

Reading the URCSA Church Order with African Lenses: A Belhar Confession Perspective

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Abstract

There are individuals within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) who claim that URCSA is not an African church in the real sense, as it ought to be. These claims have emanated from the narrow reading of URCSA's Church Order from a European perspective. This article aims at exploring how one can read the URCSA Church Order with African lenses. The author will highlight the identity of URCSA, as was accepted by the 2005 General Synod of Pietermaritzburg, which is African and Reformed. In this article, the author will outline the three concepts that are recently underpinning the African philosophy, namely community, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa as the lenses with which to read the URCSA Church Order. The utilisation of these concepts as lenses will enable us to understand and interpret the URCSA Church Order in an African sense.

Keywords: Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); Church Order; African lenses; Belhar Confession; Community; Ubuntu; Ujamaa

Introduction

The author is influenced by his participation in the church, as former Actuarius and academic, to respond to individuals in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) about its Africanness as a church in southern Africa. The identity of URCSA will be highlighted in this article, as was decided at the 2005 General Synod of URCSA. The author will engage scholars to find a better understanding of African philosophy on community, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa as the underpinning notions within African philosophy. The reflections focus on how to read the URCSA Church Order with African lenses. The point of departure is to find out what the identity of URCSA is, before one can assume that URCSA is African and Reformed.



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URCSA's Identity as Reformed and African

Clarification of the concepts “identity” and “African” will shed light on the question whether URCSA meets the requirements to be African. A scholar like Coetzee (cf. Coetzee and Roux 2004) critically engages the concept of “identified” in the post-colonial African philosophy. His discourses on identity have taken the form of a deconstruction of ideologically inflated Eurocentric representation of colonised Africans as the “other”; a representation widely held to sit at the root of the African's preoccupation with reconstruction. It is the responsibility of URCSA, as a church in Africa, to engage with decoloniality through its understanding of the African church and church polity. This denomination (URCSA) already in 2005 set the tone for a deconstruction of the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, as well as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, and their viewpoint from Eurocentric evangelisation, colonialisation and de-Africanisation of the African members of these European-orientated denominations.

The URCSA General Synod of 2005 engaged in a debate that ended with a decision of deconstruction and reconstruction of a new ideology, namely that URCSA ought to be an African church. The emphasis on unity, justice and reconciliation underpinned the process toward working together as a community of God through an Integrated Ministries Model (Mazamiza 2005). The synod used the concept of being “Reformed and African” as it was coined by Prof W Mazamiza. In his argument for Africanism in URCSA, Mazamiza (2005) emphasised that the reformed faith had come to Africa like a plant in a pot, planted in European soil. It was never taken out and planted in the African soil because it could become contaminated by “evil” Africa. The plant was kept in the pot and was never internalised in Africa, thus it remained the same throughout the years (Mazamiza 2005, 210). The analogy of the plant and internalisation needs to be approached in line with the decoloniality project, together with the Catholics' approach, which is inculturation. One needs to be careful not to be assimilated within the European culture while un-planting and re-planting the tree. Tlhagale (2004, 44) warns African scholars and Christians against this danger of assimilation while Africanising. He argues that European faith will find a home in the host culture and it will transform the host culture so that it becomes part of the host culture, and yet not of that culture. Mazamiza (2005) was aware of that danger—hence he gave clear steps that assisted the General Synod of 2005 to decide on the following to affirm that URCSA ought to be an African church:

- Synod affirms its African identity as an African church.
- Synod commits itself to reclaim this African identity through the symbols and rituals which we develop.
- Synod instructs all its core ministries as well as its support ministries to make our African heritage part of their programmes and processes during recess (Mazamiza 2005, 211).

The decisions taken by this synod emphasised that URCSA ought to be an African church that needs to display this Africanness, which is reflected in its Church Order. The key question is: What can URCSA do to reclaim their African identity amongst the midst of European Reformed tradition? Mazamiza (2005, 210) suggests the following:

- Members of URCSA need to convert from their European tradition and become Africans again.
- They should all recognise and appreciate what they are and have.
- They have their inter-subjectivity, which is how they relate to other human beings, Ubuntu.
- African spirituality is much closer to the world of God in Psalm 8 than the Reformed tradition because we believe firmly that every human being is created in the image of God.
- Africans need to take the plant from the pot and re-plant it in our African soil. The Reformed tradition should be internalised and made part of the African culture.
- Only Africans could do this and bring forth a new plant of fruits that is true to our African culture.
- Africans should reclaim their African Reformed identity and stop being and acting as Europeans.
- Members of URCSA should acknowledge and appreciate the symbols and rituals that are true to our African heritage (Mazamiza 2005, 210).

