the perception emerged that the DRC might be adhering to a "*volkskirche*" understanding (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa [URCSA], *Acts of General Synods 2001*, 121). Again, this issue was raised but not pursued. The synod of 2005 dealt extensively with both the confessional basis and the model on which the united church could be organised. URCSA argued for the model on which she was structured since the founding synod, namely a synodical-presbyterial structure organically developed from the congregations and outward towards the various assemblies (URCSA 2005, 14). It seems evident that the church had not yet incorporated the lessons of its own weaknesses as manifested in its organisational model.

At the 2008 synod in Hammanskraal, the assembly went into two opposite directions. On the one hand it suspended talks with the DRC in light of the perceived attack on the moderator of URCSA by the moderator of the DRC and their lack of "seriousness" with regard to the unification process. On the other hand, URCSA made a decisive interpretation on the issue of diversity that advanced the understanding of unification. The synod argued:

It is a fact that the URCSA consists of a diversity of people with a variety of languages, spiritualities and historical background. The DRC, DRCA and the RCA perhaps contain less internal diversity, but as part of the unification process, they add to the cultural, spiritual and ideological diversity of the DRC family. The only basis on which meaningful *organic unity* can be achieved among people of such diversity, is if it becomes a home with enough space, with freedom for people to be different from one another, provided everyone eats from the same pot in the kitchen. The core teachings, values, processes and structures therefore need to be firmly established, while for the rest there should be freedom for people to express themselves in different ways. (URCSA 2008, 38)

The synod presumably understood the "core teachings, values, processes and structures" to relate to the confessional standards and the church-orderly shape of the envisaged new church. It is significant that the issue of diversity surfaced consciously. URCSA has unfortunately not clarified what it meant by "a home with enough space" and what "the rest" beyond core teachings and structures entails.

A further document we need to consider is the memorandum of agreement that was adopted by both URCSA in 2012 at its synod in Namibia and by the DRC (URCSA 2012, 189–194). This memorandum documents the "acknowledgement" of the Belhar Confession in the standards of the envisaged united church; it also adopts the synodical-

presbyterial model of organic unity. It further incorporates references to restorative justice and reconciliation and it uses much more sympathetic language. The memo incorporates a perspective on our tasks in society and it initiates a process whereby a new church order can be drafted. The document suffers from the same limitations that have frustrated the processes in URCSA. It maintains the basic Reformed polity without any demand for substantial restructuring. It does recognise the diversity of language and culture but it suffers from a disturbing silence about the genesis of our mutual estrangement. We get the flavour of this document in the following paragraph:

5.2.2 We accept the reality that conflict, bitterness, hatred, racism, ethnicism, classism, sexism and a lot of emotional pain is still very much part of society. We must address some of the core reasons for conflict like: misunderstandings and poor communication, bad and corrupt leadership, language, culture and religion, ideologies and the greed for political power, injustices, personalities, scarce resources and imbalances in society. (URCSA 2012, 193)

At the URCSA synod in 2016 the reference to restorative justice continued. The synod adopted a resolution that required that the issue of justice moves to the centre of the deliberations:

The GS declares emphatically that restorative justice should shift hence on from the periphery to the axis of bilateral and multilateral talks of the **DRC** Family. Justice does not pass over wrongs. Wrongs in church and society should be faced and addressed in a comprehensive manner. In doing so, the **DRC** Family will be able to overcome past divisions and find a new and richer unity. Without attending to the issue of restorative justice church reunification will not be possible. (URCSA 2016, 67)

While this forceful decision was made, the synod failed to flesh it out in terms of its implications and neither did it set up a mechanism to actively pursue and address this crucial issue. At the same time, the synod adopted a new interim church order for unification processes that focused on judicial structures and processes with very little extensive social or contextual analysis.

This is the extent of our progress with unification since the DRCA decided at its 1975 synod in Worcester to seek unity with its sister churches in the DR church family. I have excluded the many ways in which URCSA and the DRC continue to interact and work together practically. This is an important component that helped to sustain the quest for unification. For the purpose of this essay it will take us beyond the limits of our task.

The Dialectics of Social Structure and Theological Conviction

We have seen above that Smit (in VGKSA 1997) argued for a strict determination from theological conviction to structural alteration. Smit's methodology, concentrating on theological content and intra-church renewal, has been the horizon against which many URCSA documents have been formulated. This essay argues that a more complex approach is needed; one that recognises the necessity for theological consistency and

faithfulness while shifting the socio-structural issues more to the centre. To this end a dialectic of structure and theology must be incorporated. Cornel West argued that black theologians have used a dialectical methodology when dealing with their subject matter (West 1982, 108). This approach has three features—negation, preservation and transformation. This entails that the black theologian refuses to uncritically adopt the theological interpretations of his/her white counterparts. They have to digest and decode reflection on God and uncover the deceptions and distortions lurking in white theologies. At the same time, they have to interpret the Christian story in meaningful ways for the black person and community. West observed the negation of white interpretations by black theologians, the preservation of their own readings of biblical texts and a transformation of gospel interpretations into new ones: “These three steps embody an awareness of the social context of theologising, the need to accent the historical experience of black people and the insights of the Bible, and the ever-evolving task of recovering, regaining and repeating the gospel” (West 1982, 109). West calls the relationship between black historical experience and the biblical text a symbiotic one, each illuminating the other. West accords the historic experience of black oppression a very privileged place but he does not reify it. Scripture clarifies and critiques it—but at the same time the black experience discloses new and different aspects and readings of the gospel message. It is the view of this writer that the concentration by URCSA on the formal place and status of theological conviction as expressed in the Belhar Confession allowed for the under-emphasis of the real conditions of black Christians and an adjustment to a purely theological agenda that obscured the social and structural issues, without which church unification will be a futile exercise.

