Discovering and exploring *ubuntu*-language in the dialogue between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

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Discussions with members of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in Ohrigstad illustrate the possibilities of *ubuntu*-language in overcoming racism and prejudice. After proposing a number of meanings and values related to *ubuntu*, this research explores the role of *ubuntu*-language – and at times the lack thereof – in the concrete relationship between these two faith communities as an expression of recent South African history. *Ubuntu*-language seems to offer unique outcomes in this relationship in strengthening identity, unleashing vitality, celebrating diversity, awakening solidarity, revealing humanity, bolstering individualism and enhancing Christianity.

Introduction

The relationship between the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) in South Africa has been one of apartheid since 1857. In that year, the DRC divided because white members wanted to have communion separately. For me as a white, female minister, who was ordained in the DRC after apartheid, it is disappointing that this state of affairs still endures. However, the two churches – the DRC and URCSA – never stopped being in dialogue with each other. All over South Africa, there are URCSA and DRC congregations, presbyteries and synods that continue speaking about strengthening relationships. In Ohrigstad, a rural town in the province of Mpumalanga, discussions like these were fruitful in the past. Sadly it stopped. In my opinion, to build relationships, people must keep on talking, especially leaders and members of ordinary congregations at grassroots level. That is the reason I started conversations[1] with members of the URC and DRC congregations in Ohrigstad. I wanted to explore the relationship and the understanding and misunderstanding between ordinary members of these two churches. The discussions are still going on, and I deeply appreciate members of both congregations' participation.

Discussions in Ohrigstad with members of the DRC and URCSA on racism and the relationship between members of these two churches identify heart-breaking accounts of prejudice and misunderstanding, but also surprising experiences.

During these discussions, a member of the DRC stated the following about misunderstanding:

> 'There are times when I just don't understand. When there is a desire within young people … they put themselves in a disadvantage … they choose the difficult path of farming, because they want to help people. They start farming with the whole community in mind; they empower previously disadvantaged people by letting them take over the farm with lodges on it, so that the whole community can benefit from it in the end. But then members of the community burned down the lodges … it is as if they could not grant each other progress and prosperity.' (Speaker 1)

A member of URCSA said the following about racism:

> 'Racism is rife here. Once I was invited by one of the farmers to his house, we know each other. We were sitting in the kitchen drinking tea. The farmer's son came in and asked: "Pappa, hoekom drink jy tee met 'n swart man [*why are you drinking tea with a black man*]?" I tried to pretend I did not hear,

1.In order to get to a better understanding of the relationship between black and white church members in Ohrigstad, I am utilising qualitative interviewing, where the interviewees are coresearchers. This means that I listen to the coresearchers (interviewees) as they describe how they comprehend the different worlds in which they live, their experiences of being a white, or a black Christian in South Africa, and how they understand each other.
To put this into practice, I opted for a narrative pastoral practice, where I conduct narrative conversations with research participants as a co-explorer of ideas relevant to the participants. Julian Müller (2003:295) states that 'the narrative or social-constructionist approach … forces us to firstly listen to the stories of people struggling in real situations, not merely to a description of a general context, but to be confronted with a specific and concrete situation'.
Narrative, qualitative inquiry involves a process where the researcher and the participant jointly live out their narratives (Clandinin & Connelly 1991:265). Participants are continuing to tell their own stories, but the stories are now being lived out in a collaborative setting. The narrative approach gives a voice to the coresearchers: the questions the researcher asks create space, and facilitate a mode conducive to dialogue (Anderson & Goolishian 1992:34).

> but the farmer saw I heard. He apologised. He said "sorry, it's just a child". I laughed it off, but after that I was very disturbed. I felt embarrassed and disappointed. It is strange, because the primary school has black and white children. It is very sad ... Again on a farm, I went with white people on an outreach in the community. I was the only black person. When we entered the place, and all of a sudden the farmer's dog confronted only me. The owner apologised. Was the dog trained? But it is not the majority.' (Speaker 2)

Fortunately, there are also hopeful accounts and themes of humanity, compassion and understanding, which strengthen the relationships, and offer unique outcomes and possibilities for future dialogue.