The contribution of Mazamiza to the development of an African Reformed theology for URCSA brought some challenges. These challenges have confronted many African theologians from as early as the 1950s to date, especially in terms of developing and differentiating the African theology from the African Christian theology. Bujo (1992, 2) confirms this in early publications such as those by Mulago and Kagame (1956), Mbiti (1969; 1976), and Mugambi (1989), who followed the great African authors of the 1950s. The argument of Magezi and Igba (2018) on differentiating African theology from African Christian theology—together with their response to the challenge that the Bible remains central to both theologies—is of great assistance to what Mazamiza is saying regarding being African and Reformed. The basic Reformation principles are: the priesthood of all believers (socialisation as against individualisation); *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone); *Sola Christo* (Christ alone); *Sola Deo* (God alone); and *Sola gratia* (grace alone). These principles, when un-planting the tree into African soil, need to be interpreted within the African concepts that are central in this article. Moreover, the priesthood of all believers must be viewed in the light of community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa. Like other authors and African theologians who attempt to develop African theology, Mazamiza views *Sola scriptura* (Bible) as central to his proposal. In simple terms, Mazamiza is bringing interplay between Reformed tradition (or any Reformed

principles) and the African context, which is contained in African philosophy. Three important concepts will be used in this article to reflect Africanism within the URCSA Church Order. These concepts are: community, Ujamaa, and Ubuntu.

African Philosophy: Community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa

African philosophy is based on the interconnectedness of different compounds like households, families, clans, tribes and the community (Mbiti 1969). Core concepts in African philosophy, that the author is going to use in this research, are “community”; “Ubuntu”; and “Ujamaa” in relation to the URCSA lifestyle. These concepts will be used to read and interpret the URCSA Church Order in African sense-making.

Community in African Society

The African people do not live in isolation or as individuals, but they live in interconnectedness within the network of the community of God and humanity. Gaybba (2004, 132) indicates that, as is the case of the Triune God, Christians believe in a community of persons. Therefore, any kind of human interconnectedness reflects that Triune God. In the Old Testament (Genesis 2:18) it is argued that it is not good for the individual human being to be alone. If this is true, then maybe this is because it is not good for God to be alone. Maybe it is so because it is only in their togetherness that humanity can truly reflect God, who is a community (Gaybba 2004, 132). Humanity is intended by God to be within a community and to truly share in God’s own communal life. In an African community, a human being is expected to be in a relation with other human beings, like God who is a community. Life in an African context is lived in community with others. An individual does not exist alone, except corporately (Masango 2018, 75). African humanity is defined in terms of the community. Humanity in the African context is primarily defined by a sense of belonging, of community and of serving one’s people in togetherness. Muzorewa (1985, 16) indicates that in an African context, it is not enough to be a human being. Unless the individual shares a sense of community, one can turn out to be an enemy. Oduyoye (1979, 110) states:

Africans recognise life as life-in-community. We can truly know ourselves if we remain true to our community, past and present. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, are crucial in one’s estimation of oneself. Our nature as beings-in-relation is a two-way relation: with God and with our fellow human beings.

Communities are built by families, families are built by households, and households are built by the individual. Mbiti (1969, 106) indicates that African people view the family as a wider circle of members than the concept of “family” is regarded in the European context. In the traditional African context the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters, who may have their children and other immediate relatives; this is what is called extended families. The joint households constitute a large family. Where is the individual in the whole equation of households, families and community? In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist

alone. The individual is indebted to others for his/her existence; the individual is simply part of the whole. The community must make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group. Solely in terms of other human beings does the individual become conscious of his/her being, his/her duties, his/her privileges and responsibilities towards the individual-self and other people. During a time of suffering, the individual does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when the individual rejoices, he/she rejoices with kinsmen, neighbours and relatives—whether dead or living—as well as the whole community (Mbiti 1969, 108). The individual can only say: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” O’Donovan (1996, 4) concurs with Mbiti that:

Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny. The reality in Africa may be described with the statement: “I am because the community is.” The feeling may be stronger in some groups than in others but it is very important throughout Africa.

