

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH GOVERNANCE
AND ADMINISTRATION IN THE
UNITING REFORMED CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract

In the period before 1994 many youth members of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) never had the opportunity to participate in the governance and administration of their church. The contemporary system used local church councils (*plaaslike Kerkrade*) who were allegedly accountable to the white missionaries. However, the birth of Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) brought with it significant changes in that its Church Order and Supplementary Stipulations (article 1, stipulation 1) make provision for the large scale participation of stakeholders in the church. This approach entrenches principles and values in the governance of the church. This article attempts to examine participatory church governance in the context of democracy and emphasises the need for a bottom-up approach to church governance within the democratic style of church leadership. The point made is that, without active and effective youth participation in the church, effective leadership in URCSA may degenerate into a 'facade-governance' where democratic principles are not observed. The smart research question is, therefore, relevant: How crucial is youth participation to church governance and administration in the Uniting Reformed Church? The article also argues that, should youth participation be neglected, misuse of power and positions in congregations by ministers, evangelists, church councillors and deacons

may go back to the days of the missionary enterprise. The intention of this article is, therefore, to advocate the cruciality of youth participation in church governance, which will help to keep unbridled power in check and to prevent individuals from making policies which might be detrimental to the general wellbeing of the church - congregations in particular. Clearly stated, all the stakeholders, including the Church Council (*Kerkraad*) which has the responsibility to control and oversee the congregation, are required to account for their functions in the church. Therefore, the inputs from the youth in congregations are essential and cannot be brushed aside lightly or simply ignored.

1 INTRODUCTION

Youth participation is a process that focuses on the role of the youth in the church. In the URCSA this group is called the 'Christian Youth Movement (CYM)' and its objective is to form the church youth to become spiritual adult members of the Body of Christ, who are competent in the doctrine, and active in mission, service and sacrifice (section 3 of CYM Constitution 2003:110). It is therefore a service organisation of the URCSA and functions in accordance with the regulations of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

In this article the point of departure is that, before 1994 the majority of members in URCSA, including youth and adult members, were not enfranchised and could not participate in the administration and governance processes of their church, particularly in the Ring and notably at congregational levels where their children were being taught the theological curriculum designed from somewhere else by somebody else, notably the DRC.

The critical questions that guided the study are: What is youth participation in church governance and administration all about? How did it originate? What are its major issues? Who are the major role-

players in this event? What is interesting about it? What are the main achievements that the church has in prospect? An adequate response to the above questions will help to shed light on cruciality of youth participation to church governance and administration in the URCSA. In essence, the process of youth participation in URCSA, and in other churches as well, was influenced by both external and internal factors, especially economic factors and, particularly by religious leaders themselves. Of course, in many ways, it remains a story of good hope (Hofmeyr 2004:22; Matsaung & Seloana 2005:226). This article will also look at the historical viewpoint, define basic concepts, describe youth participation in governance and administration in the URCSA, delve into values and finalise with a conclusion.

2 A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) was born, in 1994, out of a combination of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) (Matsaung & Seloana 2005:428). Its history is rooted in the family of the 'DR Churches, namely, Dutch Reformed Church (for whites), Dutch Reformed Mission Church (for coloureds), Reformed Church of Africa (for Indians) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (for Africans). The DRC used Apartheid theology to justify church separation based on racial lines (Marais 1986:43, Ngcokovane 1989:44).

The fact is that, prior to 1994, church governance and administration in the former DRCA and DRMC were characterised by the *dogterkerke* (daughter churches) based on a philosophy which undergirded the system, about which members of these churches had no say, nor were they even consulted regarding its making (cf. Matsaung 1999:44; Maree 1966:34; Pretorius 1949:27)). This situation began to change with the unification of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) and Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sending Kerk (NGSK) into URCSA which incorporated the Belhar Confession (article 3, stipulations 2 and 3 of the Church Order, 2003) the

objective of which was to unify church members into one church body which is not fragmented like those which had operated under the previous dispensation (cf. De Gruchy 1979:36). The 1994 General Synod Agenda paved the way for democratic dispensation in the church, and in 1995 the regional synods and rings (presbytery/circuits) were elected and, in 1996, the local church councils followed.

