

Synod in 2003 and met for the first time in November of that year. Since its organization, Michael Vandenberg has served as the commission's moderator. As he ends his term of service on the commission and his leadership as moderator, the commission offers the following resolution:

**R-79**

**Be it resolved that the two hundred and first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America expresses its appreciation for Michael Vandenberg's four years of faithful service as moderator of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. (ADOPTED)**

## Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

### INTRODUCTION

The General Synod is responsible for the RCA's ecumenical relations (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part V, Article 2, Section 5). In response to Christ's prayer that we may all be one and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102) the CCU has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA. CCU advises General Synod on ecumenical matters and communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies. CCU educates the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with the RCA's confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," which was adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod refers ecumenical matters to CCU for study and implementation.

Though the RCA's ecumenical life can be generally summarized under the rubrics programmatic ecumenism, conciliar ecumenism, and conversational/dialogue ecumenism, these categories remain inadequate to express the full spectrum of the church's ecumenical life.

**Programmatic ecumenism** refers to cooperative work with other churches creating joint programs of mission. This may be done formally or informally, from denominational to local levels. It emerges from a mutual desire to carry out a specific mission. Examples are cooperative education, curriculum development, disaster relief, vacation Bible schools, shelters for people who are homeless, food banks, youth events, and services of worship. RCA Global Mission is an excellent example of programmatic ecumenism through partnerships and cooperative work.

**Conciliar ecumenism** represents the world, national, regional, state, and local councils where churches come together for mission. Councils facilitate collaboration of denominations and churches in a host of programs of service and witness, while recognizing and accepting the distinctive history, polity, and ecclesial expression of the church catholic.

The RCA is a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches and a charter member of the World Council of Churches, the National Council

of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Most recently the RCA has become an originating member of Christian Churches Together. Several regional synods, classes, and local congregations hold memberships in the National Association of Evangelicals.

**Dialogues and conversational ecumenism** are expressions of ecumenical practices that occur between churches at denomination level. They may either be bilateral (one-to-one) or multilateral (more than two). Through dialogue, faithful expression is given to what churches believe. Areas of common belief are identified alongside those that need further reflection. The process of dialogue requires respectful listening to one another, letting each church speak for itself and then together recognizing any emergent consensus offering substantial fellowship and common mission. The RCA is currently involved in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues including the Reformed–Roman Catholic Dialogue; the Moravian Dialogue; and the Dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

### **ECUMENICAL OFFICER AND ASSOCIATE FOR ECUMENICAL RELATIONS**

The general secretary of the RCA, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, is the commission's chief ecumenical officer, serving through various degrees of engagement with the leadership of other churches and councils. He serves as an ex-officio member of the Commission on Christian Unity.

The associate for ecumenical relations, the Rev. Douglas Fromm, as part-time staff, assists the general secretary in the development, coordination, and interpretation of ecumenical policies and relationships. He serves as staff for the Commission on Christian Unity and RCA dialogues and represents the RCA in ecumenical meetings and assemblies.

### **CLASSES ECUMENICAL NETWORK**

CCU has invited and encouraged each classis to appoint an individual to serve as ecumenical liaison with the commission. A significant number of classes accepted the invitation, others vested this role in their clerks. For all classes the network provides a communication link with the local churches. CCU shares information and updates of its work and receives information about local ecumenical initiatives.

### **RCA ECUMENICAL APPOINTEES**

The RCA is represented at ecumenical tables and events by persons elected or appointed who willingly give of their ecumenical gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity we have in Christ. A complete listing of ecumenical appointees may be found under "Rosters" behind the Delegates/Committees tab at the front of the General Synod Workbook. Following participation in events or meetings these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to CCU.

#### **Programmatic Ecumenism**

Since most such actions happen on the local level, the CCU does not feel qualified to report to General Synod.

#### **Conciliar Ecumenism**

#### **The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)**

Meeting at Accra, Ghana, in August of 2004, the WARC General Council focused on achieving life in fullness and agreed on a confession entitled "Covenanting for Justice." In

May of 2006 the confession's contents were distilled into a statement aimed at reclaiming three important Reformed understandings of how churches go about being the people of God: reclaiming spirituality, reclaiming a theology of God's economy, and reclaiming mission. In July of 2006 a WARC consultation held in Manila called on churches "to resist empire and to renew communities of life." Dr. Oliver Patterson from the RCA Commission on Christian Unity participated with representatives of WARC, the World Council of Churches, the Council for World Mission, and the United Evangelical Mission at a meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which set forth a program of meetings and consultations to be held around the world from 2007 to 2009 to reflect on and address covenanting for justice.

A significant movement in the life of WARC is its proposed merger with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to form the World Reformed Communion, bringing over eighty million Reformed believers into a single confessional body.

### **The Caribbean and North American Area Council of WARC (CANAAC)**

The steering committee met in January of 2007 in Guyana and approved a paper on transatlantic slave trade. CANAAC will coordinate with churches and other groups to conduct critical analyses of slavery as it has affected economic injustice and environmental destruction. CANAAC will also hold a youth assembly in Trinidad in October of 2007 and cooperate with the Caribbean and North American Council for Mission to send representatives to each others' youth assemblies during the upcoming two years.

### **The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A.**

The Commission on Faith and Order continues work related to the church's exercise of authority in the world, justification/sanctification, and full communion. The RCA's ecumenical appointee to this group, Paul Janssen, has worked in the study group on authority, contributing an essay to a collection to be published in 2007.

The Commission on Faith and Order will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary July 9-13 in Oberlin, Ohio. Paul Janssen will be the coordinator for the inter-confessional prayer services to be held at that event.

### **The World Conference on Faith and Order**

Over the next several years the CCU will seek to listen to and educate the RCA through guided reflection on and response to a paper recently released by the World Conference on Faith and Order, "The Nature and Mission of the Church." This document represents common perspectives arrived at over fifty years of bilateral and multilateral discussions. These perspectives are offered alongside areas where differences remain within and between churches. These later areas are seen by some people as legitimate diversity, and by others as church-dividing. The RCA and other churches worldwide have been invited to read and reflect on the document and respond according to ten particular questions in order to exercise mutual admonition and upbuilding.