A member of URCSA in Ohrigstad shared an experience of himself as a black person, and his relationship with white Afrikaans speaking people, which shows humanity and understanding:

> 'I am part of the local rugby team … when I located here (in town, from the township), this was Afrikaner town, there were no blacks and now there are six black households. I'm a sports person – I play soccer, but here is no soccer team and I can't stay without jogging. Here was only a rugby team with only whites. I felt let me just go and try and see how they react. I spoke to the coach and he was very welcoming. He even encouraged me to bring others from the village so that the team could grow. The management didn't have an attitude – they were accommodating. But initially you could see among the players those who did not understand why I was there. The coach introduced me. Afrikaners always shake hands and there were those you could see dodged me with the hand shaking. I would think: this one has a problem – maybe in time … the larger group did not have a problem. As the only black person, I thought they were going to be rough on me, that they would injure me so that I could no longer play. They did not. That perception was proven wrong. I'm second oldest and I felt like retiring, but they said no. Now I am also on the management of the team. This is my job now, but I am still playing … I have learnt about the Afrikaans culture. With team events and parties, they will come with their wives and children; they have meals and they tell me they are here for the family to bond. My younger boy always wants to go with me. I just clicked in the team.' (Speaker 3)

One participant from the DRC tells the following story of humanity and compassion:

> 'At times, some of our church members visit people in the townships in an attempt to reach out. I visited one of the poorest families. I was surprised about the condition of their house, given the meagre circumstances … I came unannounced, but everything was spotless and tidy. We sat in the dark zinc kitchen and we drank tea from clean tin cups. I went there to reach out, but the woman reached out to me. She asked about my children … she prayed for my children. She talked about her neighbours who share their porridge when she had none. She told me how far they walked to fetch firewood, and how they always sing while doing it. She was like the woman in the Bible who, although her container was empty, still shared. She knew that the next time someone would also share the little he/she had with her …' (Speaker 4)

Many black African participants in the discussions typify these incidents of humanity and compassion as concrete examples of *ubuntu*. They agree that the values of *ubuntu* may contribute significantly to the building of relationships and understanding.

The South African theologian Albert Nolan (1988) states that these values of *ubuntu* generate hope:

> I am challenged by the hopefulness of other people … I become hopeful when I see what God is doing in and through other people, and they are no doubt affected by my hope and my commitment. We need one another. (pp. 195–196)

In this article, I explore the concept of *ubuntu*, seek it out in the history of the churches in South Africa, and attempt to formulate what *ubuntu*-language entails in relation to the dialogue between the DRC and URCSA.

Different possibilities of *ubuntu*

Whilst the concept of *ubuntu* is often utilised, a clear formulation of what *ubuntu* entails is less accessible. It is clear that *ubuntu* is a richly laden concept that is used to underscore a variety of meanings and values. In the next section, I explore a number of these meanings and their possibilities for a future relationship between members of the DRC and URCSA.

Ubuntu as identity

The Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti (1969:108, 109), describes *ubuntu* as 'a deeply religious *transaction*' (my emphasis), in which an individual becomes conscious of his or her own being, duties, privileges and responsibilities through other people: 'I am, because we are, and since we are, I am'. Locally, the South African Batswana theologian, Gabriël Setiloane (2000:20), compares Western notions of identity, for example, the positivistic Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am' – with the African notion of 'I am because I belong'. It implies that *ubuntu* locates a person's identity and worth within the community.

Ubuntu as vitality

Elaborating this, Setiloane (2000:24) explains that *ubuntu* not only establishes a person's identity, but also adds vitality and potential to a human being. He argues that whilst some Western concepts of human beings give the impression that a person is like a 'computer that can be programmed, and from which information and data can be retrieved at will', the African view is that a human being (*Motho UMuntu*) is like a dynamo: 'A human person is like a live electric wire, which is ever exuding force or energy in all directions'. There is, according to Setiloane (2000:25), 'interplay that takes place when people come into contact or live together, thus a person's vitality is activated and enhanced within relationships with other humans'.

Ubuntu as widening community

Ubuntu likewise transcends usual tribal relations and widens the African understanding of community to include people

who are not part of the blood family. There is the sense that every person is related to one another. This is apparent when tragedies (like death) or events like weddings take place (Setiloane 2000:20).

This sense of community that extends beyond the family, clan or tribe, also includes people of different skin colour. Setiloane (2000:21) recounts that in the early days of the *trekboers*, king Ngqika took one of the *trekboers*, De Buys, into his tribe, and made him one of his councillors. Likewise, some of the Sotho-Tswana chiefs looked after the white missionaries like fathers.

Ubuntu always aimed to include, rather than exclude. Even in war, the purpose was to incorporate, rather than eliminate (Setiloane 2000:22).

Ubuntu as solidarity

According to Mbiti (1969:108), *ubuntu* also establishes solidarity across the community. He describes that when a person suffers, the whole group suffers. Similarly, people rejoice with their neighbours and relatives. What happens to a person happens to the whole group. What happens to the group happens to the individual.

Moffat of Africander, a missionary, remarked on the Khoi's sense of community. He said they wept for one another, always stretching out a helping hand to widows and orphans (Setiloane 2000:22, 23).

Ubuntu as humanising

The most famous of South Africa's theologians, emeritus archbishop Desmond Tutu (2011:21, 22), agrees that *ubuntu* realises a person's identity, but adds that it also makes you a better human being: 'A person is a person through other persons. It means that my humanity is inextricably caught up with yours'. It also means that human beings cannot exist without one another (Hulley, Kretzschmar & Pato 1996:96).

We learn to be human through other human beings. Consequently, people are more important than things, profits, status, race, gender or achievement (Tutu 2011:22). Tutu argues that *ubuntu* can be summarised as follows: 'When I dehumanise you I inexorably dehumanise myself' (Hulley *et al*. 1996:102).

According to Du Toit (2005:853–854), *ubuntu* teaches responsibility. He argues that *ubuntu* makes people coresponsible for one another. It establishes social harmony and balance, laying emphasis on interconnectedness (Brouwer 2011:14).

A colleague in URCSA, Rev. Willard Sefara (2010), remembers how *ubuntu* had a humanising effect on the community of his childhood:

> Was everybody well to do? No, but we managed! There were poor families, but they were not rejected nor neglected, neither were they conspicuous, thanks to the spirit of botho, popularly known as ubuntu. A poor family could be given a cow to keep and it was to be returned after producing a calf or two. The poor also had fields which were ploughed with the use of other people's oxen … If you didn't have matches to make fire, you got a *serumula* (a burning piece of wood) from a neighbour. A tired and hungry traveller was given food and accommodation for the night. (p. 7)

Ubuntu and individualism

Although *ubuntu* describes society as an organism where communion is more important than autonomy (Du Toit 2005:853, 855), and although it rejects the notion of an objective world that is separate from an individual person, Du Toit (2005:854) argues that *ubuntu* is something different than socialism. It does not take away personal identity – rather, personal identity is formed by interaction with my community. Du Toit (2005:852) states that although African culture can be typified as sociocentric, individualism is not a foreign experience. The concept of *ubuntu* does not take away one's person or personal responsibility – it enhances relationships with others.

Ubuntu and Christianity

In the church, the *ubuntu* concept is a familiar notion. Setiloane (2000:22) states that the language of *ubuntu* has a lot in common with the language of the Christian Bible. The Old Testament prophets teach about care for the widow, orphan and the poor, and the whole Bible emphasises the value of hospitality.

Likewise, the Christian Bible underscores the notion of connectedness that *ubuntu* advocates. Setiloane argues that both *ubuntu* and the Christian way of life stress the significance of life together and relationships between people. Jesus teaches about love for one's neighbour and care for the marginalised. Equally, *ubuntu* explains 'the interplay that takes place when people come into contact or live together' (Setiloane 2000:25).

Ubuntu-values in the context of the DRC and URCS

In the church in South Africa with its diverse cultures, the various values of *ubuntu* and the values of the Christian Bible that underscores *ubuntu*, are important. It opens up possibilities for meaningful relationships and strengthens the community – instead of existing separately; *ubuntu*-values can shape a community where a person's identity comes to life through the community. Different cultures can enrich each other with the interplay that takes place when the community is widened through inclusion rather than exclusion. The *ubuntu* concept can aid church members to live, in solidarity with the marginalised (which is in accordance with the Bible), by remembering that when a person suffers, the whole group suffers. *Ubuntu*-values can offer humanity for both the DRC and URCSA – it can teach us to be human through each other and to take responsibility for one another.

Sadly, the history of the DRC and the URCSA often caused *ubuntu* to become nearly invisible. In continuity with the rest of South Africa, the history of the two churches demonstrated prejudice and distrust.

