

Church Media and Reconciliation in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)

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Abstract

In honour of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel, this article is dedicated to her last endeavour, “to reflect on the road travelled” of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Plaatjies-Van Huffel became outspoken against the lack of internal unity in URCSA, especially after the retraction of her nomination as Actuaris at the URCSA Cape Synod elections in 2018. In this regard, the article focuses particularly on reconciliation in URCSA with a focus on the role of the church media as a medium for reconciliation. The paper will focus on the media reporting of the DRMC church newspaper, *Die Ligdraer*, between 1990 and 1994 on church unification between the DRCA and the DRMC as a case study to reflect on what role church media can play in the internal unification processes in URCSA. The author conducts a rhetorical analysis of the DRMC’s newspaper, *Die Ligdraer*, and its role in the facilitation of unification between two churches (DRMC and DRCA), with different ethnic and cultural traditions that became reconciled and united in the context of political transition within the broader South African context.

Keywords: Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); *Die Ligdraer*; church media; rhetoric; newspaper; reconciliation; unity



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Introduction

The problem of internal unity was one of the burning issues, alongside matters of patriarchy and gender insensitivity in URCSA, that Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel found extremely salient to address in her academic corpus. Her contribution to the edited book, *Belhar Confession. The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society* (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Modise 2017) demonstrates her commitment also towards the biblical commandment for unity and reconciliation. As a staff member at the University of the Free State (UFS), it was heartwarming to observe the manner in which colleagues reflected positively on her contribution at one of the unique events of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, at the Theological Day, wherein she participated in February 2018. She shared the space at the time also as the moderator of URCSA with the then moderator of the DRC, CJP (Nelus) Niemandt. The two of them also shared a stage at the University of the Western Cape's (UWC) conference on 3–5 June 2015 with the theme “Ecclesiology and Ethics: The State of Ecumenical Theology in Africa.” Their papers addressed specifically the issue of unity in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) family. Therefore, these and other engagements demonstrate her continuous efforts in engaging academically with the issues of church unity and reconciliation.

However, in one of her last academic contributions (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019), before her passing on 19 May 2020, Plaatjies-Van Huffel presented a paper at the URCSA 25-year academic conference in Bloemfontein, where she also reflected on her disappointment on the internal unity process within URCSA as a “procedure to safeguard positions of power for a certain cultural group” which led to her resignation as the elected Actuarius of URCSA (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 8). This was part of the road “travelled,” in the words of Plaatjies-Van Huffel. This reminds us of the words of Nick Apollis (1997, 566) during his last address as the moderator of URCSA in 1997, that the road towards unity in URCSA will become difficult in the future, and that URCSA would have to “die” like a “grain in the soil” to bring in “a harvest.”¹

Plaatjies-Van Huffel's journey in the church was inclusive of an ongoing journey towards reconciliation in URCSA, one in which she and others reflected on the journey. The role of Plaatjies-Van Huffel transpired alongside that of other role players, and as this contribution will showcase, also that of the church media.² It is, therefore, crucial to understand the role that the media, specifically the newspaper of the church and in terms of how members of the DRMC, ultimately, embraced the unity with their brothers and sisters from another “racially-based” church (DRCA).

1 Apollis cautions, “Ons aanvaar mekaar as bondgenote in ‘n stryd wat vir die Kerk moeilik is en al moeiliker en gevaarliker gaan word” (Apollis 1997).

2 Kritzinger (2012, 238) refers to the role of the media in religious issues.

Baron (Forthcoming) argues in a similar vein³ that the South African media has a role to play in reconciliation and social cohesion. This paper will take it a bit further in arguing that church media also has a significant role to fulfil in terms of fostering unity and reconciliation in the church and congregations. The paper contends that the discourse which is circulating in church contexts, is able to foster good or bad relationships, encourage and also foster ethnic reconciliation within congregations and churches.