### **Christian Churches Together**

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) grew out of a deeply felt need to broaden and expand fellowship, unity, and witness among the diverse expressions of Christian faith today. It is composed of thirty-six churches and national organizations from virtually all U.S. Christian Evangelical, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, historic Protestant, and racial and ethnic churches. It provides a context marked by prayer, theological dialogue, and fellowship in which churches can develop relationships with other churches

with whom they presently have little contact. On February 9 CCT was formally launched at a celebration held in Pasadena, California. Committing itself to the mission of overcoming domestic poverty, CCT invites all Christians, all people, and especially all leaders in public life to embrace and implement four objectives: 1) to strengthen families and communities (because they are essential bulwarks against poverty); 2) to reduce child poverty (by 50 percent in the next ten years); 3) to make work (by combating racism and guaranteeing that full time work offers a realistic escape from poverty and access to good health care); and 4) to strengthen the educational system with particular attention to the public schools (because access to quality education offers perhaps the best way out of poverty).

### **Dialogues and Conversational Ecumenism**

#### **The Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue**

Since 1965 a series of dialogues has been held in the United States between official representative of the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches. The dialogues have been held under the auspices of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. The seventh round of the official dialogue began in 2003 and continues to the present. RCA representatives are the Rev. Renee House and the Rev. John Paarlberg. The Rev. Douglas Fromm, RCA associate for ecumenical relations, serves as staff to the consultation. Other participating Reformed churches are the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ. The Rev. Dr. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, serves as co-chair with the Most Reverend Patrick Cooney, bishop at Gaylord, Michigan. The current consultation is focused on the sacramental understanding of baptism. The current consultation is focused on the sacramental understanding of baptism: its meaning and practice, its relation to the Eucharist, and how it shapes churches and the Christian life. The most recent dialogue was held in Chicago March 26-27, 2007. It is hoped that the dialogue will complete its work in the fall of 2007 with a full report going to the churches by the spring of 2008.

#### **The Moravian/Reformed Dialogue**

The Moravian/Reformed dialogue group met in Kentucky on April 30, 2007. The Rev. Daniel Meeter is the RCA's ecumenical appointee. Current discussions are on structural aspects relating to "full communion" and of understanding the role of bishops (an aspect of Moravian polity) that figure in the Eucharist.

**The Christian Reformed Church in North America** celebrates the 150th anniversary of its founding and a century and a half of faithful ministry this year and asks General Synod to promulgate the following resolution:

#### **R-80**

**BE IT RESOLVED** that the two hundred first regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Pella, Iowa, June 7-12, 2007, commends the Christian Reformed Church in North America for one hundred and fifty years of faithful ministry. In recognition of our shared heritage in the Reformation, common use of ecumenical creeds and standards of unity, years of parallel ministry, increasing cooperation in ministry, joint appointments of overseas missionaries, common publishing and distribution of print and multimedia materials, and orderly exchange of ministers, we look forward to ever greater cooperation and ever deeper fellowship as we, separately and together, follow Christ in mission to this world so loved by God.

**(ADOPTED)**

## THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The 2000 General Synod voted to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13 amended, p. 100). CCU has made the Belhar Confession and the church-wide study its highest priority for the last six years.

**Background:** The Belhar Confession is rooted in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa. It is an “outcry of faith” and a “call for faithfulness and repentance.” It was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC, colored) under leadership of the Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak. That church took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a “status confessionis” in which the very truth of the gospel was at stake.

The Belhar Confession was adopted in 1986 by the DRMC after years of conversation with its “mother church,” the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa (DRC, white). This adoption, which was not repeated in the DRC, set the DRMC apart from the DRC. In April of 1994 the Belhar Confession was adopted as the theological foundation of the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), comprised of the former bodies of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA, black). Though some regional synods of the DRC have adopted the Belhar Confession, the DRC as a whole has not yet done so. Even so, the DRC no longer offers theological justification to apartheid.

**What Belhar Addresses:** The Belhar Confession addresses the issues of church unity, reconciliation, and God's justice. *Unity* is seen as a gift and an obligation for the church. It is to be pursued and sought and built, becoming visible wherever and whenever possible as a witness to the working of God's Spirit for the unity manifest in the unity of the Trinity and so that the world might believe.

*Reconciliation* is a message entrusted to the church by God. The church is called to be a peacemaker, giving witness in word and in deed. The church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Peace is the salt and the light. *Justice* and true peace are revealed as the nature of God, who is God to the destitute, the poor, and the wronged. The church is called and must stand where God stands, with people in any form of suffering.

**Belhar Is a Gift:** The Belhar Confession is a gift to the whole church. Born in the Southern African struggle, it has wide implications beyond its original context. It is a confession for the whole church seeking to be faithful to God, who stands in the midst of suffering of any and all expression.

**Our Historic Confessions:** The confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that comprise the Reformed Standards of Unity are the Heidelberg Catechism (1563; adopted by the Reformed Church in America in 1792); the Belgic Confession (1561, revised A.D. 1619; adopted at the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, with foreign delegates exhorted to preserve it), and the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619).

Timely in their context and of great value and significance for the faith of the church, these “standards of unity” say little about the centrality of unity to the life, witness, and mission of the church as an expression of the fullness of the Reformed faith. Unity is the prayer of Christ in the gospel of John, chapter 17.

The themes of reconciliation and justice are repeatedly expressed in and through the ministry and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are intrinsic in the call to the church to stand where God stands in the world. Their absence from the sixteenth-century confessions diminishes the fullness of the Reformed faith in today's world. The twentieth-century Belhar Confession rounds out the RCA's sixteenth and seventeenth century standards of unity.