The new church committed itself to participatory democracy (cf. Gifford 1995:28). This saw a review and preponderance of articles and stipulations coming into being for different spheres of church governance. The Belhar Confession (1986) is one such article of faith (article 2.1, 2.1 & 2.3, Church Order, 2003), whose objective is the unity of the church. This article affords the members a say in the running of their church through participatory democracy. The Belhar Confession encourages openness and transparency in all activities of the church. This type of approach adds legitimacy and value to the policy-making processes of URCSA. It makes the whole church system accessible to even the poor of the poorest by making confession basic to all children of the church (cf. Currie & De Waal 2005:621, Potgieter et al 1997:5, section 1, subsection 2 of the CYM Constitution 2003:110). However, where there is pervasive apathy, and the youth neglect to participate in the processes of democratic church governance, this could lead to the demise of the URC's fledgling democracy (Hilliard & Kemp 1999:41). The article will elucidate a range of statements including the concepts of church governance and administration, youth participation, top-down versus bottom-up church management, values and human rights in the church and will end with the conclusion.

3 ELUCIDATION OF CONCEPTS

Church governance is the manner, style and mode of governing (cf. Cloete 1994:4) while administration refers to the specific functions performed by church officials in congregations, presbyteries and synodical levels (Cloete 1995:34). Administration is that part of governance that is concerned with implementation of policy and decisions. It focuses on the day-to-day running of the church by

various committees (cf. Potgieter et al 1997:77). In the church, administration is used to include the saakgelastigde (chief administrator, clerks, typists, secretaries, handymen as well as officials entrusted with the implementation of the legislation and policies of the church). Participation is a processes in which participants initiate an action in terms of their own thinking, over which they exert control as a way of empowering themselves (cf. Liebenberg, Theron & Stewart 1997:125). In this study, youth participation means to take part or to become more actively involved in sharing activities. Youth in a congregation can become involved in a range of activities, including the determination of levels of service to Sunday school children and the aged, fund-raising priorities and youth programmes which fulfil congregational needs, building support and encouraging a sense of cohesiveness within the church environment (cf. Fox & Meyer 1995:20). Youth participation in the church is therefore a right and a privilege to serve one's country on a religious or a church platform, to become involved in the running of the country through governance in the church. This article wishes to be an eye-opener to this fact and encourages youth to use this opportunity to enhance the spiritual life of other citizens. It also endeavours to redress injustices of the past, especially the legacy of the top-down managerial style which was practised under the white missionary dispensation (Hilliard & Kemp 1999:42). A related concept is that of church management. This task is performed on a daily basis by a trained church official and it occurs at all levels of the church including the general synod.

4 YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE CHURCH

This article deals with aspects of youth participation in the church, namely; church governance and administration. The Church Order (*Kerkorde*) makes provision for participation in these participatory processes.

4.1 Youth participation in church governance

Since 1994 the URCSA has ensured that members have the opportunity of making inputs into her policy and decision-making process. This approach emerges from the intentions to eliminate the imposition of policies on the majority of members by few individuals using unilateral, top-down styles of management. To undo this approach various checks and balances were introduced as Church Order provisions, legislation and policy to promote democratic principles. One such provision is the CYM Constitution section 3(1) which recommends that: "As a matter of urgency the CYM is aiming to build the unity on regional, circuit, but most importantly on local level (branches). We need to stress the importance of developing the capacity of young people to address these challenges themselves through the process of locally identifying the needs and addressing them. We want to mention the role of regional synods as well as commissions for Christian education (RCEs) in supporting these efforts by regions and circuits" (cf. URCSA General Synod Agenda 1994:197). The main objective of this section is to ensure that youth participation in church governance and administration is achieved. Even in the founding provisions of the 1997 CYM Constitution, Description point (*Beskrywingspunt*) 12, section 6, recommends that: "Christian Youth Movements (CYM), Brigade, CKB and Teenage groups are an integral part of the URCSA and wish to act in such fashion." The Synod agreed that, in planning the next Synod meeting, the following roles for youth should be identified:

- *Stewards*. Any big meeting of church bodies across the world makes use of young people as stewards to perform a number of administrative and logistical functions. We proposed that the same role be given to young people in the region where the Synod takes place. The number will depend on the size of the meeting and activities required to be performed.
- *Facilitators*. Young people can be trained to be facilitators for both Bible study and the reports that will be dealt with at Synod.

- *Leading of songs.* Young people/groups can render a valuable service by leading songs and choruses and Synod.

- *Participating in synod.* A representative each from national and regional executive can be allowed to be non-voting delegates with full right to participate in the activities of Synod.