Nevertheless, two matters need to be mentioned before embarking on such a study. The author does not argue that the editors of the DRMC would ever assume such a role (ministry of reconciliation) through the newspaper, but the arguments raised in the paper contend that the reporting would fulfil such a role, given the rhetorical strategies. Furthermore, though one would be able to argue that recently (with the advent of COVID-19) various online, digital platforms have also become instruments of instant communication—and serve as a good platform for fostering reconciliation—such a study would be beyond the scope of this paper. The author purports first to consider and demonstrate such a relationship between the church’s print media and processes of reconciliation in church contexts. Only then can we build on the outcome of the study to broaden the research in analysing social media platforms that have been utilised by church ministers across the spectrum, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The paper will commence with a discussion of the church media and reconciliation, followed by a rhetorical analysis that was the research method used to unearth the rhetorical strategies that *Die Ligdraer* used in its reporting on church unification during the period of 1990–1994. Though the author focuses on church unification, this does not mean that the reporting is only about achieving structural unity; however, the issues around the unification demonstrate that it is more than that—it is a matter of reconciliation. Conradie (2013, 22, 23) lists various contexts in which reconciliation takes place, which include: “Reconciliation between groups that have little or no contact with each other, but where tensions may nevertheless be prevalent in the form of perceptions, attitudes, jokes, and stereotypes, for example, with respect to particular groups of foreigners.” It is within this context that the author argues that the unification between the two churches was a matter of reconciliation. The matter of unification would not have succeeded, had the parties in the DRMC as well as the DRCA not reconciled and embraced one another. The author then presents the results of the research and in the final section discusses the implications of the case study used in the article to underscore the crucial role that church media would fulfil in fostering internal unity and reconciliation in URCSA, as two of the pillars (alongside justice) constituted in the Belhar Confession.

3 Baron (Forthcoming) has shown in his thesis on the impact of the media on the issue of morality in South Africa through newspaper reporting.

Church Media and Reconciliation

Robert Schreiter (1992, 72–73) refers to the church and its “ministry of reconciliation.” He argues that this can be achieved in the following manner within and through the church. The church should in the first place be “listening and waiting.” This implies a church that has a disposition of listening and provides such time (space) for itself to understand the struggles and suffering of people. This requires the church to live out of the reconciliation work of Jesus Christ. The church would, therefore, have to allow that people share their “stories” and journeys. The implication for the church and its media in this regard would be to demonstrate, through its ideological disposition, that it has its eyes and ears fixed on the struggles and hurtful past of members in the various congregations. This role of the church is also to allow those members space to reflect on their painful and hurtful memories of the past. According to Schreiter (1992, 72), it would showcase the church’s compassion as walking alongside and “entering into” the painful journey of people. Thirdly, he refers to the work of the South African theologian, Villa-Vicencio, that places reconciliation within the post-exilic (reconstruction) paradigm of the Bible. This would imply that the church’s role in reconciliation should not primarily be perceived as a role of “liberation” from the past (which Schreiter argues would never be completed), but to learn how to create a new life out of the old. It would be a new future for victims and perpetrators,⁴ and not only for the perpetrators—a place where both have never been before.

These three acts are dispensed through a “spirituality of reconciliation” (Schreiter 1992, 70–73). This, therefore, is not about specific moral acts but an embodiment of the virtues of reconciliation.⁵ This embodiment can only take place through character formation, which takes place in various ways. Conradie (2006, 77) lists certain conditions that are important for moral formation to take place. In terms of newspaper reporting, the following are important to mention, for instance, “regular exercises”—where people are regularly exposed to and made aware of those virtues that are crucial to build a new society. It also happens through presenting “a vision for a good society.” It could also develop where “virtues are usually embodied and carried through narratives and paradigmatic stories” (Conradie 2006, 77).

The three strategies mentioned above illustrate how the media can play a role in assisting with the embodiment of reconciliation as a moral demand (Conradie 2013, 16), or a “spirituality of reconciliation” (Schreiter 1992, 70–73) to its readership. This is specifically done by the church’s newspaper through the rhetorical strategies that it employs. These rhetorical strategies include, among others, a focus on the “emphases”;

4 Conradie (2013, 50) argues that demarcation between the two is not always possible. The victim can also be a perpetrator and the perpetrator a victim.

5 This has to do with the contentious debate between moral decision-making or being a person with a good character. The latter is the basis of the article: that a good person would be able to engage with moral responsibility in society. This argument is based on the work of Aristotle, the theologian Thomas, and the re-emergence of the virtue ethics in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

the arguments (*logos*); the feelings that it triggers (*pathos*); its space allocated; the frequency of issues of unification and reconciliation; and the metaphors and narrative that are constructed through its reporting. These are some of the elements and components that would demonstrate the role of the church newspaper in unification and reconciliation. It would assist the rhetorical critic in understanding the intended effect of *Die Ligdraer* for its readership in terms of unification and reconciliation (cf. Lawrie 2005, 126–139).

It is crucial to underscore the relevance and the crucial role that *Die Ligdraer* played in the DRMC, especially because the members at congregational level did not have ready access to the formal conversations, discussions and decisions of the church on church unity between 1990 and 1995.⁶ The content of meetings was not divulged in its entirety, and it was, therefore, crucial that the newspaper would facilitate such a process of awareness, allowing space for the expression of various feelings of “insecurity”; of doubt, and of fear, to be publicised and placed within a narrative that would allow members to imagine and foster “reconciliation” and unity as a result of its reporting.

Research Methodology

The author selected the church newspaper of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), namely *Die Ligdraer*. All the articles that were published on church unification during the period 1990–1994 were selected. This period was significant because it captured the challenges that the two black churches, namely the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) had been faced with before the unification in April 1994. The unification conversations and discourse in *Die Ligdraer* show the stumbling blocks that hampered the church to become unified already in 1991. However, the reporting also shows how difficult it was for the two churches to embrace each other and reconcile after years of separation. The author, through an interpretive research framework, analysed the agency of the church newspaper in the process of reconciliation.

The author used a rhetorical analysis method to understand the effect of the reporting of the church newspaper on the unification during the period 1990–1995. The task and responsibility of the editors of a newspaper cannot be perceived as an unbiased, neutral view, as newspapers and media have their ideological disposition, through expressing certain views, positioning and structuring arguments and conveying issues from a particular perspective. This article is based on the argument of various scholars of rhetoric that all communication has an effect and has a purpose (Lawrie 2005). This effect is achieved through various rhetorical elements within a text. These elements do not function in all texts at once and simultaneously, and it is also not the case that all the elements would function in a text or corpus. It is the rhetor who decides which

6 See for instance the remark later in the paper on the different perspectives of Buys and Botman, against that of Apollis and Botha in one of their moderation meetings in 1991—concerning the postponement of the Founding synod or the proceeding thereof.

elements would work best to achieve the desired effect. Therefore, the author was conducting a rhetorical analysis of the DRMC church newspaper, *Die Ligdraer*'s, articles and letters specifically related to the unification process of the DRMC and the DRCA between 1990–1995. The main research question was: What rhetorical strategies did *Die Ligdraer* use in its reports in church unification between 1990–1995? The author used the rhetorical analysis model of Lawrie (2005) in his book, *Speaking to Good Effect*, to understand the rhetoric of *Die Ligdraer* and its effect on its readership. The author adapted it for the purposes of this article and commenced with: 1) listing the operations; 2) identifying the master tropes; 3) analysing the arguments; 4) examining the style; and finally, 5) reconstructing the rhetorical situation. The final stage is where the author asked: “What was going on in the rhetorical act?” The author will compile the findings and present the outcome of this process in the following section.

Die Ligdraer and its Reporting on DRMC and DRCA unification (1990–1995)

The newspaper indeed provided valuable information for the members of the church at grassroots level, for instance, the newspaper provided the members with information on the proposed unification that would take place in 1991. The editors of the issues in the run-up to the synod invited members' inputs and provided space in the newspaper for members to raise their views on the church unification debate (NGSK 1991b, 9). This demonstrates the church's crucial position on the unification debate—it wanted to allow a well-informed decision and actions taken on unification. This is also seen in its emphases on the unification process during the 1990–1994 period.

Die Ligdraer reflects an increase in articles and coverage on the deep divides between the different standpoints within the church, especially before the founding synod in 1994. Whether for or against the unification—none of the sentiments were censured. The newspaper presented the strong, vehement rejection of structural unity because of it being experienced as an imposing hand of the executive structure of the church.⁷ Others focused on the exclusion of the DRC in the unity talks⁸ (initiated between the DRC and DRMC). Furthermore, others accused the DRMC of acting in an unbiblical manner,⁹ while *Die Ligdraer* referred to the problems in unity as not only an act of obedience (Mentor 1994) but also that other issues were at stake. The continuous emphasis on the imposing of unity, especially by Adams, Mentor and others (Mettler

7 cf. Breytenbach (21 March 1994).

8 See the articles of Adams (1994, 9) where the alleged exclusion of the DRC in the unification between the DRCA and DRMC is labelled as unbiblical and *Die Ligdraer* (NGSK 1991c, 3) in which the Presbytery of Ebenhaezer refused to attend a synod where there would be deliberated about the church unification between the DRMC and the DRCA.