In compliance with the General Synod directive of 2000 CCU has prayerfully and intentionally presented the Belhar Confession to each General Synod since 2002. These presentations have been coupled with the desire of bringing to confessional completeness the fullness of the Reformed faith, its biblical witness, its loyalty to Christ, and its mission of, and witness to, the gospel of unity, justice, and reconciliation "of a lost and broken world so loved by God."

### **General Synod 2002**

At its annual ecumenical breakfast, CCU presented the Rev. Dr. Edwin Mulder and elder Sarah Smith, who focused on "The RCA History with Belhar: Voices from the RCA." CCU presented to General Synod as its ecumenical presenter the Rev. Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe, ecumenical representative from the URCSA. These two events inaugurated the church-wide study of the Belhar Confession. Dr Pitikoe's address was printed in the *2002 Minutes of the General Synod* in the CCU report (*MGS 2002*, pp. 166-172).

General Synod instructed the CCU to continue the study of the Belhar Confession by the RCA and to report its progress to General Synod 2003 (*MGS 2002*, R-35, p. 175). General Synod encouraged the church to use the Belhar Confession in their work, especially as it related to dealing with racism and strengthening ecumenical commitment, and to explore the implications of its endorsement by the RCA for life and ministry in the RCA (*MGS 2002*, R-36, p. 175).

### **General Synod 2003**

Continuing the church-wide study of the Belhar Confession, CCU presented to General Synod as the ecumenical presenters the Rev. Gretel Van Wieren and Dr. Oliver Patterson, RCA members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity. Rev. Van Wieren addressed "The Theological Implications of the Belhar Confession" and Dr. Paterson addressed "The Theological Implications of the Belhar Confession for the Reformed Church in America" (*MGS 2003*, pp. 184-190).

General Synod instructed the CCU to continue guiding the RCA's study of the Belhar Confession, and to report its progress to General Synod 2004, and further, to encourage other parts of the church to use the Belhar Confession as they do their work, especially as it relates to dealing with racism and strengthening ecumenical commitment, and to explore the implications of its endorsement by the RCA for life and ministry (*MGS 2003*, R-45, p. 196).

### **General Synod 2004**

CCU invited speakers to address "The Practical Implications of Belhar" at an "all synod" breakfast convened by the president of General Synod as part of the morning agenda. Dr. Christo Lombard, a fellow at the Institute for Theological Studies at Princeton, New Jersey, and a member of the URCSA, addressed the implications of the confession from the perspective of his homeland, Namibia, and offered insights as to implications for a church like the RCA. The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, general director of the International Center of Bethlehem and senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem,

focused on broader implications of the confession as it addresses unity, reconciliation, and the justice of God. His context was the Middle East and the implications for the confession in an arena where unity, reconciliation, and justice are high priorities of concern.

Following the presentations delegates shared discussions and raised questions around tables and submitted question and comment cards to Commission on Christian Unity.

### **General Synod 2005**

On Friday evening of General Synod a forum considered the Belhar Confession in relation to the RCA's Standards of Unity and raised the question of whether or not the RCA could embrace a fourth confession from the twentieth century. General Synod professors Dr. Paul Fries and the Rev. Renee House from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Dr. Thomas Boogaart and Dr. George Brown from Western Theological Seminary each spoke to the confession from a historical/theological perspective and to the use of the confession as an educational/formative work in the nurture of faith for witness and mission.

The "all synod" ecumenical breakfast on Monday of General Synod featured Bishop Mark Hansen, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe of the URCSA. Bishop Hansen focused on "Confessions: What Are They? and How Do They 'Inform' the Church for Witness and Mission?" Dr. Pitikoe spoke on "Living and Breathing the Belhar Confession in the URCSA." Continuing in the plenary after worship, CCU offered a "hands on" study of the Belhar Confession for the delegates. This forty-five minute presentation included narrative, video, large-screen images, and drama and music presenting the story of the Belhar Confession and its themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. The presentation used racism as a case study where delegates met in small cluster groups for discussion and sharing of reactions and feelings. Delegates completed "feeling cards" that were posted at the doors of the plenary hall for perusal during the remainder of synod.

### **General Synod 2006**

At the "all synod" ecumenical dinner on Sunday the Rev. Dr. Israel Batista spoke on the church and its mission in Latin America from the context of the Belhar Confession (*MGS 2006*, pp. 154-160). He concluded his remarks with a prayer for the RCA as it interacts with and learns from the Belhar Confession, imploring the Almighty that through the Belhar Confession we come to witness to the God in whom we believe, discern the action of that God in our lives and in history, and learn resistance in the face of behavior that is dehumanizing and renew our passion for proclaiming the gospel.

At synod 2006 the CCU also introduced *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession*. This congregational guide to the Belhar Confession uses racism as a case study. A copy was presented to each synod delegate and synod adopted a recommendation to commend to the congregations of the Reformed Church in America the Belhar study guide for use in teaching ministries during the years 2006 to 2007 (*MGS 2006*, R-47, p. 168) in the hope that as the RCA becomes familiar with this twentieth-century confession—the first from a church in Africa and the first from the southern hemisphere—we might express a desire to embrace this confession as one of our own.

### **General Synod 2007**

This year's "all synod" ecumenical dinner will be addressed by two leaders from Reformed churches in South Africa, including the Rev. Dr. Russel Botman, rector of Stellenbosch University and a member of the URCSA. They will address the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice found in the Belhar Confession as these relate to their own and other

Reformed Church bodies, bearing testimony concerning the power of the Belhar to serve as a confessional basis to a biblical commitment to racial reconciliation, justice, and unity.

Having lived with *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession* for a year, and found it useful in many settings:

#### **R-81**

**The two hundred first regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Pella, Iowa, June 7-12, 2007, offers thanks to Susan Damon, a member of Drayton Reformed Church in Ontario, Canada, for the many years of selfless devotion and cooperative work which led to the creation of *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession*. (ADOPTED)**

### **WHAT IS A CONFESSION?**

**A confession** is a written formal statement that acknowledges, declares, and gives evidence of religious beliefs.

**A confession** speaks internally to the church that makes the declaration and as such is informing for the vision and mission of the church. **A confession** gives material form to the vision and mission...it states the characteristic quality of the vision and mission...it communicates the vision and mission of the church...to the church...about the church...thus inwardly forming the church, calling to, and reminding the church of, its vision and mission.