Cornel West and Prophetic Pragmatism

Cornel West is an appropriate source to draw on since he writes as an Afro-American philosopher from a context of racial domination, neo-liberal capitalist exploitation, a heightened awareness of gender marginalisation and acute struggles around ecology. Mary Doak argues persuasively that West manages to formulate an integrated and unified political theology that is simultaneously multifaceted, based on his rootedness in the struggles of Afro-American and other minorities in the USA (Doak 2002, 88).

West constructs his political theology in the context of liberation theology (especially the Latin-Americans), poststructuralist theology (Mark C. Taylor), public theologies (Stackhouse, Tracy) and counter-cultural theologies (Hauerwas, Radical Orthodoxy). Doak observes that West draws on all the different approaches of political theology in his search for a truly liberating project in the American context:

Also, despite the not inconsiderable differences between them, it is perhaps worth noting that aspects of each of these four theological approaches appear in West’s work: the liberationist concern for specific injustices, the poststructuralist rejection of an ahistorical and foundationalist truth, the public project of extending democracy, and even the countercultural recovery of particular religious traditions as alternatives to the status quo, are all part of his project. (Doak 2002, 100)

For our purposes, the work of West could clarify the dynamic interaction between theological conviction and social context. West provides lenses and frameworks to read and engage both poles of our dialectic. He is especially fruitful in his critique of truncated theories that ultimately sacrifice the deeply human and inclusive frame of the Christian faith.

Eduardo Mendieta explores the way in which West periodises Western history to have reached the current context of post-modernism (Mendieta 2007, 175). West identified the period of 1492 to 1945 as the age of Europe. This was followed by the end of modernity as an outflow of the termination of the European age. The subsequent period of postmodernity is characterised by dispersive and critical practices. Postmodernity accelerated the crisis of Western science, it delegitimised the claim to universality of the framework of humanism and fostered the return of paganism and hedonism, and thirdly, it deepened the attack on the primacy of the Kantian subject.

This historical development, for West, is the background against which the struggles of Afro-Americans must be situated. By raising this historical awareness, West can avoid the dead-ends of a narrow nationalism (of which Marcus Garvey and more recently, Louis Farrakhan, are exponents), while simultaneously exposing the stunted approaches of a purely economic, class-based analysis of the orthodox Marxist type or a gender approach that privileges a section of the excluded, while ignoring the interconnections of all these myriad oppressions. West therefore finds the usual analysis of racial oppression, like Marxist economic determinism, inadequate.

For him the discourses of raciality have very complex and multiple sources: “In short, modern discourses of raciality must be understood under the rubric of the hegemony of ocularity, representability, scientificity, and the hegemony of the Greek aesthetic ideal imposed by a return to Greece as a cultural model for beauty of a particular type, proportion, moderation, and so forth” (Mendieta 2007, 177).

West then proceeds by asking how Afro-Americans responded to this multifaceted experience of racism. He identifies four major traditions, namely the exceptionalist (DuBois, Luther King Jnr), the assimilationist (Frazier), the marginalist (Wright) and the humanist (Ellison, Morrison). The exceptionalist tradition celebrates the uniqueness and exceptionality of Afro-American culture and personality. The assimilationist tradition views Afro-American culture to be deficient and pathological as a consequence of institutional racism. The marginalist tradition finds Afro-American culture restrictive and disabling. It comes to this assessment via existentialist and ontological constructs. The humanist tradition regards Afro American culture as rich, varied and a balm. It takes the humanity of Afro-Americans for granted. The humanist tradition enables the political theologian to draw on the cultural documents and experience of Afro-Americans to construct a transformation project. West situated his own theologising within this humanist tradition. He neither rejects and devalues Afro-American history

and learning, nor does he elevate it to an eminence that does not need the insights of other cultures and formations.

Mendieta identifies four elements that emerged from Cornel West's project of prophetic pragmatism. These are the first element of tragedy, the second of political and spiritual engagement and committed praxis, the third being remembrance and historical situatedness, and the fourth a post-humanistic post-universalistic cosmopolitanism (Mendieta 2007, 185). We can see that West operates with a conceptual matrix that holds on to the critical elements that inform our quest for more authentic gospel community. His project is a down-to-earth one of praxiological rootedness; at the same time, he allows his vision of community to be informed by the peculiar gospel tradition as it unfolded in a particular community. But West's project is disciplined by a deep historical awareness—the memory of struggle and global change. This enables him to avoid ill-considered and pseudo-solutions for social challenges.

