

Reflecting on URCSA25

On 12 and 13 April 2019 an academic seminar, **URCSA25**, was held in Bloemfontein, South Africa, at the Faculty of Theology of the University of the Free State. Eighteen scholars gave papers reflecting on the history of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa the past 25 years. The day after the seminar, Sunday 14 April 2019, saw the national celebrations of the quarter century existence of this church.

On 14 April 1994, 13 days before the first democratic elections including people of all races in South Africa, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa came into existence. It was a unification of two apartheid churches created by the (white) Dutch Reformed Church. On this day there was a historic unification of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, reserved during apartheid times for brown people, and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, reserved for black people.

The scholars who presented papers at the seminar were invited to submit their papers to *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*. These papers were subjected to a double blind review process according to the procedures and standards of the journal, and 16 papers were accepted for publication. They are published in the third issue of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Volume 45 (2019). Permission was obtained to publish slightly outside of the 25 per cent restriction on articles from a single institution.

The first paper published here is by Prof. Leepo Modise, Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA and Professor in Systematic Theology at the University of South Africa. He provides an overview of the 25 years' history of URCSA, with reference to URCSA's contribution to democracy in South Africa. This serves as an introduction to the four themes covered by the other papers.

The first theme that received attention from the authors is, of course, that of the unification between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa itself, the history leading to this unification and the faces of the unification that have revealed themselves over the past 25 years. Prof. Thias Kgatla, emeritus Professor in Missiology from the University of Pretoria and previous Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA (2005-2012), describes the difficult ecclesiastical and political circumstances under which the unification took place. Rev. Pieter Grove in turn describes both the theological and socio-political reasons why a full unification of all the churches in the DRC family is lacking. Prof. Tumi Senokoane, Assessor of the Southern Regional Synod of URCSA and Professor in Systematic



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Theology at the University of South Africa, argues that the unification, seen in the light of the missionary policy of the Dutch Reformed Church, was indeed an impossibility which came into reality in spite of the “mother church” and her history with the “daughter churches.”

The second theme deals with the most identifiable characteristic of URCSA, namely its Confession of Belhar. Rev. Henco van der Westhuizen from the University of the Free State and Cobus van Wyngaard from the University of South Africa, in two separate essays, analyse the decision of the Dutch Reformed Church not to accept the Confession of Belhar as their official confession. Dr Gideon van der Watt, affiliated to the University of the Free State, constructs a possible line from the Synod of Dordt held 400 years ago in 1618/19, and URCSA celebrating 25 years of existence in 2019, as reflected in the Canons of Dordt and the Confession of Belhar. The two confessing “by faith alone” makes the decision of the Dutch Reformed Church—and consequently the division it brings between confession and church practice—all the more tragic. Rev. Martin Laubscher, also from the University of the Free State, in his article embodies the Confession of Belhar in liturgy and Christian worship. Finally in this subsection, Rev. Moses Maponya, Principal of the Northern Theological Seminary of the URCSA, and Rev. Katleho Mokoena from URCSA Nhlazatshe, with co-author emeritus Prof. Klippies Kritzinger from the University of South Africa, ask the question: “How Belharic have we become?” with reference to the 25 years of theological training in URCSA. If it were not for these two young black ministers of the Word from URCSA, the publications from the URCSA25 seminar on the Confession of Belhar would have been solely in the hands of white men.

The third theme of the conference publications comprises URCSA as a missional and prophetic church. While Dr Eugene Baron from the University of the Free State calls on URCSA to fulfil its missional role after 25 years, Prof. Reggie Nel, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, points towards the Christian Youth Ministry reimagining missional ecclesiology since 1994. Dr Eugene Fortein from the University of Stellenbosch, again, asks whether URCSA has retained the prophetic voice it had 25 years ago. Prof. Piet Meiring, emeritus from the University of Pretoria, in the final article of this subsection, presents Rev. James Buys, Actuarium of the first Moderamen of URCSA, as a person with a prophetic voice in his presentation on behalf of URCSA to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on 19 October 1997.

The final theme of the URCSA25 seminar deals with gender. The three essays dealing with gender published here point to the fact that URCSA claims to be *en route* towards eradicating patriarchy in its ranks, but that it is far from accomplishing this goal. Dr Bonita Nel from the University of the Western Cape argues that the Christian Women’s Ministry of URCSA has the potential to address patriarchy in the church, but that this potential is often compromised by a variety of factors. Some of these factors are the fact that URCSA as a whole is not addressing gender injustice prophetically, and that it does not actively seek witness to the partnership between men and women. Prof. Mary-Anne

Plaatjies-Van Huffel from the University of Stellenbosch and Prof. Christina Landman from the University of South Africa, the only two women during the past 25 years to be elected to the Moderamen of the General Synod of the URCSA, both use autoethnography as method to describe their journey with URCSA amidst the challenges facing ordained women in URCSA—and specifically women in leadership.

On 24 September 2019, a second URCSA25 Seminar was held at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch to deal with the challenges facing URCSA the next 25 years. The papers delivered at this seminar will be published in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* during 2020. For now, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* is proud to present in publication the papers of the seminar on the history of challenges faced by URCSA during the first 25 years of its existence.

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