By adopting the Confession of Belhar (1986) URC recognised that the aspects of accountability, responsiveness and openness were already stressed as essential ingredients of democratic church governance (Hilliard & Kemp 1999:43). In essence, it implies that public functionaries like ministers in congregations and evangelists have to provide explanations to justify positive or negative results obtained in the performance of their daily activities and that members have a surveillance role to play ensuring that public functionaries comply with the responsibilities granted to them (cf. Cloete 1995:23).

One of the most significant Church Order provisions in the sphere of Youth participation and involvement in Church governance and administration is found in section 3, sub-sections 4-5 of the CYM constitution which states that:

Every member of the organisation should aim to:

3.4 Remain faithful to the doctrine of the URCSA which every member must confess and regularly attend to the gatherings of the church, the church services and prayer meetings.

3.5 Regularly attend the meetings of the organisation and faithfully attend to the responsibilities and activities that arise from his/her membership of the organisation.

In terms of section 5 of the CYM constitution:

5.1 Every branch chooses an executive who shall be submitted for the approval to the local church council and who functions under the supervision of the church council. The church council may only refuse to approve the names(s) of those under church censure. In such cases the matter will be referred back to the CYM. At the end of each financial year, a branch should report to the church council about its activities.

5.2 If there is more than one branch of CYM in the congregation, a congregational union executive shall be established, who will report annually on its activities (sub-regulations).

5.3 Within each presbytery a Presbyterial Union Executive (PUE) shall be established. It shall be composed of a representative of each CYM branch and Congregational Union Executive (CUE) within the boundaries of the presbytery and two (2) representatives of the Presbytery Commission for Christian Education (PCE) (Sub-regulations). The Presbytery Executive to be elected every two years.

5.4 Each presbytery has a Presbyterial Commission for Christian Education (PCE) which functions in accordance with the stipulations and regulations of the URCSA.

5.5 Presbyteries are further integrated into regions, which shall, as far as possible, form geographical units. Where necessary, regions may be divided into sub-regions.

5.6 A National Executive Committee (NEC) for the CYM is elected at the congress, which takes place every four years. The General Synodical Commission for Christian Education (GSCE) nominates two (2) of its members to serve on the national executive.

5.7 The GSCE supervises the activities of the National Executive.

The above clearly indicates that the CYM leadership at different levels is required to consult its members and different structures at different levels of the church on the issues of censure and discipline, the budget for their activities, which also has to be approved by majority of their members present and voting at a meeting convened for the purpose (section 7) and on an annual fee per branch to be payable to the SCE Commission for Christian Education. In addition, a CYM branch forms part of the activities of the local congregation and, at the end of each financial year submits a written report on its activities and finances to the church council (section 1.4. 1of CYM Constitution 2003:116 it may b). From these provisions it is concluded that youth participation in church governance and administration is indispensable and that youth have an important obligation to the church as well as a duty to consult on issues outlined in the Church Order and stipulations (cf. CYM Constitution, sections 1-5.3.11; Davies 2001:71).

From this exposition, it is very clear that the current URCSA wants to ensure maximum involvement of youth in church governance and administration. This opportunity is created to enable youth to make their input in church matters. However, whether the youth themselves shall be willing to use these opportunities is a matter for further debate (cf. Hilliard & Kemp 1999:44). Their participation would be in the form of planning, organisation, leadership, controlling and overseeing. This form of participation involves debates, questions, interpolations and enquiries, and would, in fact, enhance youth activities in congregations. It would also help the CYM executive and the local church council to be accountable for any action, inaction or wrongdoing in matters pertaining to the congregation because accountable church governance and administration is an integral part of any democratic dispensation.

4.2 Youth participation in church administration

Besides the fact that youth are able to become involved in church governance through the church council and other activities of the

church, they are also permitted, in terms of stipulation 3, articles 1 & 3 of Church Order 2003:10-11), to become involved in church administration. For example, article 3.3 states that “Baptised children of communicants (practising members) belong to the church by virtue of the covenant of grace.” Such members will affirm their membership of the church by professing faith before the congregation. Biblically stated, “Faith is confirmed by actions” (Rom 1:17). Duncan (2005:483) argues that democratic faith presupposes the possibility of democratic transformation through participation towards perfectibility. Stipulation 106.1 states that: “Anyone feeling aggrieved by the pronouncement of a church meeting shall have the right of appeal to the next, broader church meeting, namely to the Presbytery and Regional Synod respectively” (cf. Stipulation 60.9). This makes interaction between church members possible and therefore involvement in the administration of church including ministers at congregational level, Presbytery, Regional and the General Synod. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa supports this view in section 33:

- (1) Everyone has the right to administrative action that is lawful, reasonable and procedurally fair.
- (2) Everyone whose rights have been adversely affected by administrative action has the right to be given written reasons.
- (3) National legislation must be enacted to give effect to these rights, and must
- (4) Promote an efficient administration.

