UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (URCSA) GENERAL SYNOD 2026

Pastoral Letter to URCSA Congregations

We Are the Salt of the World

A call to faith, justice, unity, reconciliation and transformation

Issued on behalf of the Executive of the General Synod

4 October 2026

"You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13–14)

To the congregations, members and ministries of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and to all people of goodwill: Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we write as a Church that shares the life of our people. In homes across South Africa, Lesotho and Namibia, families wait for work, worry about the safety of those they love, and try to hold on to hope amid rising hardship. Some women and children live with the threat or memory of violence. Survivors wonder whether they will be heard. Migrants meet suspicion where they seek safety and belonging. Young people ask whether there is a place for them in the future of our societies and our Church. These are not separate items on an agenda. These are wounds in the lives of our neighbors – not mere separate items on somebody's agenda - and in the one human family to which God calls us.

We bring this pain before God. We grieve with those who mourn, we listen to those whose voices are too often ignored, and we confess that the Church has not always offered safety, solidarity or truthful witness. We also remember that the risen Christ calls us beyond despair, and sends the us to be salt and light wherever life is threatened.

Belhar shapes our witness

The Confession of Belhar is the ground from which we speak. In the humbling knowledge that we have been gathered, and are cared for, by the triune God, we confess that the unity of Christ's people is both gift and calling. We have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation while we continue to stand where God stands… in solidarity with people who are poor, wronged and vulnerable. And it calls us to confess and do these things in obedience to Christ, even when faithful witness is costly (Belhar, Articles 1–5).

Belhar therefore comforts those who are suffering and unsettles every power, practice or prejudice that denies their dignity. It calls us to speak with tenderness to people who are wounded, and with

clarity to systems that wound them. Our prophetic voice must rise from compassion while this compassion must find expression in our actions and ministry.

When public trust is wounded

Across our region, unemployment, poverty, food insecurity and unequal access to education, housing and healthcare weigh heavily on families. Young people need meaningful opportunities and communities need dignified work and reliable services. In Lesotho and Namibia, as in South Africa, economic uncertainty and hardship place pressure on households and congregations. We ask our churches to strengthen practical ministries of care, learning, skills development and community partnership. We also call on leaders in government and business to serve the public good, especially those who are most exposed to hardship.

Corruption is not an abstract failure of administration. It takes from people what should serve the common good while weakening the very institutions on which the vulnerable depend… instead of justice our communities only meet betrayal. Crime and attacks on police officers and others who serve their communities deepen fear. We call for ethical leadership, capable institutions, lawful accountability and the protection of human life. Accountability should establish truth, prevent further harm and restore trust; it must be pursued fairly and without favor.

In South Africa, the Madlanga Commission is examining serious allegations that criminal syndicates infiltrated law-enforcement and associated criminal-justice institutions. We do not presume what the Commission will find. Its work must be independent, and its findings must be followed through lawfully. Yet, the allegations themselves are frightening as it dawns in us that institutions entrusted with public safety may be compromised, eroding the trust in our communities and leaving ordinary people exposed and unprotected. How then can we trust the search for justice?

In Namibia, the Fishrot proceedings concern allegations of fraud, corruption and racketeering related to the allocation and use of fishing quotas. The case remains before the courts, and due process must be respected. At the same time, the scandal has brought into view the danger of public office and shared natural resources being diverted for private benefit. The cost of such abuse can be borne by workers, fishing communities, the public purse and the marine environment. We pray for truth and justice and call for public resources to be managed transparently for the well-being of all.

These matters are not occasions for the Church to pronounce verdicts. They are occasions to stand with people harmed by corruption, to defend the independence of just processes, and to insist that public power and common resources serve the people.

Where neighbours are made strangers

We grieve the violence directed at women and children, including gender-based violence and femicide. Abuse is a violation of every person's God-given dignity and is in every aspect contrary to the Gospel. The Church must never silence survivors or shield perpetrators. Congregations should become places and spaces without shame and blame, but rather of affirmation, care, support, and safety. Men and boys must help change the attitudes and practices that sustain violence. Our ministries must intentionally and boldly resist all forms of violence while empowering all members to become the embodiment of care.