African life, leadership and management are envisaged because of the collective forces found in the principle of community and the interconnectedness of humanity. Individuals survive and prosper because of others in the community who are united in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu as a Lifestyle within the African Community

Boon (1998, 31), Mbigi and Maree (1995) and Broodryk (2002, 13–14) emphasise that Ubuntu is all about a comprehensive traditional African sense-making. It is based on the values of intense morality, humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion, empathy about values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in a spirit of family. In its simple form, it is the ethic and interaction that occurs in the extended family. The emphasis from these researchers is that Ubuntu is a communal and collective networking of group solidarity, where conformity and dignity are fostered and enhanced. African Ubuntu is the philosophy that is lived by Africans daily. Ubuntu is not a programme, structure, template, or a mental framework.

Tutu (1994, 122), when interacting with victims and perpetrators during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), came to realise that Ubuntu in African philosophy is a philosophy that demonstrates gentleness, compassion, hospitality, openness to others, vulnerability, to be available to others, and to know that human beings are bound up with them in a collective form of life. Furthermore, Meiring (2015, 1) indicates that the notion of Ubuntu became well known as a prominent concept in theology. This Ubuntu theology emphasises reconciliation, the joining of apparent opposites and the restoration of humanity and dignity of not only the victims of violence, but also that of the perpetrators of violence. Resane (2017, 97) indicates:

One of the core concepts of Ubuntu is that individualism is self-fatalism. The submissive mental attitude resulting from acceptance of the doctrine that everything that happens is predetermined and inevitable finds no space in Ubuntu lifestyle. Everything that happens to the individual is to be felt by the community. ... The individual responsibility or irresponsibility impacts the community.

Ubuntu is all about the interconnectedness of humanity as a community that lives in harmony. If by mistake there is violence or provocation, reconciliation is prominent and possible.

The African and Reformed church is the church of “Ubuntu” where “*Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe.*” This principle of Ubuntu can be expanded on by saying that a human being is a human being because of other human beings, and because they are the image of God. Being the image of God implies being love, because God is love. The principle of Ubuntu simply says “illustrate what you are” (meaning love). If we practise this principle of Ubuntu (showing love) the history of “top dog and underdog” will not prevail, because Paul has taught us: “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” Love always illustrates compassionate justice, hospitality and gentleness (Tutu 2012).

Ubuntu is often misused to advance selfish ambitions. Therefore, it is not safe to employ Ubuntu alone to define Africanism. In this sense, it is safe to couple Ubuntu and Ujamaa to avoid a dependency syndrome under the banner of economic inequality.

Ujamaa as the Emphasis of Family within the Community

The African and Reformed church is a church of “Ujamaa” because of its unity and brotherhood or sisterhood. Onwubiko (2001, 36) explains that the concept of “Ujamaa”—properly understood as “togetherness” and “familyhood”—does not depend on consanguinity. It depicts a “community spirit” of togetherness which regards all people as “brothers and sisters.” This community spirit, in turn, shapes distinctive African understandings of personhood. In most African societies there is a very limited sense of individual autonomy. Keshomshahara (2008, 76) indicates that Ujamaa is the political ideology which was developed in Tanzania to imply a synthesis of African traditional ways of life and modernity to overcome the challenges of poverty, ignorance and disease without endangering the African identity, human dignity, freedom and unity.

The emphasis of Ujamaa is the unity of the African people in a particular setting where Africans are living as a community. Within the Ujamaa sense-making context the community is arranged in a particular way so that the basic needs of human beings are taken care of by the community, whatever it may cost. Okonkwo (2010, 96), reflecting on togetherness in Africa, states:

Africans are famous for believing in and enhancing communion, within and beyond the shores of Africa. This notion is a reflective journey into pre-Christian African societies, which were an organised system that guaranteed that the interest of the community was

of importance. Rights were exercised individually and collectively. The cultivation of social and moral values, and hence the enhancement of social cohesion, played a conspicuous vital role in African life. It enabled society to be held together; great value was placed upon communal fellowship in the traditional society. This fellowship infused African social life with pervasive humanity and fullness of life. (Okonkwo 2010, 96)

This understanding of togetherness is coined within the notion of Ujamaa, where familyhood is more than an individual.