The above must be seen against the background of a long history of Missionary enterprise by the DRC in South Africa. The Belhar Confession of the URCSA seeks to prevent this history from being repeated by addressing the situation in which church members find themselves, to confront it with the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Boesak 1977:36). Explicitly, it guarantees just treatment for the individual in his or her relationship and dealings with functionaries in the church of Jesus Christ. In essence the process of transformation in South

Africa was strongly influenced by the churches and religious leaders and it remains in many ways a story of good hope (cf. Hofmeyr 2004:22). In short, it can also be through youth participation in church administration that provisions of section 33 can be implemented.

5 APATHY VERSUS PARTICIPATORY CHURCH

GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

One problem facing youth participation in the church is apathy. Apathy makes people fear to speak out about corruption in congregations. Unless members, especially the youth, are prepared to speak out, the Church Order and Supplementary Stipulations remains a piece of paper on the church table. The CYM Constitution encourages consultation with all role-players and stakeholders in the governance and administration of the church and encourages the right to be free (Mosala & Tlhagale 1986:26). This is the essence of participatory management. One method of combating youth apathy is by encouraging popular participation which allows youth to be members of different committees which serve different objectives for the whole church development (cf. Warner 1997:414). Through this method the youth become directly involved in the governance and administration of the church. Clearly, then, the youth develop a sense of patriotism and purpose when they are allowed to make a contribution to the affairs of their church, no matter how insignificant their inputs may seem (Hilliard & Kemp 1999:47). Youth participation is therefore essential and indispensable for sustaining good church governance and administration in congregations. It is also observed that youth participation unites youth from different perspectives and backgrounds on a common purpose of the church, while promoting respect and responsibility and communal spirit (Freysen 1998:249). This can be achieved through forums, church activities, voluntary participation and joint planning efforts (Reddy 1996:283).

6 BUTTOM-UP VERSUS TOP-DOWN CHURCH

MANAGEMENT

In fact, the youth in the church should realise that, since 1994, authority and power lie in their hands and their participation in church matters is viewed in a different light since the birth of URCSA and the coming in of the new dispensation. They should be involved in matters of decision making affecting themselves and their congregations. This implies that significant transformation should come from the bottom, not from the top, as had traditionally occurred in the old NGKA and NGSK. What is necessary is a willingness to work for one's church, for the Church Order makes provision for openness, transparency and good church governance in congregations. Therefore, the bottom-up approach should work well for those who participate with love in the process.

7 VALUES AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION UNDERGIRDING CHURCH GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION IN URCSA

Youth participation ensures that parents are getting value for the money paid for the spiritual support of their children in the church. To achieve this, the youth need to participate in voting capable representatives onto the church council and other committees of the church. This is the simplest form of delegation which occurs in the form of a mandate when members make a decision and then hand it over to the church council to implement or execute (cf. Beukes et al 2006:92). However, voting may differ from congregation to congregation depending on, inter alia, socio-economic status, educational levels, a sense of duty and responsibility, and apathy or lack of interest (Clapper 1997:66). Furthermore, the youth must have a greater say in the way the church is run, without diluting its spirituality. If the youth are not satisfied with representatives who are elected into church office, they can oust them in the next elections. Therefore, to keep capable representatives in church office, maximum youth participation in church meetings is critical and essential. However, to avoid an element of intimidation during periodic elections of such functionaries, the ballot system of voting instead of hand-raising can be used. All in all, the Christian values of

faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13) undergirding good governance, administration and management in the church must be observed and adhered to.

8 ASSESSING THE VALUES AND PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH IN CHURCH GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE URCSA

8.1 High ethical standards

The Uniting Reformed Church, in general, and the local congregations, in particular, expected the youth and other members who are elected onto different committees in the church, to perform their duties honestly, openly and transparently (Hilliard 1996:230). Stipulation 95.2 and articles 7, 9.4, 10.2 & 11.9 provide that:

Ecclesiastical supervision and discipline shall be carried out by church councils, Presbyteries and the Regional Synod, with a view to the maintenance of the soundness of doctrine and the conduct in life of members and office bearers of the church. Section 24(c) of the 1993 Interim Constitution of South Africa also provides that:

Everyone has the right to be furnished with reasons in writing for administrative action which affects any of his/her rights or interests (unless the reasons for such action have been made public).