West approaches all history, but particularly Afro-American history, as conditioned by tragedy. Evil and defeat are real and history is a demonstration of failures. This perspective is necessary to temper any idea of progress and transformation: "Tragedy is the name we give to fallibilism in history." West believes secondly that the quest for transformation must be rooted in the combination of political, spiritual and existential engagement for it to have any chance of success. In this respect, West turns towards the community's spiritual traditions for its pedagogy. Thirdly, West extolls the power of remembrance, "anamnesis." This memory of suffering, defeat and triumph serves as both positive and negative reference points. West fourthly argues for a "post-universalistic cosmopolitanism." He holds on to difference and avoids trying to neutralise particularity. West wants to broaden the "we" through a greater appreciation and acknowledgement of difference.

McPhail (2002) describes West's approach to philosophy as coherentist. West articulates dialectical inquiry with dialogic interaction, while being pragmatic in his thrust. Therefore, he turns away from both foundationalist and externalist justificatory strategies: "Epistemologically, his call demands a move from foundationalist and externalist justificatory strategies to a coherentist approach to dialogue that recognises how positions are implicated in each other, and it interrogates the assumptions at work in arguments to find common ground and expose artificial divisions" (McPhail 2002, 455).

The Tasks of the Unification Process

We have seen how URCSA as a uniting church has stalled time and again in her endeavour to find greater unity—both within herself and with other partners. This essay proposes that URCSA has limited the conception of the unity process and concentrated it almost exclusively on the theological conviction leg. Although that leg is fundamental in the context of a church tradition, it is not nearly adequate if we want to undo the destruction and misery of generations of division and enmity.

The church must necessarily move between the twin dynamics of theological principle and the social-historical context. The danger remains that we will collapse towards either side. This essay argues that this is in fact what happened due to various pressures. Church assemblies and processes are not insulated from the demands of their context and because we have a limited view of our task, we have in fact simplified our gospel project.

Cornel West can help us to recover some aspects of our task and deepen our approach.

West calls himself a prophetic pragmatist. He is neither unnecessarily optimistic or unduly pessimistic. He maintains a stance of life and struggle being tragic, filled with failure and much hardship. This stance resonates with the Christian sense of sinfulness and weakness. It is an element of realism but not defeatism. This element will deepen URCSA's acknowledgement that we cannot create the unity. It is a given by Christ and we strive for its embodiment. When it becomes our project, it has already been defeated.

When we investigate the approach of URCSA towards unification, it is at times curious that the church has placed so much expectation and trust in possible short-term outcomes. When these outcomes failed to materialise, the first response has often been to question the viability of the unification project itself. An appreciation of the extraordinary project of embodiment of a vision of reconciliation and justice, must however, reckon with major setbacks, even defeat. This sense of limitation of which West speaks, is in fact a liberating emphasis and needs to infuse the process of the DRC family towards unification.

West's second theme is likewise appropriate. He argues that the quest for greater liberation and towards a kingdom alignment must be rooted in praxis of politics, spirit and existence. In our unification project we had little real engagement. Our process is mostly formulation and document construction. I understand West to be arguing that the goal must be born in the praxis of engagement. URCSA has engaged in a process that demanded little and, therefore, our outcomes have been poor. It is perhaps part of URCSA's real stance that it does not expect its conversation partners to make any substantial shift and consequently it is not ready to make those shifts itself. The unification project then becomes an interminable series of meetings and explorations without any real progress. The risk of practice, life together, worshipping together, reflecting from different life-worlds—these are indispensable requirements for the unification project to make headway.

West urges us to keep remembering the triumphs and defeats of the past. In this regard he understands that memory does not have to be negative and demoralising. Memory can keep us on track and is a necessary element to avoid the dead ends and remind us of the possibilities. The uncritical call to forget or at least move on from the past is destructive and a denial of the sacrifices of the previous generations. It is also to lose the fundamental insights that past experience affords us. West's call reminds of the

stirring pronouncement of Jesus Christ in John 8:14: "... I know where I have come from and where I am going." The requirement of anamnesis entails a significant reading of our multiple pasts. When the former oppressed and oppressor meet in the context of a joint faith tradition, the excluded are apt to go into accusatory mode while the former antagonist feels pressed into defence or silence. This is especially the case where the fruit of a former unjust system is so immediately visible. URCSA and her partners have no alternative but to clarify the mechanisms of continued privilege and identify ways to work on common projects of justice.

West's fourth theme is perhaps the most stirring. In a world of many differences between cultures and communities, can it be just to demand a levelling and homogenising so that people lose their sense of identity gained over generations? West's conception of diversity within community, a "broader we," allows for multiple identities within the one overarching identity in Christ. Christians are supposed to live a greater generosity and appreciation for the uniqueness and mystery of others. URCSA has found it difficult and not expedient to talk about identities in her midst, and much more so in her relationships with her church partners. But the creation of an inclusive and healed community with many transformed identities, lies at the heart of the unification project. The formulation of West—a broader we—and of Smit way back in 1997, show the way forward.

Biographical Note

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