We, together with the rest of society, must confront racism, tribalism, xenophobia and Afrophobia. We are deeply saddened by and concerned about what appears to be persistent Afrophobia, i.e. hostility, stereotyping, violence and exclusion directed at African people, that continue to play out in front of our eyes. When one African is treated as less human or less entitled to safety because of origin, language or nationality, the whole community is diminished. Belhar rejects separation, enmity and hatred as incompatible with the visible unity Christ gives and commands us to pursue. We must tell the truth about these harms, repent where we have participated in them, and work to restore relationships and protect those who are targeted.

Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are not a threat to be feared; they are people bearing God's image, often carrying deep pain, loss and trauma. We encourage congregations to offer hospitality, practical support and pastoral accompaniment, and to work with ecumenical and civil-society partners for their protection and belonging. However, we also ask that claims describing white South Africans as refugees in the United States be examined carefully and truthfully. Genuine personal fears must not be dismissed. However, public narratives should also not distort South Africa's realities or turn genuine concerns into a tool for division. Our witness must hold compassion and truth together.

Praying and working for peace

We are deeply troubled by the violence and humanitarian suffering in Israel and Palestine, including the killing and displacement of civilians in Gaza, occupied territories, and across the region. We call for the protection of all civilians, the release of hostages, unimpeded humanitarian access, an end to violence as well as a just peace that recognises the rights and security of all peoples. We reject antisemitism, Islamophobia and every form of hatred directed at people because of their faith. We also reject the dehumanisation of Palestinians. The Church must be able to name injustice and call for accountability without turning criticism of political action into hostility toward a people or faith community. We encourage careful Bible study and theological reflection on Christian Zionism, antisemitism and the realities of the conflict.

Our pastoral presence in political life must be offered across party divisions. Chaplaincy to political parties should serve people without making the Church an instrument of party interests. We remain free, and are called, to speak prophetically wherever power is abused or human dignity is denied.

Receiving creation as a gift

Droughts, floods and environmental degradation affect livelihoods, especially those of rural communities and small-scale farmers. We give thanks for creation and confess our responsibility to care for it. We encourage water conservation, sustainable agriculture, protection of ecosystems and solidarity with people affected by climate-related shocks. Decisions about energy, including nuclear power, require transparent public participation and careful attention to safety, long-term waste, environmental effects, access to energy and the well-being of future generations.

A Church where all can seek God

Some matters in the life of our Church still call for patient theological discernment, including children's participation in communion, charismatic influence, worship and liturgical practice, and church attire. We ask congregations to approach these conversations through Scripture and the Reformed tradition, with humility and care for one another. Difference must not become a pretext for humiliation or exclusion.

The Church's engagement with human sexuality, marriage and the ordination of queer members also requires theological seriousness and pastoral responsibility. Belhar teaches that descent or any other human or social factor must not determine membership in the Church. Queer people who are baptized and confirmed members of URCSA must therefore be treated with dignity, care and the full rights of church membership. No one should face contempt, violence or rejection in the Church. The confession calls us to resist exclusion; questions concerning marriage and church office require continued, responsible discernment considering Scripture and the Reformed tradition. We encourage the competent church structures to continue that work and to consider candidates for ministry under the same prescribed requirements and standards that apply to all members. URCSA is ready to move beyond debate so that we deepen our dialogue towards becoming an even more inclusive and affirming community.

We are salt and light …

Dear congregations, let our response begin close to home. Make space for people to speak and be heard. Support survivors. Welcome those who arrive seeking safety. Create meaningful ways for young people to lead and serve. Teach children that every neighbor is a bearer of God's image. Build partnerships that address hunger, unemployment and isolation. Ask public leaders for honesty and accountability, and care for the land and waters entrusted to us.

We do not offer these words as observers standing outside the pain. We offer them as fellow members of Christ's body, called together to bear one another's burdens. We will need courage to speak, patience to listen, repentance where we have failed, and hope strong enough to become service. The Belhar Confession reminds us that the Church must not only confess unity, reconciliation and justice; in obedience to Jesus Christ, it must live them.

May the Spirit comfort all who mourn, protect those in danger, strengthen those who serve, and turn our congregations into places that are welcoming, places that welcomes the truth, and spaces for healing. As we return to our communities, may we carry the light of Christ into every place where people long for safety, justice and hope.

We are the salt of the world.

To God be the glory. Soli Deo Gloria.

On behalf of the Executive of the General Synod Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa