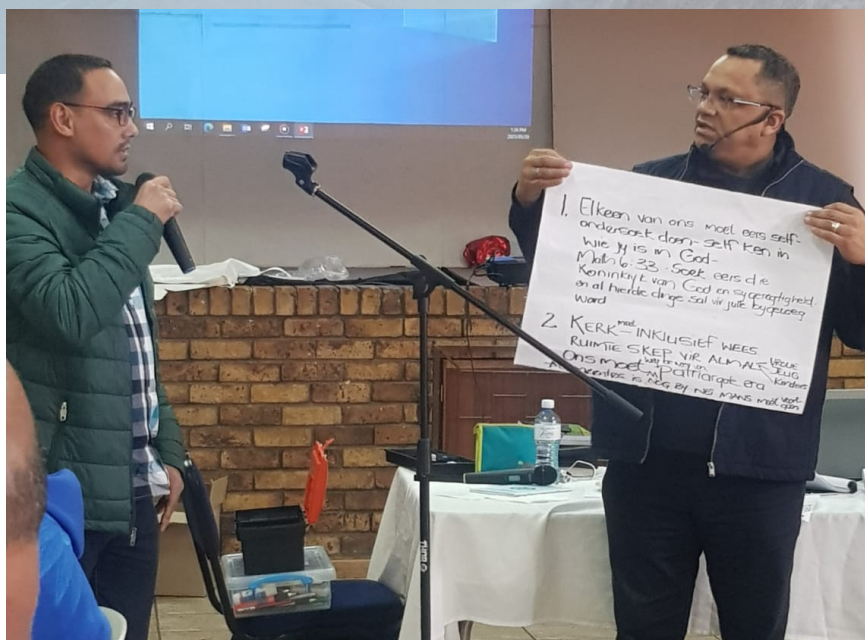
CONGREGATIONAL WITNESS

DECEMBER 2023

NEWSLETTER



In service of our congregations and presbyteries



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CONTACT & INFO

stephen@kaapkerk.co.za / +27 67 770 5986 / WEBSITE



A message from Witness Ministry's Co-chairman

Rev. Clive Jacobs

Good day dear Friends

We are blessed to be part of the Regional Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and that we can celebrate the unfailing love of God, but also the calling of Jesus Christ our Lord on the church under the theme: "Discerning the will of God in a time like this …" (Romans 12:1-12)

We look back over the past few months with gratitude and with a feeling of inspiration as we as a church family hold close to our hearts the desire to do God's will under challenging circumstances, in a world that constantly stands with its back toward God and His Word - this world that we are being sent to by "the God who sends" (the Missio Dei).

As we ponder on this very intriguing theme of the Synod, we are also reminded of the calling of Jesus, to bring ourselves, to offer ourselves, to dedicate ourselves, to empty ourselves - time and time again - knowing that at the heart of the process of discerning God's will lies the commitment to be obedient to His voice. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly puts it: "When God calls a man (woman), He bids him (her), come and die …"

We are indeed grateful that we can in this publication report how God has inspired our ministries to serve on so many levels in church and society and really make a difference in the lives of people, in the lives of congregations, and indeed, in the life of the church.

May God continue to bless us as we strive to "discern His will" as Witness Ministry and as Congregational ministries for our church today.

Blessings

Rev. Clive Jacobs

SUPPORT AND ACCOMPANIMENT: SUPPORT OUR PRESBYTERIES

Missional Leadership workshop for the Presbytery of Wellington



"The conversation about the missional calling of the church is also for the URCSA an important conversation today, especially given the cry of distress from various communities that the church must define and play its role more clearly in our society," says Rev. Stephen Pedro, Task Team Manager for Congregational Witness.

"The role of leadership in the conversation and especially that church leaders must understand the distinctive leadership required for being a missional church is equally (if not more) important. Therefore, the Presbytery of Wellington decided to initiate a conversation about missional leadership under the moderatorship of Rev. J. Hendriks."

On Saturday, 20 May this year, Rev. Pedro facilitated this important conversation at URCSA Immanuel where more than 70 church council members from each of the eleven congregations in the presbytery attended this workshop about missional leadership.

"Rev. Pedro really impressed us with his passion and enthusiasm and you could experience his leadership," says Brother Ivor Collins from URCSA Huguenot. The outcome of how our church can become a missional church was accepted with great unanimity. The delegates agreed that this workshop should be expanded through follow-up sessions at individual congregations in the presbytery.