Individualism, with its characteristics of selfishness is not entertained, as each member of the community is encouraged to work hard for the sake of the community lifestyle (Keshomshahara 2008, 76). It is used as a model for the new state in which humanity, service to the community, cooperation, solidarity and collective development are opposed to all forms of exploitation, profit-making, power-seeking and acquisitiveness. Ujamaa emphasises human equality as an essential and decisive aspect of socialism. Hence, URCSA, as an African and Reformed church, confesses and confirms this oneness or togetherness through its Confession of Belhar and the URCSA Church Order. African sense-making does not stand in isolation from God and nature. The image of God does not necessarily rest on the individual, but on God who is a community, who cannot exist alone without the other persons; so strong is the image of God as a community in the African context, that a human being cannot exist alone without the community.

Carelse (2016), in the foreword of the URCSA Church Order, illustrates the Africanness of URCSA's Church polity as follows:

Our African Reformed Church law fully embraces the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu* which focuses on human dignity, mutual care, respect for one another and mutual responsibility. In our togetherness in congregations and our pastoral care together with other chaplains in the Security Services, we serve the Lord and our beloved country. The Guidelines for Partnerships with churches and organisations in the rest of Africa and abroad are ways of sharing and caring through *Ubuntu*. Furthermore, the contents of this Book also embrace the African concept of *Ujamaa* with its emphasis on transformation, equity and equality. Congregations are called to practice *Ujamaa* namely, support people who experience any form of suffering and need; witness and fight against all forms of inequality; strive for restorative justice; wipe out historical imbalances. (Carelse 2016, foreword)

The emphasis is that URCSA is in the position do all the above-mentioned (Carelse 2016) for the reason that URCSA's church polity is *exemplary law*. It serves as a pattern for the formation and administration of human law generally, and therefore of the law of other political, economic, cultural and human institutions. The reading of the URCSA Church Order from an African lens is anchored on this foreword.

The section to follow will apply the three African philosophy concepts to illustrate these concepts within the URCSA Church Order articles.

Utilisation of African Philosophy as Lenses to Understand the URCSA Church Order

Based on the argument above, the researcher values African philosophical concepts very highly in the reading and interpreting of the URCSA Church Order as an African church. The utilisation of African philosophy to read and interpret the church polity of URCSA and the URCSA Church Order is an attempt to design a methodology to read the URCSA Church Order from a new point of view, namely, an African lens. The African lenses mentioned above, namely community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa, will be utilised in the sections to follow in order to read URCSA Church Order articles and to bring about a contextual interpretation of this URCSA Church Order.

Reading Article 1 with an African Lens: Community

Article 1, in Reformed churches, is an important article that stipulates what the church believes in, thus forming the confessional basis of the church. In the URCSA Church Order we define who we are, as Africans, because we cannot confess in isolation from “who” we are? The reading of Article 1 of the URCSA Church Order is being done with the lens of “community” as an important African value. This article reads:

The church of Jesus Christ is a community of believers who are called together by the Word of God and by his Holy Spirit. Those who have been called and form the “Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa” are part of this church of Christ. Together with all the other churches who confess Christ, this Church has been set apart as a nation as the people of God who belong to Him and who have to proclaim the saving deeds of Him who called them from darkness unto light, a new creation who lives in the light as He is the light. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

The emphasis in the above article is a community that starts from URCSA and spreads to other Christian churches that confess Christ; just like in an African community, it is built by households and the community—and communities form a tribe. Individualism is not mentioned in this article since an individual does not exist in an African context. This belief of a community is re-emphasised in Article 2, where the community of God opens the whole article on a confessional basis.