**A confession** speaks externally—to the *oikoumene*, the “whole inhabited world,” the world so loved by God...as known in other churches, faiths, cultures, and societies both religious and secular, in other words, the “total community” in its various lifestyles and structures.

**A confession** puts forth a declarative statement to the *oikoumene* so that the church’s beliefs regarding the call of God to a vision and mission can be known, made evident by, in, and through the church.

“**A confession** does not only say something about God and his heaven, about the believer and his church, but also something about the world. It says something about God as he comes to meet the world in Jesus Christ the Lord; and about the Church as it lives in the world; and about the world as it exists before God” (*A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*: edited by Cloete and Smit, William B. Eerdmans, p. 113).

### **HOW DOES A CONFESSION COME ABOUT?**

**A confession** begins its formation at a time when an extremely serious situation and a very important issue or issues arise that seem to go “right to the heart of the gospel”; those occasions when the gospel is threatened; when the integrity of the “gospel is at stake” (*status confessionis*), such as in the sixteenth century when classical Reformed confessions were formed, written, and embraced and in the twentieth century when the Confessing Church in Germany came into existence over against those Christians loyal to Hitler and produced the Barmen Declaration of 1934.

In the later part of the twentieth century the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Southern Africa challenged the biblical and theological legitimacy of the doctrine and law of apartheid as being a situation that “struck a moment of truth” in which “the gospel was at stake.”

### WHAT PURPOSE DOES A CONFESSION SERVE?

Christian faith is the decision in which men have the freedom to be publicly responsible for their trust in God's Word and for their knowledge of the truth in Jesus Christ, in the language of the Church, but also in worldly attitudes and above all in their corresponding actions and conduct (*Dogmatics in Outline*, Karl Barth; SCM Press, p. 28).

**A confession** declares that God is historical. The nature and action of God are imbedded in creation, i.e., the world. The world is the theater of God's action, God's glory. The world is the purpose of God's action. God's calling of the church into existence is to be a community that arises out of the world and lives in the world for the world.

**A confession** declares that the church is gathered not on its own behalf or for its own purposes, but to be the manifestation of God's healing, redeeming, repairing, renewing of the world. Or as we say in the language of our day...a thousand churches/congregations in a million ways doing one thing "following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

**A confession** professes to the world in word and deed that the church's business is God's business and that God's business is the world. It is a declaration to the world and a reminder to itself that the church is called to be radically attentive to the world, even as God is radically attentive to the world as creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

**A confession** gives expression of faith, by and through the church, giving rise to action/mission that becomes an historical witness to the truth that God is a living, active, expressive, moving God in events and time.

### WHAT DOES BELHAR MEAN FOR THE RCA?

The confession provides a scriptural and theological foundation for the call of the RCA "to follow Christ in mission in a lost and broken world." It gives a scriptural and theological foundation to the RCA's privilege of "participating in God's ongoing transformation of our lives, our congregations, and the world—extending God's mercy and grace to people in our communities and in countries around the globe." The confession provides a scriptural and theological foundation for the vision of the RCA as it imagines a church called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to stand where God stands with the poor; a church that is racially inclusive and multicultural; a church where baptism and not race determines membership in the body of Christ; a church where hurts are healed, the lost are found, the hungry are fed, the broken are healed; a church witnessing to hope, transforming lives by the love of Jesus Christ; a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing...following Christ in mission.

### WHAT WILL THE RCA DO WITH BELHAR?

After five years of presentations to successive General Synods and a year of study by congregations throughout the RCA, the Commission on Christian Unity brings the following recommendation (R-82) to General Synod 2007.

► A motion was made from the floor to amend R-82 as follows:

To adopt the Belhar Confession provisionally for ~~two~~ three years, testing it:

- in worship through RCA liturgy,
- in teaching through formation and nurture of faith for RCA witness and mission,
- in discernment as a theological foundation for the RCA call "to follow Christ in mission in a lost and broken world."

- in confessing the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice by “participating in God’s transformation of our lives, our congregations, and the world”

for report to the General Synod of ~~2008~~ 2009 through the Commission on Christian Unity. ◀

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment to R-82.

**R-82**

**To adopt the Belhar Confession provisionally for two years, testing it:**

- **in worship through RCA liturgy,**
- **in teaching through formation and nurture of faith for RCA witness and mission,**
- **in discernment as a theological foundation for the RCA call “to follow Christ in mission in a lost and broken world,”**
- **in confessing the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice by “participating in God’s transformation of our lives, our congregations, and the world”**

**for report to the General Synod of 2009 through the Commission on Christian Unity. (ADOPTED)**

## **BELHAR CONFESSION**

**September 1986\***

- 1. We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
- 2. We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

**We believe**

- that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2.11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4.1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17.20, 23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and

share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2.1-5; 1 Cor. 12.4-31; John 13.1-17; 1 Cor. 1.10-13; Eph. 4.1-6; Eph. 3.14-20; 1 Cor. 10.16-17; 1 Cor. 11.17-34; Gal. 6.2; 2 Cor. 1.3-4);

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12.3-8; 1 Cor. 12.1-11; Eph. 4.7-13; Gal. 3.27-28; Jas. 2.1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

#### **Therefore, we reject any doctrine**

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

### **3. We believe**

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5.17-21; Mt. 5.13-16; Mt. 5.9; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21-22).
- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world (Eph 4.17-6.23; Rom. 6; Col. 1.9-14; Col. 2.13-19; Col. 3.1-4.6);
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