A history of distrust

The history of the church in South Africa shows many stories of distrust, but there have always been voices of protest. In this section, I look into the role that Colonialism and apartheid played in the life of the church, and vice versa. I look at turning points, voices of protest and the notion of a new era.

Colonialism

Much of the least attractive parts of the present South African political economy stems directly from the earlier history of Colonialism (1652–1910). In order to live comfortably in a newly found 'home away from home', the white colonialists moved quickly to establish hegemonic structures. Black people were reduced to 'drawers of water and hewers of wood' (Chitando 1998:76). The missionaries who came with the colonialists might sometimes have protested against the inhumane treatment of black people but the colonialists were fully convinced that the 'native' did not deserve better treatment (Chitando 1998:76; Kgatla 1994:209).

When the Africans exhibited will power, white interests were jealously guarded. Industry and commerce were made the preserve of the whites, relegating black people into servant roles. Black people could only succeed in peripheral occupations such as building and barber shops (Chitando 1998:77; Kgatla 1994:205).

Chitando (1998:78) says that in the case of Zimbabwe, the position of black people in the economy during Colonialism had decisive repercussions on their present-day status. De Villiers (1991:20) believes that it is also true for South Africa. Black people have largely been relegated to the class of consumers whilst the reins of power in industry and commerce are firmly in the hands of a few white males.

By the end of the colonial period, the global hegemony of the Western free-market economy had been well established in South Africa. African economic and political systems were radically altered, particularly as the need for cheap labour resulted in the disintegration of ritual systems. This was caused by the absence of males for extended periods from their homes as migrant labourers left to work in urban areas (Venter 1998:430).

The role of the DRC in apartheid

The DRC provided theological justification for apartheid since 1948 and contributed to discourses of racism and cultural hegemony.

In South Africa, the Nationalist party came to power in a white election in 1948, promising that it would implement a policy of separate development and named it apartheid. The Nationalist party had the full support of the DRC (Hulley 1993:75). The government promptly passed a series of laws to put its election promises into practice – the *Population Registration Act* aimed to give everyone a permanent racial classification; the *Group Areas Act* defined residential rights racially (Hulley 1993:76).

According to Gaum (1997:9), there were many times that the DRC insisted that the government enforce apartheid. Many apartheid laws were installed with the approval of the DRC, such as the *Immorality Act*, the *Group Areas Act*, and the law that forbade people of colour to attend church in a white congregation.

Kgatla (1994:204) states that the church offered a passive religion that told the poor and the oppressed to accept political decisions and authority without question, and to obey those in power for the sake of the peace of the nation. People were to prepare their souls for the life to come.

A turning point

The Sharpeville massacre (March 1960) marked a turning point in the political and ecclesiastic history of struggle in South Africa. The massacre increased tensions between the English-speaking churches and the DRC. In response to the threat by the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Joost de Blank, to withdraw his church's membership unless the World Council of Churches (WCC) expelled the DRC for its continued support of apartheid after Sharpeville, the WCC called its member churches in South Africa to a consultation at *Cottesloe* in December 1960 (Gous 1993:254; Loubser 1987:87; Van der Watt 1987:104–118).

The representatives of the WCC and the eight South African member churches, including two Dutch Reformed churches (the DRC synods of the Cape Province and the Transvaal), concluded that apartheid could not be reconciled with the teachings of Scripture. After Cottesloe, a political uproar arose because of three decisions (Gous 1993:255; Gous & Crafford 1993:206–207):

- The request for political rights for people of colour.
- The consensus that there is no Biblical foundation for the prohibition of racially mixed marriages.
- The decision that no one may be excluded from any church on the basis of race and colour.

Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the then Prime Minister, immediately realised that the WCC consensus at Cottesloe pulled the theological basis for the National Party's policy of apartheid from under their feet. In his 1961 New Year's message, he dismissed the decisions as the opinion of individuals. He drove a wedge between the official representatives of the Afrikaans churches and the rest of the church by indicating that the synods still had to ratify the delegates' decisions. The DRC delegates were thus reprimanded by Verwoerd for allowing them to be manipulated by the WCC, and were told

to recant. This most of the DRC delegates did, thus paving the way for the DRC synods of Transvaal and the Cape Province to reject the Cottesloe decisions in 1961, and to resign from the WCC and from the South African Council of Churches (Gous 1993:255). This tragically led to ecclesiastic and theological isolation from the rest of the world for the DRC.