Something that was highlighted is the importance of a congregational vision and mission, and the vital role leadership plays in embodying this vision and mission. Moreover, the importance that this vision and mission should be continuously renewed, strategies should also be readjusted, and the commitment to live up to the vision and mission should be reaffirmed.

"Rev. Pedro's contribution was invaluable, and the general feeling was that this conversation should be continued and kept alive in the presbytery. Keep up your good work," one of the attendees remarked.

Explorational visit to the Presbytery of Zuurbraak

Creating spaces and opportunities for engagement and reflective listening form an integral part of Rev. Stephen Pedro's operational programme. This he does by having explorational visits and conversations with ministers of presbyteries. On 7 September 2023, he met with a few ministers from the Presbytery of Zuurbraak for such an engagement.

He also utilizes these engagements to build positive relationships with his colleagues and contributes positively to their well-being and of their congregations. But most importantly these conversations are also opportunities for him to soundboard with his colleagues about important challenges facing our congregations and the important role of the presbytery regarding the support of congregations.

Consequently, they touch on matters like the well-being of the congregations without ministers, the possibility of combinations, and the support and accompaniment of these congregations. He especially used the time to share his plan of action to train the ministers to take ownership of the facilitation of the support and accompaniment of the 'vacant' congregations within the presbytery, and how Contextual Bible Study can assist with this support. "In such a way, we can ensure that all the congregations in the presbytery are being reached, including the vacant ones without full-time ministers," Rev. Pedro explained.

They also talked about the relationship and cooperation with the local DRC congregations and the importance to build positive partnerships with one another, especially with regards to the challenges of our many congregations without full or part-time ministers.



Informational Workshop with the Presbytery of George



An important part of the work of Rev. Stephen Pedro, Minister in Synodical Service (MSS), is to keep our presbyteries and congregations informed about the work of Witness Ministry so that they can be informed and actively involved partners of Witness Ministry. He does this by having informational workshops with presbyteries. Such a workshop took place on Thursday, 7 September 2023, with the Presbytery of George, at URCSA Groot Brakrivier.

“I was really surprised and impressed by the attendance at the workshop. For a day during the week, with an attendance of more than 60 congregational leaders, confirmed that our members are hungry to be engaged about the witness ministry of the church”, says Rev Pedro.

Most of the Ministers of the presbytery also joined and it was indeed a blessed evening. The congregations received pamphlets from Christian Literature Fund (CLF) about topics related to the congregation’s ministry, to strengthen the work of the church council members and witness ministries.

After a short dwelling in the Word, Rev. Pedro gave an overview of the work of the six task teams of Witness Ministry. He zoomed in on the work of Congregational Witness, especially with regards to the witness ministry of congregations, the challenges facing the many congregations without ministers, the option of combinations between congregations, and the available Proponent’s Fund, to assist struggling congregations who wants to call a proponent.

The feedback from the leaders were very positive and there was a consensus among participants that presbyteries and congregations need to be more intentional in attending to the witness calling and work of the church. We all need to become more involved with the core ministries of the church, like service and witness, so that our congregations can grow spiritually and become more missionally or outward-looking inclined, and consequently more community focused, as Matthew 28: 18-20 and Acts 1 v 8 clearly direct and teach.

It was evident that an event like this is not only about the sharing of valuable and important information, but is also a great opportunity for leaders to be part of an important conversation within the church and at the same time enjoy uplifting and energetic fellowship.

Presbytery of Fish River: MSS focuses on 'Vacant' Congregations

Having workshops with especially ‘vacant’ congregations, and informing them about the support available to them, is a vital part of the operational tasks of the Minister in Synodical Service (MSS) for Congregational Witness, Rev. Stephen Pedro. During the weekend of 6 to 8 October 2023, he visited the Presbytery of Fish River and facilitated a workshop at URCSA Bedford with a few ‘vacant’ congregations: Bedford, Immanuel-Cradock, and the two congregations of Hofmeyr. Emeritus minister, Rev. Murphy Maart from URCSA Queenstown, also joined the workshop.

The first part of the workshop focused on the accompaniment process. The different phases of the accompaniment process were explained as well as the purpose and goals of the process. The assessment phase of the accompaniment process was also explained in detail, especially Contextual Bible Study as part of the assessment phase and how it can also be utilised as an assessment tool.

During the second part of the workshop the focus shifted to Contextual Bible Study (CBS) with Sr. Nosipho Konki as co-facilitator. She facilitated the SEE part of CBS, and in cooperation with the leaders present, they utilised the CBS method to explore the landscape of these congregations and the communities they are located in. They then identified some of the major challenges facing their communities and congregations.