9 See the headline of *Die Ligdraer* which reads, “Vereniging van NGKA en NGSK nie Bybels” (Adams 1994, 9).

and Mentor 1994, 7),¹⁰ creates the impression that there was a force that was pressuring the church to move into an undesirable direction? However, when those reports were published, they would always be placed together with an article that was encouraging the unification to be expedited and would be in direct contradiction of such articles.¹¹ The editorial of the newspaper would, amidst such letters, insert bold encircled wording which stated that there was a paucity in the unity process—to “trust in God.” It would also refer to these remarks as a “forcing hand,” as “bangmaakstories” (scary stories) and nothing more.¹²

However, it is evident that these challenges and objections raised against the organising of an earlier synod for unification, were not placed on its front pages, but as in these abovementioned cases—appeared more towards the back pages of the newspaper.¹³ Nonetheless, the newspaper’s editorial team re-assured the DRMC members that church unity would eventually become a reality—stating it in their own editorial piece and using the notion “wedding” as a metaphor to describe the upcoming unification (cf. NGSK 1993, 1).¹⁴ This editorial had also been placed on the front page of the edition, which shows the high premium that was placed on such an article for the attention of its readership. The “wedding” metaphor also provided context to the “preparations”—which used the metaphor of “verlowing” (engagement) (*Die Ligdraer* 1991, 11), but also the joining of two parties from different backgrounds and cultures that would commit to journey on a new road. This in itself operated as a rhetorical mechanism to understand the union between the two churches—not as a “once-off” event, but a new journey with a commitment of faith. The positioning of such an article is important in the context of the intensified internal forces within the church that opposed the unification in 1994 and depicted it as a haphazard process. This was at the same time a means of presenting a biblical vision for the church—and to allow its readers to imagine the church as a unified one.

10 See the headline, “Gemeentes word nuwe kerk ingedwing” (Mettler and Mentor 1994, 7) and “Ring stuur nie Afvaardiging na VGK nie” (NGSK 1991c, 3) as captions that provide a narrative of an illegitimate force that is pressuring the church to move into an undesirable direction.

11 For instance, see the article of Mentor and Mettler (1993) “Verenigings-klausule Dwing Gemeentes Nuwe Kerk in” where it also places the letter of Valentyn (1993, 11) “Vervroegde Sinode Absoluut Noodsaaklik.” These two also wrote another letter to the newspaper in 1994 (Mettler and Mentor 1994, 7) “Gemeentes word Nuwe Kerk Ingedwing” which is placed on the same page with an article of Loff (1994, 7) “Kerkorde kan Verander oor Geloof” that is also positive and encouraging an early synod for unification.

12 The newspaper states categorically, “Daar is ‘n gebrek in die eenheidsproses aan vertrouwe in God. Die bangmaakstories van magte wat die kerk sou koop, is die kerklike denke onwaardig” (NGSK 1994c, 6).

13 These two instances are a primary example of these issues being placed on pages seven and eleven of the newspaper in contrast with the 1994 paper, which has an entire front page with the photo of jubilation taking place at the founding synod of URCSA in 1994.

14 See also an earlier mention thereof by the editorial in 1991 already (*Die Ligdraer* 1991, 6). It refers to the unification as a “kerkeenheidshuwelik” (church unity marriage).

It is also evident in the newspaper's continuous effort to deconstruct the ideas and sentiments among certain DRMC members, that some members believed church unification would be harmful and detrimental to the church (as an institution). There is one such instance where *Die Ligdraer* placed the responses from two opposite viewpoints, Mettler and Mentor (1994, 7) and that of Loff (1994, 7) on one page in the particular edition. When the one would focus on the church order that might be misinterpreted and abused, the other would argue that in the history of the Reformed churches, a church order can change—and for unification, it would suffice and be imperative for the witness of the church in the world.