#### **Therefore, we reject any doctrine**

- which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

**4. We believe**

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right (Deut. 32.4; Luke 2.14; John 14.27; Eph. 2.14; Isa. 1.16-17; Jas. 1.27; Jas. 5.1-6; Luke 1.46-55; Luke 6.20-26; Luke 7.22; Luke 16.19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4.16-19; Rom. 6.13-18; Amos 5);
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

**Therefore, we reject any ideology**

which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

- 5. We believe** that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4.15-16; Acts 5.29-33; 1 Pet. 2.18-25; 1 Pet. 3.15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

\* This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## **Address to the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America**

The Rev. Dr. H. Russel Botman  
Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

### **The Confession of Belhar and Our Common Future**

Brad Lewis, moderator of the RCA; Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary; Doug Fromm, comrade in reconciliation and unity; Ed Mulder, former general secretary; members of the conference, and allow me to mention especially the Black Council of the RCA—I think specifically of Bill Howard and those who carried the torch further—I have a story to tell and the significance of Belhar to emphasize.

#### **My Personal Journey with the Story of the Confession of Belhar**

The theological engagement with the central issues underlying the Confession of Belhar started on a beautiful day in Cape Town in the second semester of 1978, two years after the tragic events of 1976 when Hector Petersen and other children were shot on the streets of Soweto by the apartheid regime. We were then still struggling to make theological sense of the resistance to apartheid. Our professor of systematic theology, Jaap Durand, called us to order, saying, “You have been quite explicit about the legal, sociological, psychological, and political science reasons for your judgment on apartheid. I want to challenge you to find the theological essence of the judgment on apartheid.” I have a feeling that it was his way of giving us a reason to read Karl Barth’s work on “The Doctrine of Reconciliation,” since he gave this to us as reading material. One day in the spring of 1978 we arrived at a conclusion: apartheid has as its point of departure the irreconcilability of people of different race groups. It was thus against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which takes its point of departure in the doctrine of reconciliation.

In October of the same year, the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, with Allan Boesak and others in the leadership, considered this theological conclusion. The Theological Commission of Synod confirmed this conclusive judgment and further indicated that if this theological judgment was affirmed by synod it would mean that apartheid was “anti-evangelical,” against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The racism of apartheid was, therefore, a structural and institutional sin.

In 1982, Allan Boesak presented this position of the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa to the General Conference of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, Canada. Again, this theological understanding was affirmed, but this time in the context of the Reformed ecumenical community. It was no longer merely the biblical understanding of a black, Reformed church on the southernmost tip of the Cape of Good Hope. The theological understanding that Christians are witnesses to reconciliation as the heart of the gospel of Christ became an ecumenical matter throughout the Reformed tradition and churches.

It so happened that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church had its following General Synod in the spring of 1982. The coherence between the decision on apartheid in 1978 and the Ecumenical Report about the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1982 deepened the debate at the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. This time around, I was an ordained member of that synod. The synod was led to a next moment of faith. The key to this next moment of faith was the understanding that if all of this were true, then the theological justification of the racism, divisions, and the injustices of apartheid is both idolatry and a heresy. We were all deeply aware of the fact that we had entered a moment of faith that was even bigger than the

church itself. We were all overwhelmed by how insignificant we all were, and even our church was, in a moment that belonged only to the Holy Spirit. This confirmation by WARC affirmed for many of us the identity of being black and authentically Reformed. It has happened too easily that being Dutch and Reformed became the defining features for any person sharing this great tradition. Belhar widens the ownership of the Standards of Unity to both black and white in Reformed churches worldwide.

At this stage the synod turned to Karl Barth for wisdom. The answer was eloquently presented to synod by the late professor Gustav Bam: if a church has stumbled upon a heresy it has no option but to confess its faith in the face of such a false doctrine. This is how the idea of a new Reformed confession in the twentieth century emerged.

The synod, as they seem to do everywhere in the world, appointed a committee to investigate an appropriate response for such a context of faith. Within days the committee presented the synod with a concept confession of faith, known today as the Confession of Belhar.

### **The Significance of the Confession of Belhar**

Although the history of apartheid forms the context of the emergence of the Confession of Belhar, it is never mentioned within it. Instead it lifts up the heart of the Gospel as a testimony of hope in the context of the full human condition. Its foremost significance is that it helps us read our world—the condition humanity has maneuvered itself into, and especially the suffering that we see worldwide in a new way. Eventually, it speaks to all of us from the very heart of the gospel. It speaks of good news in a divided world where hatred reigns. Its message of hope is woven together in the gift of and the calling to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

1. The fact that the Confession of Belhar is the first to emerge from a Reformed church in Africa is in itself very significant. More so, is the fact that it resulted from the struggle of black people with the essence of Reformed faith. As such, one can say the Confession of Belhar arose from the underside of modern history. It represents a Christian view on racism, natural division, and suffering from the context of those who suffer the realities of such human conditions.
2. The Confession of Belhar contributes significantly to the nature of Reformed confessional statements. These statements comprise the Reformed Standards of Unity, namely the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619), and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619). The nature of Reformed confessions of faith is broadened by the Confession of Belhar to include the idea that Christians can derive confessional affirmations from social ethics. Fundamentally, it embraces the theological view that one's understanding of the church and of Christ expresses one's social ethics; that one's acting manifests one's way of being. The way you are, the Reformed Church in America tells the story of your international social ethics, and therefore, the reality of your lived confession.
3. The scandalous absence in the Reformed Standards of Unity is a confession on justice. The significant contribution of the Confession of Belhar to the Reformed Standards of Unity is also a matter of contributing content of faith. The content it adds, in complementing the existing standards of faith, is in its explicit confession of faith in God as a God of justice. The Confession of Belhar closes a loop in Reformed confessions by coming to terms with the revelation of God in relation to the realities of social justice. In this context it confesses that God is revealed as one who brings justice and true peace among human beings. Further, that in a world of injustice and enmity, God, in a special way, is revealed as the God of those who suf-

fer in general and also of those who suffer as a result of poverty and injustices. In this addition to the standards of faith the Confession of Belhar has made a significant contribution to the content of faith in the Reformed community at large.