Some of the challenges they identified were unemployment, substance dependency, violence against women and children, teenage pregnancy, and the scarcity of resources like water. “These challenges are interconnected with the challenges facing our congregations. If we don’t start to work in a structured, and systematic way of putting service and witness in the centre of our congregations’ ministries by utilising CBS as a tool to do so, we will not be able to make progress or impact our communities,” Rev. Pedro explained.

The weekend concluded with a Holy Communion service held at URCSA Bedford. A short report of the workshop the previous day was shared with the local congregation and guests present. Again, it was emphasised how CBS can be utilised as a method and tool to empower the congregation to address the communal challenges facing the congregation and the community surrounding the congregation.

The empty pews on a Sunday and especially our youth not attending church and not being involved in church activities were again raised as a serious concern to which congregations need to attend urgently. CBS can help congregations to attend to this concern and put together concrete transformational plans, rooted in the Word of God.



SUPPORT AND ACCOMPANIMENT: ACCOMPANIMENT OF CONGREGATIONS

Equipment Workshop with the Church Council of URCSA Laingsburg



Rev. Stephen Pedro with some of the church council members at the equipment workshop.

On the weekend of 30 June to 2 July 2023, Congregational Witness had an equipment workshop with the church council of URCSA Laingsburg.

Their request was that we should focus on preaching and the tasks of the elders and deacons, seeing that they do not have a full-time or part-time minister at the moment and must take responsibility for leading the worship services, preaching on Sundays, and at other worship services during the week, like funerals.

However, one Saturday was not enough, so the church council requested that we must have a follow-up workshop. Hopefully, after these workshops relationships will be established, and the importance of the missional journey for the leadership and congregation will be realised to ensure that we can continue with the missional transformation process. Maybe by that time the congregation's new minister, God willing, will be ordained and/or installed, and will also be part of the missional transformation process.

We concluded the weekend with a blessed worship service. We focused on the gospel reading, according to the Revised Common Lectionary, Matthew 10:40-42. We called upon the congregation to continue being a welcoming community of believers and continue making the practice of hospitality, part and parcel of the congregation's ministry, especially regarding its service and witness in and to the community.



The church council busy discussing some of the aspects of preaching.

MSS accompaniment of URC Immanuel-Cradock continues...

On the weekend of 20 to 23 July 2023, the Minister in Synodical Service (MSS) of Congregational Witness, Rev. Stephen Pedro, continued his accompaniment of URC Immanuel (Cradock). The Afrikaans and Xhosa speaking congregations of Hofmeyr were also invited to attend this workshop.

As always, we started off with a blessed Dwelling in the Word session. According to the Lectionary readings, we read the Psalm of the week, Psalm 119. Like always this missional practice, not only helps to build spiritual muscle, but it also ensures a lively, engaging, and interactive way of reading and reflecting on the Biblical text.

However, most of the day has been dedicated to sharing information with the congregational leaders. We focused on the accompaniment process or journey with congregations – what it entails and what the goals are we want to achieve. We informed them about the three phases of the process and all the tools they are being empowered with during the assessment phase, to do the second and third phases: discernment and implementation.





The most exciting part of the day was the session about Contextual Bible Study (CBS). The MSS was assisted by Sr Nosipho Konki of the CWM of the Presbytery of Fish River and a leader of the host congregation, URCSA Immanuel-Cradock. After she gave an overview of what CBS is all about, we facilitated the SEE part of CBS with the group of leaders.

We started off with the question: "What are the communal challenges facing their congregations today?"

This was also a lively and interactive part of the session as usual. The group identified four challenges:

- Unemployment
- Loss of interest in church attendance
- Substance dependency
- Lack of mentorship

After a very challenging reflection on the four challenges, the group agreed that the challenge of congregants, especially the youth, not coming to church, loss of interest in being part of church, lies at the root of the other three and many other challenges facing congregations and communities.

Because it is at church and being part of church that you are being part of a network of contacts and possibilities about work opportunities, etc. It is at church that you are shaped and formed to be a leader and mentor according to kingdom values and the example modeled by Jesus Christ. Here you can get help and support with your dependency, and where you get exposure to constructive role models. You are inspired by the Word of God and are being formed to be a disciple of Christ. At church you enjoy warm fellowship and are embraced and excepted just the way you are. Here a sense of belonging is experienced amidst a world which so easily rejects and cancels.

So, at the end of the day we've decided that the challenge of dropping in church attendance, people having lost interest in being part of church, will be the focus when these leaders reconvene to do the DISCERNMENT AND ACT parts of the rest of the CBS.