It is also apparent in the reporting that the newspaper does not present much of the issues that the other members of the DRMC moderation raised during the 1990–1994 period and during their meetings and discussions of unification, but consistently perspectives from the moderator on the unity process. The moderator, Nick Apollis, had a particular, reserved column, *Die Uurglas*, that was dedicated to him by the newspaper, where he clarified and discussed his perspectives and ideas of the unification. While he was mostly focused on “following of the church orderly processes” and strongly considered the external “legal advice” received, others’ perspectives, especially those of James Buys and Russel Botman, do not feature at all, especially because their views were in stark contrast to that of Apollis during an intensive moderation meeting, which led to the resignation of Buys as the Actuarium (NGSK 1991a, 1–6) of the DRMC General Synod. The newspaper's selective placing of events creates the impression that the early synod, that was advocated by Buys and Botman, was not desirable in 1991. The mere placement of the resignation of Buys in the newspaper would already indicate that there was a contentious debate within the moderation, because Buys resigned before his term would end in the capacity of Actuarium of the DRMC. The newspaper's ideological position in 1991 (of a postponement of the synod to 1994) was also apparent in its editorial on 4 February 1991, in which it argued that the two churches should first come to know each other and also to provide time to get its own “house in order” (*Die Ligdraer* 1991, 6). This indicates that the newspaper itself was aligned ultimately with the views of those who argued for the postponement of the synod in 1991.

Though the newspaper itself followed the cue of the moderator and the logic that church orderly processes were followed,¹⁵ it also followed the cue of the DRMC moderation that in 1994 the church should take all these matters (that members had raised) into account, but should proceed with the founding synod in 1994, in obedience to God's commandment.

The newspaper, also in 1994, in particular raised the notion, and placed mostly articles on the “obedience” to Christ and his commandments, and unity as a biblical imperative

15 This is reflected in the response by the DRCA moderation member, Nico Smith who vehemently repudiated the charge that the church order had been flouted. The newspaper, after the long and intensive accusation of a minister in the DRMC, placed its response and its adherence of both the DRCA and DRMC to the church order, into perspective (Potgieter 1991, 10).

in its reports.¹⁶ This narrative was not only sustained through presentations of ministers in the newspaper itself, but also through the inclusion of members in congregations. This we can observe in the strategic placement of a contribution by a member of one of the congregations of the DRMC, which argued that members of the synod should be obedient to the commandment of God (NGSK 1994c, 6). This was placed a few days before the DRMC would have their decisive synod on the matter, and subsequently the founding synod of URCSA.

There is a dominating narrative that depicts the unification process with all its intricacies, for example, the amendment of the church order,¹⁷ and that such an act would be aligned with the Reformed tradition (NGSK 1994b, 6). Therefore, the editorial of *Die Ligdraer* would, a few weeks before the synod, argue that the unification was aligned with the Reformed tradition of the church¹⁸ and therefore, to be obedient to Christ, it would be imperative, then, to succumb to a “democratic system” that would deviate from the Reformed tradition—to follow the biblical commandments of Christ. The rhetoric of the newspaper shows that there were fears that in the spirit of “democracy” the church would also fail to fulfil the biblical commandment of unity. The placement of such an article a few weeks before the founding synod, demonstrated the commitment of editors of the newspaper to encourage members to buy into the idea of unification. This is also apparent when one of the editors placed an article in which he listed various members of congregations—as far as the Cape (Belhar) and Johannesburg (Ennerdale)—who reported on the desire of members at a congregational level for the unification to ultimately materialise. The editor placed those “desires” of a congregational member of a congregation in the Northern Cape on the “voorstoep” (doorstep) of his church office. This allowed the readership to imagine the conversations and discussions on church unification not only to be a concern for ministers of the church, a legal issue and one of a formal nature—but also how it would affect those ordinary members in the rural areas of the country. However, it also played off the issue against the most formal conversations that at times complicated the matter, to a person who was not so well-informed about all the formal conversations, but who only knew that unification is a commandment of God for the church. In this way, the newspaper made it more than an issue of “church politics” but an issue of concern for people at the grassroots level. The placement of such perspectives (also being published weeks before the synod) is indeed a strategy to influence some of the delegates who had been sent by their congregations, including ministers and elders, to attend the DRMC synod and

16 See the articles that the newspaper placed of Valentyn (1993) and Matthys (1993) when there were already indications of a possible founding synod in 1994.

17 See as an example the letter published by *Die Ligdraer* of Breytenbach (1994, 9) with the rubric “Gewysigde KO-artikels” Skadelik vir Ware Eenheid” (“Amended Church Order Articles Jeopardising Genuine Unity”).

18 See in particular the letter of Potgieter published by *Die Ligdraer* in which he also questioned the church to act in alignment with its Reformed tradition (ensuring a two-third majority vote)—that Nico Smith of the DRCA argued that that is precisely what is happening during the unity talks (Potgieter 1991, 10).

subsequently the founding synod in April 1994. The delegates would, therefore, be aware not only of the reports that would serve before them, but what the members at the grassroots level, some as far as the Northern Cape and Johannesburg, would expect from the church.

In terms of the unification in 1994, the newspaper dedicated an entire edition for such celebration, showing the jubilation and feelings of gratefulness at the synod in 1994. The subtitle “die wonder van eenheid” (the wonder of unity) is the caption of the picture, showing members from different racial groups (white, black and “coloured”) shaking hands, filled with joy (NGSK 1994a, 1). It also provides an accompanying sentence with the picture, mentioning that this congratulatory event went on for more than an hour. This says much about the position of the newspaper itself, but also allowed the readership to observe the genuine act of reconciliation taking place, irrespective of the intense discussions of the past. This remains important in terms of how the newspaper would exclude all the issues that could divide the members on the issue of unification, but also its consistent use of the “wedding” metaphor to demonstrate the joyous occasion as a characteristic of all wedding ceremonies. This indeed instilled hope that unity and reconciliation were possible. In presenting such a narrative, the newspaper not only made their readership aware but also used these paradigmatic stories to encourage the readership towards other acts of reconciliation.

Church Media and Reconciliation in URCSA

It is evident that the church newspaper was able to facilitate reconciliation between the two racially based churches in the DRC family. This does not mean that unity had been achieved, but as a process, it assisted people to “discover”¹⁹ God’s reconciliation in the world. It brought various perspectives (its metaphors) and hurt of the past to the fore (Mentor and Mettler 1993, 11).²⁰ The author found, through this analysis, that *Die Ligdraer* played its role in terms of reconciliation at least on three fronts: making its readership aware of the sentiments of the significant “other” but also the generalised “others.” Through its consistent and repetitive reporting on the biblical command of unity, it allowed its readership to see the unification process as a biblical command, irrespective of the challenges mentioned in the paper. Its role was also played within its vision of unification that it narrated throughout the paper as fulfilling God’s command.²¹ The editorial itself stated in 1991 that those who were against unity, should confess it

19 This is based on the work of Robert Schreiter, especially where he refers to reconciliation as a process where people who have been hurt “discover” God at work through their journey with God, as a natural process of a “spirituality of reconciliation” (Schreiter 1992, 71).

20 See, for instance, members who would compare the dispossession of their properties to the unification process of the DRMC, and their fears that they would lose their buildings and properties.

21 See the articles of: Matthys (1993, 11) “Leiers moet Sterkter Lei oor Eiendomme”; “Kerkeenheid—ek het dit met my Eie Oë Gesien” (NGSK 1994c, 6) which is an article by one of the editors (Daniel Kuys); and “Kerkorde kan Verander oor Geloof” (Loff 1994, 11), the editorial of *Die Ligdraer* in the article “Eenheid en Struweling” (1991, 6) where particular reference is made of love for God’s Word, as some of the articles that allowed readership to see the unification as a biblical command.

before God (*Die Ligdraer* 1991, 6). However, what would be a shortfall of its reporting on church unification, was to provide first-person responses and reports and perspectives from members of the DRCA.²² This had not been done—but mostly reports were published in the third person, and not personal interviews and their engagements with each other within the DRMC editions.

A rhetorical analysis of the newspaper after the 1994 unification shows its struggles and challenges to maintain such a role. The newspaper, though it became *Die Ligdraer/Ligstraal*, continued with making aware URCSA members of issues which now endangered the internal unity of the church. The one important matter was the language issue in the new church. The position on unification can also be seen in the letters published on the conservation of Afrikaans within the newly established church. The editor of the newspaper provided assurance to those Afrikaans speakers and members (specifically those part of the former DRMC that were part of the new church) that their language would indeed not become obsolete in the former DRMC congregations. This is seen through the placement of articles from concerned members in congregations,²³ but also in the bold, large font rubric “Bevryde Afrikaans Gaan Voortbestaan” (Liberated Afrikaans Will Continue) on its front page. This can also be seen in the newspaper’s reference to the language policy of the newspaper, where it indeed demonstrated its commitment to include other languages. The editors published such a commitment through addressing the divided readership on the matter.²⁴

The second issue that shows its focus on internal unity processes, is the article “Ontmoeting met ‘NGK-groep’ Slaag nie” (URCSA 1995b, 6). However, this article it refers to this group as people who have rebelled against the church, stating “wat hulleself die NG Kerk in Afrika in die Vrystaat noem” (that named themselves the DRCA in the Free State). It shows that URCSA did not recognise them as the continuation of the former DRCA since its amalgamation with the DRMC in 1994. However, this report was not prominent in the edition itself, but was published as a short and small section on the sixth page of the newspaper. In terms of rhetorical theory, this was not an issue that the newspaper wanted to emphasise among other issues in the edition itself. Therefore, one might perhaps argue that the church newspaper was not so much interested in news that would endanger the “marriage” of the two churches and jeopardise the internal unity. This can be seen by an article that was published a month earlier, that also reads, “Rebel Synod Draws Line through Beauty of Church Unity” (Apollis 1995, 6), with a caption next to it “seën rus op eenheid” (blessing rests on unity) that further strengthens the argument that the narrative of the newspaper was built on

22 See, for instance, the call to only DRMC members to enter the debate on church unification through the church’s newspaper (NGSK 1991b, 9).

23 See the letter of Chris Phillips (1995) from the Worcester-South congregation, and also the letter published by Barendse (1995) “Afrikaans moet Behoue Bly.”

24 The editors of *Die Ligdraer/Ligstraal* state, “In the running of the newspaper, we had to grapple with some of the typical problems the country on a wider scale has to cope with, not least of them the sensitive issue of language” (URCSA 1995c, 6).

the notion that the unity should be celebrated and embraced. Nevertheless, the placement of both articles on the matter on the sixth page of the respective editions, demonstrates the dis-emphasis on the dividing issues. However, the flip side is that such reporting might also stifle the honest, frank and controversial issues that need to be equally emphasised to ensure reconciliation is not only scratching the surface, but an ongoing, deep reflection on the issue still at stake.

One of the ministries, departments, or commissions within a church—and whose contribution has often been underrated compared to liturgy, preaching, diaconal services and others—is that of church media in particular. This has been the case even in URCSA, where there has always been an issue of inadequate funding.²⁵ Moreover, the church media has been losing the competition with the formal synodical information, including the pastoral letters and other communication of a more formal nature. However, what has recently been seen and indeed needs further research exploration, is the emergence of social media pages of congregations and the establishment of a URCSA GS Facebook page. In observation of the pages, it is clear that on those platforms there is a similar effect than that of *Die Ligdraer*, where the “tyre hits the ground,” and there seems to be a grassroots engagement between Ministers of the Word and congregants of the church.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the rhetorical strategies that *Die Ligdraer* used to achieve the desired effect—church unification and reconciliation. However, as much as the rhetorical effect might have been achieved, it is not certain whether the readership or the audience was all convinced to act and embody “reconciliation.” This is also presented through the work of Schreiter, but the fact remains that there was a first faithful step taken towards unification. This is part of the age-long tension between what a person knows he/she should do, and what they eventually do. However, such questions are beyond the scope of this article—as the article purported to only showcase the strategies that church media, in particular *Die Ligdraer*, used to facilitate reconciliation between parties that had been estranged from each other for a long time. This places the church media among all other role players in URCSA to foster internal unity in a culturally and ethnically fragmented church—which was a huge concern for Plaatjies-Van Huffel.

In honour of Plaatjies-Van Huffel, it must be stated that she frequently engaged on these platforms regarding crucial, sensitive and often complicated matters of the church. She also engaged with congregants on social media through her own social media profile,

25 See the editorial of 28 August 1995 that dealt extensively with the factors that were crucial for the survival of the newspaper (URCSA 1995a).

providing context to such discussions and the church's perspectives on those matters.²⁶ Therefore, this paper emphasises that the current newspaper, *URCSA News*, as well as social media platforms of URCSA, should continue alongside other processes and formal decision-making bodies, to honour the legacy of Plaatjies-Van Huffel by allowing members of the church to embrace unity and reconciliation.

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26 See her post on 24 March 2019, in which she shares her views on the debate of homosexuality at the URCSA Cape Synod, "The following recommendations, which were tabled in the 'Report on Homosexuality to the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa,' Hammanskraal, September 27 to October 5, 2008, were not approved. It is, however, important to take cognisance thereof in our deliberations on the LGBTQIA+ issue. We are on our journey to GS 2020 where URCSA again will be tested to take affirmative decisions on the issue, which had been unresolved since 2005." See also September 28, 2016, her post on URCSA's Facebook page on the role of the Calvin Protestant Church in the struggle against apartheid. There are numerous other posts.

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