Reading Article 2 with an African Lens: Community

Article 2 contains the confessional basis wherein community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa are emphasised. Article 2.1 emphasises the community of God, which is the prototype on which we build the human community, as confessed in the Belhar Confession. It states:

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa believes in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This Church believes that the Bible is the Word of God and is the full and trustworthy (reliable) witness of this revelation. This Church accepts that at certain times and by the Word of God creeds came into existence, which interpret and state the faith of the Church of Christ. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

As is stated by Gaybba (2004), the human community originates from God as community. Human beings are images of God, therefore, human togetherness resembles the community of God (Triune God). It was the plan of God right from the beginning that humanity should be a community and should undeniably share in God's own communal life. This notion excludes an unhealthy individualism that would view the community merely as the total of several individuals, and as being there merely to serve the interests of each individual—considered precisely as an individual. The first two articles emphasise that URCSA polity must be within the confinement of the unity of God and the unity of human beings. Furthermore, Gaybba (2004, 133) postulates:

Just as God is physically incapable of being God other than by being in community, just as what makes God, God is ceaseless relationality, a ceaseless distinction that finds its unity in love, so too humanity is incapable of being truly human other than by being in community. What makes humanity, humanity is ceaseless relationality on the level of knowledge and love. It is the well-known African concept of Ubuntu, which asserts that a person is a person only through other persons.

The unity within this community is documented in the ecumenical creeds and formularies of unity as handed down to URCSA throughout history. These creeds and formularies are the ones that strengthen this community to live as one united nation. They assist reading and interpreting these articles within the Reformed tradition as African and Reformed. The community is built out of individual members that need to have an identity within that community.

Reading Article 3 with an African Lens: Individual within the Community

Article 3 puts more emphasis on an individual member of the community, who should belong to this interconnected community. This article emphasises who forms this community of believers, as stated in Article 1. The article states the condition to belong to this community as a member of this community; belief in Christ is the only condition for membership of URCSA. These members who confess Christ in public in the congregation are not called alone, but with other Christians, as Article 1 states that we are a community of believers called together with others to be a nation. The notion of Ubuntu plays a part in interpreting this article; the confessing member is a member because of other members within the body of Christ. Elderly and children are members, just like in an African community where all belong to the community. Mbiti (1969, 106) states that family is viewed as a wider circle of members. In this context the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their children and other immediate relatives; this is called extended families. Articles 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate this African notion of an extended family:

- People who wish to join this Church do so by publicly professing their faith before the congregation. Members from other recognised reformed churches, do so using a membership certificate.

- Baptised children of communicants (practising members) belong to the Church by the covenant of grace. Such members will affirm their membership of the Church by professing their faith before the congregation. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

This article confirms Article 1 together with other churches who confess Christ. URCSA, together with those churches, forms a nation, as long as they can prove their identity with this community by membership certificate. The article confirms the extended family notion as is emphasised in Ubuntu and Ujamaa.

Reading Articles 4 and 5 with an African lens: Ubuntu and Ujamaa within a Community

It has already been indicated how African people live in a community. In URCSA Church Order Articles 4 and 5, the church stipulates the community where service takes place within a particular geographical area. URCSA Church Order Article 4.1 states: “The congregation forms a community of believers in a particular place to serve God, one another and the world.” The responsibility of the congregation rests within the community of believers, like in the African context which emphasises that the failure or success of an individual rests within the community (Oduyoye 1979, 110). African people view life as life-in-community. So is also the life of the congregations. According to Article 4.1, the success of the congregation rests with the interconnectedness within the community. African people truly know themselves if they remain true and honest to their community, past and present. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, are all crucial in one’s estimation of oneself. African nature, as beings-in-relation, is a two-way relation, which is with God and with our fellow human beings. Articles 4 and 5 confirm this African nature of a two-way relationship with God and fellow human beings; and that this community in a particular place serves God, one other and the world. The purpose of the community is to nourish the spirit of communion and to share in the African context. Resane (2017, 110) indicates:

Caring goes together with sharing and koinonia is characterised with a lifestyle of sharing. Sharing is the hallmark of communion. When koinonia is present, the spirit of sharing and giving become tangible. Indeed, koinonia involves not only belonging to the Christian community but also having an obligation to care for its other members.