4. The Confession of Belhar does not only complement the existing Reformed Standards of Unity, It also expresses a certain unity of confession for our modern world. As such it is a well woven confession. It weaves our faith in Christ as the bringer of reconciliation; our faith in the Spirit, who leads us in discipleship for the unity of the church worldwide; and our faith in God the parent, who is revealed as the “helper of the helpless” and “the parent of the orphan.” Our faith in the triune God is expressed here in the Confession of Belhar through the many ways in which we get to know God in God’s self-revelation. The real social and ecclesial implication of the Confession of Belhar is manifested in its woven unity of faith.
5. Belhar goes further than just being a confession of faith by indicating the different world that results from such an understanding of faith. It rejects the very nature of a world that requires or prescribes, explicitly or inexplicitly, that people should absolutize their natural, human, or social diversity and differences. It rejects the very nature of a church that does not embrace lived unity and living reconciliation as its way of being. It rejects a world and an ideology that justifies forms of injustice or a policy that refuses to resist such injustice.
6. Finally, the Confession of Belhar embraces the central notion in the Barmen Declaration: Jesus is Lord. With this confession one confirms the idea that nobody but Christ lords it over us and over our church. From this understanding grew our resistance against apartheid and our resistance against all powers that legitimate forms of injustices.

### **The Comfort and Challenge of the Confession of Belhar**

The Confession of Belhar is couched in doxological language. It honors God, embraces the comfort given in Jesus Christ, and glorifies divine grace as gift and calling. There is a difference between sentimental doxology and costly doxology. A doxology that costs you nothing is a denial of the cross of Jesus Christ. High sentimentality and low cost in our doxology contradicts the origins of Christianity and of the Confession of Belhar.

The doxology of our confessions, prayers, and hymns must translate into costly public living or deny sentimentally the very faith we express. Karl Barth held a strong opinion about this: “A declaration may be bold and clear, and centrally Christian...but so long as it remains theoretical, entailing no obligation or venture on the part of him [sic] who makes it, it is not confession and must not be mistaken for it” (KD,m,4,84).

It doesn’t matter anymore that the white Dutch Reformed Church accepts the Confession of Belhar as their own or that Reformed churches in Belgium, Germany, and the United States of America adopt Belhar if it will not change the way Christians live in this difficult world. As Karl Barth states: “There are good and perhaps strong Christian words which are not confessions because they are merely spoken among the like-minded where they cost nothing and do not help to make visible the contours of the Christian community” (KD,m,48).

The integrity of Christians is at stake, at this difficult juncture of humanity, in the public, national and international way they live their unity with God, each other, and the full human community.

Both Barmen and Belhar affirm this important tenant of Reformed theology: the church

belongs to Jesus Christ. This belonging should be reflected in the way the Christians live in this world. The notion of belonging distinguishes the church from any self-selected structure and from the natural forms of race, class, gender, nationality, and ideology. Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Barmen, and Belhar claim that our ecclesiology expresses our ethics. The way Christians live is a manifestation of their identity and their morality. Christians deny the deepest meaning of Christianity, not in their private lives, but in the way they live their unity, serve justice, and seek reconciliation.

The third thesis of Barmen and the clause on unity in Belhar are based on the Reformed claim that the church should not only express its obedience to Christ in its message, but also in its order, in its visible form and its structure. The unity in the church is not merely a matter of spirituality; it should be manifested in the church as public reality. Truth and form, doctrine and ethics, worship and social structure, and word and deed belong inextricably together. There is no room for contradiction here for whatever purpose, be it political, ideological, social, cultural, economic, or simply driven by events in the world.

These very important theological thoughts undergird the Christian comfort and calling. Christians take comfort in the knowledge and faith that they belong not to themselves, but to Christ. They seek to live this faith, build traditions of this belief, structure organizations to manifest this conviction, and order their communities to express it.

### **We Are All Called to Confess Belhar in Action**

It has been an honor to share these thoughts with you on this beautiful day of June 10, 2007, as a manifestation of my own journey of faith from 1978 to 2007, from Belhar (Cape Town), where we emerged with the first embryonic thoughts that gave birth to the Confession of Belhar, to Pella, Iowa, where you, as the synod of the Reformed Church in America, will consider your verdict on the comfort of and the challenge to confessing the same hope and obedience the world needs even today.

My brothers and my sisters, in considering the implications of the Confession of Belhar for the Reformed Church in America, you are actually challenged to confirm once again that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and thus, that justice and unity are the indispensable public duties of the church of Christ in this divided world and at this terrifying time. You will be saying to the world and to Americans, if you are seeking ecclesial support for racism, disunity, and injustice or if you want a theological justification for racism, division, and injustice...don't come looking for it in our church!

God bless you.

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## **Address to the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America**

The Rev. Dr. Piet J. Naude  
Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Our Lord, Jesus Christ,

It is indeed a great honor to bring you the greetings of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa. We hope and pray that your meeting in these days will be fruitful, and that you will experience the powerful presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit brought us into the truth of Christ, and upon this Spirit we continually rely for guidance in the will of God.

I bring these good wishes on behalf of Dr Coenie Burger, the immediate past moderator of our general synod. He has asked me to apologize for not being able to accept this invita-

tion in person. The words of my address are my own, though I trust it carries the confirmation of our moderator and the majority or our members.

I have been requested to speak on the topic of the Belhar Confession from the perspective of South Africa and the DRC in specific. Let me immediately say that although the DRC has not yet formally adopted the Belhar Confession, I was (as young theological student) convinced of the truth of this confession from the very beginning. A few years ago, I participated in an unofficial signing of the confession, and I really look forward to see it included in the new reuniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

You stand at the threshold of a very important decision regarding the confessional basis of the RCA. If the proposal before this synod is adopted, the path is cleared for the Belhar Confession to become a provisional—and in two years' time a permanent—part of your church's faith foundation.