The furnishing of reasons promotes administrative accountability, openness, justification and commitment in church administration and this also reflects the community of believers who serve God, each other, and the world at large (Article 4.1). Should the church functionaries view their being in office as an opportunity to work for personal gain the members have the right to be aggrieved and to remove them from office.

8.2 Efficiency and effectiveness in governance and administration of the church

The church and congregations in particular, need efficiency and effectiveness in order to have good governance and administration in their daily running. To improve on this, youth participation must be present in all activities of the church. This will ensure that transformation takes place and that fellowship in congregations is enhanced.

8.3 Youth participation in the whole church development

In all congregations emphasis should be placed on the development of the whole church. This should include infrastructure, human resources and curricula. Churches should be developmental structures focused on improving the quality of spiritual life (cf. Bill of Rights, chapter 2 of the 1996 Constitution). In this context, the community of believers can start to re-think the way they are organised and governed. The easiest method of activity development would be to work together or to consult with other local youth in different churches, business, community-based organisations and other interested parties during the developmental process. From such a consultative partnership approach, members can be engaged in participatory planning and other capacity-building projects. By implication, developmental local church governance and administration should have major impact on the life of youth in the church, and where church councils not develop their congregations, the presbytery in consultation with the regional synod may have to adopt a strict approach towards transforming the church council itself (cf. Tutu 1983:27; Potgieter et al 1997:33).

8.4 Non-racial and inclusive church

Since 1994 the NGKA and NGSK, which were racially based and administered, have become amalgamated under one system of church governance and administration, namely the URCSA for all its members, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or any irrelevant discriminatory criteria.

The URCSA is a church in Africa and is essentially non-racial (cf. Hastings 1994:42). Thus, youth participation can ensure that there is no unfair discrimination in the church, and that services like health projects, social welfare and education are administered within church financial capacity. This will increase ecumenical relations with other religious traditions and ensure that inclusive interaction is maximised. In this context, the church's teaching should be based on the needs of the members. This will help to avoid producing irrelevant church leadership that comes with superfluous or unwanted services, using churches as centres of power. In fact the Church Order encourages constant interaction between the youth and the church. Otherwise, it should note that nothing can harm the credibility of the church more than a lack of consultation with the youth in the church, and unresponsiveness or insensitivity to their needs. Consultation with the youth is essential to ensure that they agree to give offerings in the church (cf. Potgieter et al 1997:37), and to make sure that incidents of racism do not occur in the church while it is endeavouring to achieve inclusivity and tolerance towards all religions.

8.5 Accountability

Accountability is a matter of rendering account on the part of church members who also act as watchdogs over the affairs of the church (Cloete 1995:24). Congregations should not keep functionaries who are not accountable within their fold. This also applies to ministers and evangelists who are office-bearers in congregations by virtue of their contractual employment. One of the instruments used to test accountability is an election. Functionaries who have performed to the expectations of the congregation are retained in positions and those who fell into disfavour are ousted.

8.6 Transparency

Openness and transparency may become obsolete practices and there can be reasons for lack of transparency, but remedies for dealing with obsolete transparency or lack of transparency are paramount. This means that there should be: regular youth meetings in congregations, adequate dissemination of information to all mem-

ers and interested parties, sufficient media coverage of church issues, and initiating of Christian learning programmes to improve the knowledge of the youth body and the church community to bring them into line with the politically sophisticated section of society (Hilliard & Kemp 1999:64). The intention of transparency is to keep the church community informed about matters pertaining to church, particularly because congregation members have the right to know about the affairs of their church.

9 CONCLUSION

Youth participation is essential to sustaining good governance and administration in the church. Should it be neglected, abuse of power by ministers and others may be the order of the day. However, if it is upheld, it may help to keep church leadership accountable to the church community and may help church councils to make policies that are geared to the welfare of the church. Youth participation is essential to ensure that the voice of the youth is heard in congregations and the needs, wishes and the care of spiritual life of the youth are duly acted upon. Notably, where there is lack of youth participation, members start to perceive that the church is run secretly and that something is wrong and needs to be investigated. Therefore, undemocratic style of leadership in churches should be avoided at all costs or at very best, minimised.

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