The communion with God and fellow human beings means sharing and caring, hence Article 4.2 continues to state:

Service of God has a bearing on the whole life of the congregation and therefore includes service to one another and the world. The essence of this service of God is found where the congregation meets round the Word of God and Sacraments. There God is worshipped and praised, his Word listened to, the Sacraments received, and all needs brought before him to strengthen the believers in their faith and prepare them for their service to one another and the world. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

Service of God, according to Article 4.2, is more African in the sense that it has a bearing on the whole life of the congregation, as Africans believe in the whole rather than part. The essence of this service of God is found where the congregation gathers around the Word and Sacraments.

The family of God, like the African family, meet around the Word and Sacrament (Eucharist and baptismal). Mbiti (1969, 107) indicates that Africans give an offering of food and liberation to the living-dead because they are still part of the family (congregation). The food and liberation have the same connotation as the symbols of Eucharist, namely: fellowship, communion, remembrance, respect and hospitality. The living-dead solidify and mystically bind together the whole family, as Christ binds the whole congregation around the table. The family, community and interconnectedness of God, human beings and nature (food, water and wine in Sacraments) in this URCSA Church Order article reflect the African notions of community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa (as is further reflected in Article 4.3). It is by belonging to the community that we become Africans in the real sense. The community is not against the individual, nor does it swallow the individual; the community enables each individual to become a unique centre of a shared life (Shutte 2001, 9).

African notions of Ubuntu and Ujamaa are reflected upon in this section of the article. As mentioned before, the individual does not survive for him/herself but for the community and the other. In a time of suffering, the individual does not suffer alone but with the corporate group. When an individual rejoices, the individual rejoices with kinsmen, neighbours and relatives—whether dead or living—as well as the whole community (Mbiti 1969, 108).

Article 4.3 opens with this African statement of Ubuntu and Ujamaa: “The believers accept mutual responsibility for one another in their spiritual and physical needs.” This statement confirms the fact that the congregation is a community and in the community, there is no individual selfishness and care for one’s self interest without considering others’ needs. The responsibility is mutual, meaning both parties benefit and no one is harmed. Kamaara (2018, 84), in looking at community and African lifestyle, observe that all African indigenous communities have a strong sense of community. This does not mean that community needs are met at the expense of individual needs, but that individual needs are met in the context of the community. Closely related to communitarianism is solidarity, defined as mutual dependence and cooperation (Kamaara 2018, 84).

This article upholds what Resane (2017, 100) calls African gregariousness, which is also characterised by living together (symbiosis). This is the notion of interdependence, whereby each human being benefits from the other. This is Ubuntu and Ujamaa at its core. The concepts of independence, autonomy, self-sufficiency or self-reliance find no place in the African community. This symbiosis in the African context is called Ubuntu, which is interdependence or a mutually beneficial relationship between persons, groups

or affiliations. This sense-making of Resane (about living together) is captured very well in URCSA Church Order Article 4.3, which illustrates that the URCSA Church Order reflects African sense-making. Believers, as Africans, have a responsibility towards other believers to enhance a strong community. Article 4.3 suggests that a person cannot survive on his or her own:

The congregation lives as a family of God where they are inextricably bound to one another and where they mutually share joy and sorrow. Each considers the other higher than him/herself and no one only cares about his/her own needs, but also about the needs of others. In this way, they share one another's burdens and fulfil the law of Christ. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

This article needs to be read and interpreted with an African lens in terms of community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa, for the reason that the social structure of African life makes it easy to understand God's plan for the local church. In Africa, a person's extended family and tribal community are vital realities. God plans that the local church should become the most vital community in the life of a Christian. It is a group of people who belong to each other as spiritual brothers and sisters, regardless of the tribal or social connections, because they each belong to Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

In Article 5 the emphasis is placed on services that are provided in this community or extended family which are related to Ubuntu and Ujamaa in the sense of connectedness and caring for the others. There are five services provided in this denomination, namely: worship, instruction, care, witnessing and service. All these services ought to be provided in the spirit of Ubuntu and Ujamaa; togetherness and extended familyhood as the building blocks for the community of God. In this sense, the term Ujamaa is highly suggestive as a way of describing the church as the family of God. The church family has its origin in the blessed Trinity; in the depths of which the Holy Spirit is the bond of communion. Imagining the church as a family offers a helpful path for relating the relationality of family life to the Trinitarian foundations of the church and church governance in the African context. In an African perspective, the church is seen as a distinctive form of family, which reflects the sense of mutual responsibilities and overarching interdependence that must exist among all church members. Given the traditional African emphasis on the extended family as a place of belonging and a context of more in-depth experience of solidarity and care for others, the church as a family provides an apt starting point for African ecclesial reflection on Christian ethics of power (Gaillardetz 2008, 128).