This is potentially a momentous event, as you share with us the Three Formulae of Unity. The date of the last confession, the Canons of Dort, is 1619—almost four hundred years ago! It is amazing that Reformed churches could for such a long time refrain from a confession that declares the gospel anew, addressing the challenges of different times and contexts.

### **On the Way to Common Confession**

In ecumenical circles we talk about a threefold process in the reception of important ecumenical documents like creeds and confessions: from common explication and common recognition to common confession.

The first stage is common explication.

I was impressed with the thorough work you have done over the last decade to not only study Belhar amongst yourself, but also to allow others—including the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)—to bring their perspectives with regular intervals to your general synods. That you plan to send Belhar back to your congregations for another two years is also wise. This gives ample opportunity for explication in the life of congregations before a final decision is taken.

The second stage is common recognition.

The big question Reformed Christians ask when they receive a new confession is: Do we recognize in this confession the truth of the apostolic faith? And there are two ways to determine this: testing the consonance with Scripture, and judging the confession against earlier confessions. Only if the test against Scripture is passed do we “recognize” the truth.

There are numerous references in your study documents to the fact that Belhar speaks the Word of God for our times. You have already recognized what many others have seen: Belhar is the truth, because it is in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. (Reformers stand on the *quia* [“because”] view!).

You have also seen that Belhar confirms your earlier confessions. There is a deep consonance between Belhar and the Three Formulas of Unity (the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort). A detailed study also shows the strong bonds between Belhar and the most ecumenical of creeds, the Constantinopolitan-Nicene Creed from 381 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

However, true to the nature of confessions, they not merely repeat Scripture and earlier

confessions—they speak anew. They provide us with new insight into both the heresies and truths of our time. You were right to weigh Belhar and found that she speaks with—but also beyond—our earlier faith heritage. The way in which unity, reconciliation, and justice are confessed have never been done like this before. Our forebears also could not speak like this, because they were true to the demands of the gospel in their own time, like Belhar is true to our time.

Indeed, you have recognized Belhar as a gift of God to the church in our day. That in itself was and is a very important act. You have taken a small voice from the South seriously enough to say: “We see in your faith our faith too.” Thank you for doing that, and thereby strengthening the church in South Africa.

The third stage is common confession.

Actual confession can only happen if the prior explication and recognition have been sufficiently achieved. You are at this synod at the threshold between recognition and confession.

There is no logical or necessary movement from stages one and two to stage three. Many churches reflect on Belhar and recognize in it the gospel for our day, but nevertheless do not confess. My own church—regrettably—still stands at this point, but has fortunately decided to accept Belhar as confession in the process of church reunification.

There are a multitude of reasons for not confessing. Some are theological, and hang together with the view of confessions themselves:

Let us be reminded that “confession making” is a particular Reformed activity. The greater part of the Christian family (like the Lutherans, Catholics, and Orthodox sisters and brothers) can in their view not accept new creeds/confessions; and others do in principle not accept confessions at all (like the Free- and non-creedal churches). With the rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, confessions moved even lower on the agenda of the church.

There are also non-theological reasons for not confessing, although they tend to be presented, and sometimes are camouflaged, in theological language.

Some see in Belhar a political witness, true to the times and in accordance with Scripture. It should be read in conjunction with, and on the same level as, *The Witness to the Peoples of South Africa* (1968) and the influential *Kairos Document* from 1985, but not on the level of a confession.

Others see Belhar as too contextual, too specifically focused on the South Africa of the 1980s to qualify as a confession of the ecumenical church. For them Belhar is an important declaration like *Barmen* and the *Leuenberger Concordie*, from which we learn how churches spoke in their specific situation, but it is not necessarily to be more widely confessed.

There are Reformed Christians who state that Belhar does not witness to the whole gospel like, for example, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, but only highlights important themes from the gospel. It is therefore a partial reflection of the gospel, like a good sermon, but it is not a confession.

Yes, sisters and brothers, I do not take your possible act of confession at this synod for granted. In fact, from my experiences in the DRC, I speak to you with holy fear and trembling. Experience and study over many years have brought a fundamental insight:

The act of confessing is a gift and a miracle. It happens because the Spirit is like a wind: you hear its sound, but you do not know whither it will blow. We confess not, taught Karl Barth, because we think it is a good thing to confess. We confess because we have no other option. We confess because God has hit us on the mouth and we cry out: *Credo!* (I believe).

### **Motivation from Four Contexts**

Why would I prompt and support you to actually confess? Why is it so important that you move beyond recognition to common confession? Let me attempt to motivate this from the four contexts of the church in South Africa, in the U.S.A., in the broader ecumenical family of churches, and the context of the RCA specifically.

#### **The South African Context**

I am glad to report that the family of Dutch Reformed churches has recently renewed their common commitment to reunification in one church after the establishment of separate churches for different race/cultural groups in 1881, 1911, and 1952. At its general synod this very past week, the Dutch Reformed Church clearly said that the debate around unity is not longer about “if” but about “how.”

Belhar has no doubt complicated that process, as those who might resist reunification can use Belhar as insurmountable obstacle: “We cannot so easily reunite with a church that now stands on a different confessional basis.” From those in the URCSA who have accepted Belhar, the counter-claim is clear: “No reunification is possible without Belhar.”

The reunification is now planned to include Belhar in the bigger reunited church, although it will not be required that every pastor undersign the confession on the first day. We are sure that the confession will grow in the new church through preaching, liturgy, catechesis, and experience.

If the RCA would decide to confess Belhar, it would give our long and painful process a great impetus. It would—apart from the *Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België*—be the first full adoption of the confession outside South Africa. This will send a powerful message that Belhar has been judged to be worthy of acceptance on equal footing with our existing Reformed heritage. It will tell that *semper reformanda*—so often repeated—does also include the reformation and renewal of our confessional basis.