There were alternative voices from within the DRC that proclaimed dissent. An example was Beyers Naudé. He was one of the DRC ministers who could not be forced back into the restrictive mould of the Afrikaans church. The vacuum after Cottesloe was filled under his leadership, by the Christian Institute (Gous 1993:256; Strauss 1990:358–369).

The DRC maintained its position on apartheid, which in turn enabled the government to maintain its apartheid laws for 30 years. This caused political and economic havoc in the country. If the DRC had upheld the theologically sound Cottesloe decisions, the government would not have been able to continue on the path of apartheid. Afrikaners would probably have come to their senses much earlier.

After Cottesloe, the DRC went on to do a study on the relationships between ethnic groups in South Africa. In 1974, the General Synod of the DRC accepted a new policy document – *Ras, Volk en Nasie.* In this document, the concept of neighbourly love plays a big role, but the apartheid philosophy was still strongly advocated and justified with Scripture (Gaum 1997:24; Gous & Crafford 1993:401).

It was also in 1974 that the department of Information presented an amount of money to the DRC on a confidential basis. The government needed information from the church about the actions of the World Council of Churches. The DRC had to play the part of a 'spy', so that the government could obtain counter arguments against the stream of negative propaganda, which went out from the WCC against South Africa (Gaum 1997:26).

Voices of protest

In 1976, the black students of Soweto revolted against being prescribed what was right for them. When this happened, the entire white power establishment used everything in its power to quell the insurrection. Consequently, on June 16th 1976 – a very sad day in the history of South Africa – many black youths lost their lives in the struggle against apartheid. After that day, says Kgatla (1994:206), the white Afrikaans church, the government and white business communities were up in arms in order to crush the new movement against oppression.

During the end of the 1970s, many voices from outside tried to persuade the DRC to turn around and repudiate apartheid. These voices came especially from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. In 1978, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (which later became part of the URCSA) accused the DRC of being the instigator of governmental and economical apartheid. In 1980, the *Hervormingsdag-getuienis* was published. In this document, the DRC was encouraged to renounce racism in the church.

Another document, this time from within the DRC was published in 1981. *Storm Kompas*'s 44 comments on the DRC in the South African context unleashed a very uncomfortable storm in the circles of DRC theologians. In 1982, another document was published by clergy from within the DRC – the *Open Letter to the Dutch Reformed Church*; 123 people signed this document. Negative as well as positive reaction came from the DRC (Gaum 1997:32; Gous & Crafford 1993:366).

In 1982, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church installed the *Belhar Confession* as one of their official policy documents (Gous 1993:256; Loubser 1987:148). In this confession, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church stated that they reject any ideology that would legitimate forms of injustice, and any doctrine that is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the Gospel. There was little reaction towards this confession from the side of the DRC. The DRC was especially uncomfortable with one statement in the confession – the one that holds that 'God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged' (Loubser 1987:149). The DRC argued that this statement was susceptible to serious misunderstanding (Loubser 1987:149–150).

A new era?

In the late 1980s, the protesting voices in the DRC slowly became a majority. At the General Synod of the DRC in 1986, it was recommended that the guidelines in the *Belhar Confession* would be used in future discussions with the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (Loubser 1987:147). *Church and Society* was published on behalf of the DRC within that year. This policy document radically departed from the 1970s *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, and stated that the DRC declared that there are no grounds whatsoever for apartheid in Scripture. It also stated that it was not correct for the church to prescribe political policies to the state. Every future policy had to be tested by love and justice. This policy document was revised in 1990, when the system of apartheid was rejected (Gaum 1997:52).

In *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society) (1990:17), the DRC's viewpoint on racism has been made clear. This document states that racism is a sin that cannot be defended by any person or church. It continues to say that racism implies oppression, dehumanisation, discrimination and violence.

In the years to come, the DRC clearly had a more reconciling attitude (Gous 1993:662), but in my opinion, until this day the DRC has been unable to confess unconditionally their wrongdoings during the time of apartheid. There are members of the DRC who qualify the confessions: 'We did have good intentions in our support to apartheid' (Loubser 1987:149).

Whilst the General Synod of the DRC is currently trying to get this confession accepted as part of the church's

creeds – 32 years later – for a significant group in the DRC an unqualified condemnation of the whole apartheid South African status quo remains unacceptable. Personal experience and discussions with average DRC congregants seem to suggest that previously privileged white Afrikaners still maintain the dominant discourse of cultural hegemony and racism, which for decades prevailed in South Africa. When in conversation with DRC congregants, many of them still insist on the theoretical 'advantages' of apartheid. Balcomb (1998) accurately states that:

> You will find those for whom everything has gone wrong. The country, in their opinion, is falling apart. Standards are dropping, crime is increasing, and the 'barbarians' are at the door, trying to break it down. In the words of one of apartheid's former architects[2] – something 'too ghastly to contemplate' has happened. These are those who were previously the privileged, those who, by virtue of the colour of their skin, were able to access the best of everything that the society could offer without any threat from those who were of a different skin colour. (pp. 57–58)

During the last few years, South Africans achieved many successes that are truly wonderful. However, the DRC and its black sister church, URCSA, are still two separate churches. Countless discussions have been conducted between the churches at local and at top level, but it seems as if apartheid is still alive and well, and living in the church. It is as if the two churches cannot come to a mutual trust.

The question is can *ubuntu*-language offer a shared language in which white Afrikaans speaking people from the DRC, and black people from URCSA, can come to a better understanding? Can *ubuntu*-language provide a safe space where we can be honest about the past, about our misunderstandings and a future together?

Ubuntu-language: Helping us move forward

The language of the Christian Bible is similar to the language of *ubuntu* in the sense of neighbourly love, respect, caring and sharing. In the church, this is a language everyone is familiar with. It is a language that negotiates identity that is not dependant on race; it unleashes potential and hope; it makes for robust communities where diversity is celebrated; it brings solidarity and humanity and it brings forth strong individuals who take responsibility. *Ubuntu*-language entails more than just conversation – it is a way of being together.

Ubuntu-language and discovering identity

Finding an identity is a question that all groups in South Africa are struggling with. The DRC's nationalist experiment may be revealing of how its white Afrikaans speaking members struggled to find a place in a colonial South Africa. Perhaps this is true of all South Africans.

The apartheid regime's classification of identity on race alone diminished identity for all. In contrast, Desmond Tutu locates identity in more significant attributes. According to Tutu, it is necessary for people in South Africa to share certain values, otherwise we cannot engage with one another. He states that *ubuntu* is a perspective from which we can see one another as more than just black or white (Hulley *et al*. 1996:94, 104).

Ubuntu-language: Unleashing potential

The *Belhar Confession* calls for unity, justice and reconciliation. It offers a route for the future. This document, accepted by URCSA and highly regarded (if not yet accepted) by the DRC, lays down an agenda for both churches' engagement with our context. A vibrant vision for the future echoes the *ubuntu* anthropology that sees human beings as bursting with a vital (godly) life force. URCSA theologian, Nico Botha (2013:118), says that *ubuntu* opens 'a window of hope' for South Africans to form communities of deep caring that goes deeper than just tolerating one another.

Ubuntu-language and healthy communities

Although South Africa at present is characterised by the richness of multiculturalism, the different ethnic groups have often lead to cultural hegemony (Du Toit 2004:442). Cultural hegemony caused a fragile relationship between the DRC and URCSA. *Ubuntu*-values, in contrast, celebrate multiculturalism and diversity, and open up communities to accept others.

In a conversation with a church leader in the URCSA, he expressed the hope that relations between the DRC and URCSA will one day transcend superficial niceness, and grow into a healthy community that accommodates differences and survives conflicts:

> 'Some time ago, the previous reverend of the DRC in our town and I initiated the two church councils of our congregations to get together, to discuss how we can meet each other half way – to get to know – and to help each other. They helped us a lot financially. Their intention was good. I could see they wanted to help. We appreciated it. I felt uncomfortable sometimes. For me it was supposed to be more than that. We were supposed to learn each other's cultures, and learn to understand each other. To be busy is a good thing, but we can learn each other's values … In our community, we don't plan caring and ubuntu, it comes automatically. People love each other. There are always fights, but at the end of the day, there is love … ubuntu is not something you can prepare to do. It is not a prescribed thing. People are trying to write books about it, but you cannot explain ubuntu. If people of the DRC come here in our church, they will observe how we do things, how we care. By coming together informally and doing things together, they can learn … you cannot explain ubuntu – you can write about ubuntu, but you will always leave something out.' (Speaker 5)

Can *ubuntu*-language produce enriched communities that go beyond sameness and theoretical speculation? Can it teach us to allow differences and to practice healthy collaboration as equals?

2.This was said by former Prime Minister, John Vorster (Mohr 1974:6).

Ubuntu-language and solidarity

Ubuntu-language provides an understanding of interconnectedness and accentuates the taking of responsibility for one another. Du Toit (2005:854) contends that this was not a foreign concept for white Afrikaners in times of poverty and oppression. In his book *God is not a Christian*, Desmond Tutu (2011:22) adds that *ubuntu*-language spawns the notions of generosity, hospitality, compassion, caring and sharing.

Ubuntu-language and humaneness

Likewise, *ubuntu* humanises its performers. There are stories of white Afrikaners practicing *ubuntu* without calling it by that name. I was surprised when a senior member of an URCSA congregation in a rural town told me the following:

> 'In the 1960's, some of the [*white*] farmers let the black children attend their mountain school on the farms, because they felt the children were not cared for properly in the mountains. They had respect for our culture, and wanted the children to be safe.' (Speaker 6)

Ubuntu-language and strong individuality

Contrary to the idea that *ubuntu* may prohibit strong individuals; *ubuntu*-language calls individuals to take a stand against popular power for the sake of the community. The case of Beyers Naudé and other DRC theologians who challenged the DRC leadership and bore a prophetic witness illustrates how *ubuntu* cannot be equated with mere populism, but usually requires uncomfortable choices and views.

Similarly, individuals taking a stand can change entire communities, as happened in the case of the DRC.

Ubuntu-language and the Bible

Ubuntu–language and the values of the Christian Bible offer a shared language for bridging the gaps between members of the DRC and members of URCSA, when it goes deeper than just a communication tool. We need, according to Brouwer (2011:13), to learn a 'practice of deep listening, bringing the other to speech, listening and speaking conjunctively'. We sometimes need to break the walls between us through *ubuntu*-language without using words, just by being together, by breaking bread, sharing and eating.

Antjie Krog (2009) describes her thoughts on this 'being together' in her book *Begging to be black* when she remembers a meal she shared with a mother and her daughter in Lesotho:

> After a suitable time I am offered pap, maroho and a glass of water from the water bucket, which has obviously been carried from somewhere … I keep my eyes on the plate. How do I do justice to such a gentle and beneficent gesture? Everything on this plate or in this glass has been gathered or processed with great trouble … The perfect texture of the pap, the amount of salt in it, the sharp taste of the maroho that pierces my mind with memories of sitting long-legged with black women under a tree eating from the same pot, the cool water in the scratched but surviving glass. At the same time, it feels as if the gesture is not about the food, also not about *giving* at all, but about sharing a physical generosity. It is as if the skin containing my body has become porous, as if I am dissolving into a delicate balance with this woman and her daughter, their offered food and all the places it comes from.
>
> Maybe it's also even more than that … the meal is shared within the context of a deep trust that whatever is shared, now, with me, is not only worth sharing, but confirms what has always been known here: being part of. Not of some thought-out or yet-to-come imagined space, but part of something that is, calibrating heartbeats. (p. 170)

The Christian rite of communion is aimed at exactly this above-mentioned experience. When Christians share the communion, they celebrate this listening, sharing, receiving and giving of one another, that *ubuntu* demands. It was, ironically, the unwillingness of a number of DRC members to celebrate communion with black and coloured fellow-church members that caused the break in the (once united) DRC in 1857, and severed relationships across racial lines. Perhaps this same rite, practiced as prescribed by the Bible and in following with the spirit of *ubuntu*, could heal the wounds of the past.

Conclusion

When the Ohrigstad dialogue petered out, so did the relationship between the DRC and URCSA, giving rise to misunderstanding and suspicion. My inquiry reveals, in contrast, openness to ongoing conversations and a willingness to foster deeper understanding. In this project, *ubuntu*-language offers unique outcomes in strengthening identity, unleashing vitality, celebrating diversity, awakening solidarity, revealing humanity, bolstering individualism and enhancing Christianity.

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