Reading Articles 6, 7 and 8 with an African Lens: Ubuntu and Ujamaa within a Community

Articles 6 and 7 deal with officials in the community. In an African community, there are always elders and young ones who understudy the elders. Elders are divided into two categories; the chiefs and the advisors (wise men and women in the community). Article 6.1 states: "To render the congregation's service more effective, members may

be elected—by spiritual gifts (charismata) and Gods calling thereto—to serve in one or more congregations.” These officials form the management team of the community called *kgotla* in Sesotho. These articles deal with power within the congregation, which is supposed to be vested in the legal persona present in the meeting, as per Article 11.11. God is ruling his church through his word and spirit, using men and women on earth. Mbiti (1969, 211) confirms that traditional chiefs and rulers have the responsibility of keeping law and order, and executing justice in their areas.

Article 7 states that Jesus Christ rules his church through his Word and the Holy Spirit. The office of believers forms the basis of all other offices in the church. For this reason, the congregation itself elects a church council consisting of deacons and elders from among its practising members. The church council is entrusted with the management (running), supervision and discipline of the congregation and leadership in the various ministries of the congregation (URCSA Church Order 2016). In the African Christian context, power is hierarchical, power from God, human beings (living or dead), then the natural environment. Among many peoples, God’s omnipotence is perceived in his exercise of power over nature. The wind, the sun and the rain are beyond human power of control, but not beyond God’s power, who works through them and other natural phenomena or objects. There are those people who see God’s omnipotence in terms of him being able to deal with, or control the spirits; these being more powerful than human beings. In this context, power is viewed hierarchically, where God is at the top as omnipotent, beneath him are the spirits and natural phenomena, and lower still are human beings who have comparatively little or no power at all (Mbiti 1967, 31–32). Resane (2017, 103) emphasises that discourses, dialogues and collaborations are the ongoing engagements of the community sitting at the tribal courts called *kgotla*. Issues are planned, organised, controlled and led from the decisions of the tribal courts meetings (*Kgotla*).

African scholars agree with Mbiti on the notion that authentic lifestyle is only found in corporate connectedness. This is where or when everybody relates with everybody else (Mbiti 1969, 104; Resane 2017, 103). The notion of corporate connectedness links the researcher to Article 8 of the URCSA Church Order, which states:

As an expression of the unity of the church, congregations, using representatives, come together in church meetings by Christ’s command to serve one another. The purpose of these meetings is joint consultation on matters that affect all congregations. These meetings form a visible link between congregations. Two types of such meetings may be distinguished: the Presbytery and the Synod. Depending on circumstances, the Synods may be of a wider or more limited nature. In the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, there will be a General Synod and Regional Synods. (URCSA Church Order 2016)

Article 8 needs to be read in terms of the corporate connectedness of the congregation in the African way of living as communities. Resane (2017, 104) indicates that communal lifestyle is the African expression of selfhood and ontological relations. It is

intercommunity-driven by the Ubuntu practical life, wherein individualism and egoism play no part. In the African lifestyle the individual does not exist alone, except corporately. Individual congregations cannot exist as an individual congregation without interconnectedness to other congregations in the form of meetings to deal with issues of common concern. Articles 9–12 should be read within the context of Article 7, which is the management of the congregation, while Articles 9–12 deal with the broader church council or meetings of congregations and other denominations (Article 12). These meetings reflect the corporate connectedness of the congregations, which Resane (2017) calls intercommunity-driven by Ubuntu.

Conclusion

The author has responded to informal voices within URCSA that the URCSA Church Order is not African, through broadening the understanding of church polity with African theology. The argument in this paper attempts to explore the possibility of reading the URCSA Church Order from a different perspective. The author attempted to expose the identity of URCSA as accepted by the 2005 General Synod of Pietermaritzburg, which is an African and Reformed identity. We outlined the three concepts that are utilised in the African philosophy, namely community, Ubuntu and Ujamaa, as the lenses with which to read and fully understand the URCSA Church Order.

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