The group identified Luke 15 which focuses on loss, as a possible text that will be read together, slowly, to discern what actions can be taken to address and transform this pertinent challenge for a lot of URCSA Cape congregations.
It was indeed a blessed weekend. As one of the participants summarised it: "Thank you for a very informative workshop. We are ready for the next step, thank you."

SUPPORT AND ACCOMPANIMENT: SUPPORT OF PROPONENTS

The support of our URCSA Cape Proponents is another important part of the work of the MSS: Congregational Witness. The Proponents Fund is one of the major ways how we support our proponents when called by smaller congregations. URCSA Overberg and URCSA Eendekuil, called a Proponent during the past few months and applied for support from Witness Ministry's Proponent's Fund for assistance with the salary of Prop. Bulelwa Potwana and Prop. Anthony Cloete. Witness Ministry undertook to support their salaries from our Proponents Fund for a specific period.

From Witness Ministry's side, Rev. Stephen Pedro communicated and facilitated the process with these two church councils to make our support a reality. Hence, Saturday, 26 August 2023, was a big occasion for URCSA Overberg when Ministerial Candidate (Proponent) Bulelwa Potwana was ordained as their second minister. Dr Daniël de Wet, Minister in Synodical Service (MSS) delivered a message on behalf of Witness Ministry at her ordination, as Rev. Stephen Pedro was visiting Kerk in Aktie in the Netherlands. The ordination service was conducted by Dr Cezula, lecturer at the Faculty of Theology and also minister of URCSA Overberg, and it took place in the church building of the Dutch Reformed Church of Grabouw which was of great significance.

Dr Daniël highlighted two moments of the day that were very special. Firstly, Rev. Bulelwa Potwana's husband, Rev. Siya Potwana, minister of URCSA Decoligny, was privileged to proclaim the Word of God at this special occasion. Rev. Potwana's message called us to action amidst the many challenges in South Africa. Secondly, the confirmation of a proponent is really a beacon of hope; of someone who said 'yes' to the calling of the Lord and then of a congregation who says, 'We would like you to come and minister here.'



On 21 October 2023, URC Eendekuil also celebrated the ordination of Proponent Anthony Cloete. His ordination was conducted by the Relieving Minister, Rev. Julian Coetzee, and the ordination sermon was delivered by Rev. Stephen Pedro (MSS: Congregational Witness).

Both occasions were special and, as Congregational Witness, we assured these church councils of our continued support.



NETWORKS

MSS for Congregational Witness visited Kerk in Actie



Rev. Pedro (left) with Rev. Karin van der Broeke, Ecumenical Relations Officer of PKN.

During the last week of August 2023, Rev. Stephen Pedro, MSS for Congregational Witness and manager for the roll-out of the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) project to our URCSA Cape Regional Synod's congregations visited the offices of the main donor of the project, Kerk in Actie in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

The purpose of this visit was to provide them with an overall report of the progress we have made with the Introduction of CBS to our presbyteries, congregations, and ministries. Furthermore, to motivate in person why we want to continue empowering our congregations, as well as our ministries, with this powerful capacity-building, transformational, and developmental tool.

He also utilised this time to network with colleagues from the PKN (Kerk in Actie), who are also involved with CBS/CBR projects locally, as well as in other parts of Africa and Asia.

"Overall, it was a very blessed and fruitful visit and I want to thank Petri Hofland and the other colleagues at Kerk in Actie for their warm welcome and support. We are looking forward to the next phase of taking CBS to our congregations, and ministries, which will enable us to start making the difference where it really matters, on congregational and community level," Rev. Pedro said.



Rev. Pedro (right) with Martin Teunissen, CBS project manager in Pakistan.

FAREWELL AND CONGRATULATIONS!

Rev. Aidan Windvogel



On Saturday, 26 August 2023, it was a great occasion for Prop. Aidan Windvogel as he was ordained as the new minister of URCSA Die Goeie Hoop in Rocklands, Mitchell's Plain. During the months preceding his ordination, he was in service of Witness Ministry, as an administrative assistant of Rev. Stephen Pedro (MSS: Congregational Witness). Hence, we want to congratulate Rev. Windvogel and we pray that the Lord will use his talents abundantly to His glory and in service of his new congregation.

Contact details



Rev. Stephen Pedro
Minister in Synodical Service

067 770 5986
stephen@kaapkerk.co.za



Ms. Leoné Prinsloo
Administrative Coordinator

076 330 1527
kga3@kaapkerk.co.za