Although South Africa has undergone a relative peaceful transition to democracy and we have a stable constitutional state, the challenges of unity, reconciliation, and specifically economic justice are still looming large. Your confession would show that South Africa and its new challenges are not forgotten by the churches in the northern hemisphere. Your confession would be a sign of solidarity that you stand with us in the new struggles we face, as you and others stood with us in our struggle against apartheid theology.

Yes, you would do it for our sake.

#### **The U.S.A. Context**

I had the privilege of having been a research guest in your country for the past six months. This is too vast and complex a nation to make quick and general conclusions. But allow me in all humility to say why I believe you also need to confess the issues taken up in Belhar.

## Unity

The freedom on which the country has been built has turned into a libertarian spirit in the church. Unity and reunification amongst those churches that could and should belong together are not always pursued with the necessary vigor. Schismatic actions and denominational divisions are not seen as counter-witness to the prayer of Christ in John 17, but rather as expression of religious freedom. Mission is replaced by market competition amongst churches where no new Christians are brought in, but existing ones “recirculated.” A situation can be reached where religious consumerism supersedes sound theology in a scramble to attract people and satisfy their religious and experiential needs.

The sensitivities of Belhar—that Christ has only one body and gave his own flesh to bring unity, and that visible unity in freedom is both a gift and a task—are urgently needed amongst churches in the U.S.A.

## Reconciliation

Recent events have shown the deep divisions in this great nation. Racism “is still endemic to our society” and there is a general denial of history under the cloak of sentimental, Hollywood-style “universal culture,” states William H. Willimon.<sup>2</sup> There is still the continued need for a “black history month,” and black bodies are—according to James Cone—still lynched today “whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them.”<sup>3</sup>

The proclamation of Belhar that reconciliation is possible in Christ and that cultural and other “natural” differences are gifts for the upbuilding of church and society should be heard loudly and clearly all across America.

## Justice

As undisputed economic, military, and technological leader of the world, there rests a huge responsibility on the U.S.A. to use its immense power wisely. There remains, therefore, a crucial task for theologians, ethicists, and church leaders in the U.S. to urge the political powers of the day to actively support global ecological initiatives and in a rational manner renegotiate the terms of global trade toward a fairer and more just system.

Let us be reminded that the interrelations of security, politics, and religion have shown themselves to be the main building blocks of inhuman “Christian” ideologies in the twentieth century. Apartheid is an infamous example of this.

Let us follow Jesus in his openness to the physical and spiritual needs of those marginalized by culture, religion, or economics. We hear his teaching that it is better to give than to receive, and that the eschatological judgment will be based on our action toward the weakest and the smallest (Matthew 25). In the context of a self-serving agenda by the religious leaders of his day, Jesus teaches that those who cling to life will surely lose it, and that those who show mercy to others are blessed (Matthew 5).

The revelation of God as “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged,” so eloquently confessed in the Belhar Confession (Article 4), is still as urgent as ever before.

## The Catholic or Ecumenical Church

Just a few short remarks about our global situation:

## Unity

If the churches in the world cannot show greater visibly unity, the world will not believe that God sent Christ as the savior of all humankind (John 17). Church union and reunion dialogues, dialogues amongst the great traditions of the Christian family with a view to celebrate common baptism and communion, are absolutely crucial in a world that yearns for precedents that unity is possible amidst diversity and deep historical separations. If we do not achieve more, Christ is recrucified, and the power of the gospel denied.

## Reconciliation

If the churches in the world do not demonstrate that we are counter-societies where there is no longer Jew and Greek, man and woman, boss and slave, how will the world believe in the power of reconciliation in Christ? If the churches are merely mirror-images of societal divisions between rich and poor, black and white, man and woman, educated and illiterate, we have become cultural-religious clubs that play church-church, but do not practically demonstrate God's embracing love (Gal. 3:26-28). I often marvel at the fact that sociology ("birds of a feather") is stronger than theology ("body of Christ") when it comes to the practice of being church.

## Justice

If the churches in the world merely accept global economic, cultural, and ecological injustices as if the powers behind these new configurations are blind, immutable laws of economics and politics, how will justice be established? Or have we resigned ourselves to the fact that many humanist efforts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a clear vision have supplanted the churches in the spheres of public life?

## The Context of the RCA

Looking from the outside, Belhar has the potential to strengthen and sharpen the purpose and mission of the RCA. I think specifically of the purpose "to minister to the total life of all peoples...by all Christian good works," and the following of Christ in mission, "in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

This will require discipleship, an important theme of the Belhar Confession. Discipleship is not often mentioned as a core theme in Belhar. There is, however, no other way to read the fifth article, which calls those who confess to turn their confession into reality.

A confession without action is like faith without works. The best way to dis-empower Belhar is to accept it as confession and then nothing changes afterward; to see it as an interesting, exotic product "out of Africa" with some curiosity value, but not as transformative Word of God.

I therefore wish to remind you: Confessing Belhar will raise serious questions for the RCA. You are best able to formulate them. My restricted view allows for the following:

- Do you love the unity of Christ's body more than your own tradition and history? Or have you become a typical denominational church that sees the boundaries of your church as the boundaries of the kingdom and of your own Christian identity?
- Are you willing to become a truly multicultural church that openly witnesses against racism, sexism, and xenophobia no matter who is involved, and no matter how sensitive such witness may be politically?

- Are you—a rich, blessed, and middle class church in the North—willing to stand where God stood in Christ: with the outcast, marginalized, and socially marginalized members of American society and elsewhere in the world?
- Are you willing to follow Christ, who did not cling to his Godhead, but humbled himself even unto the cross? Are you willing be a kenotic church, a *doulos* (slave) church for the sake others?

### Conclusion

We all know that confessions in the earliest church did not start with dogmatic statements after careful deliberation by a synod commission. No, they were doxological utterances in reaction to the resurrected Christ. The early church did not “think up” the idea of Jesus Christ as Lord. This earliest confession was a reaction in praise and worship of their encounter with the post-Easter Jesus.

They could also not foresee what the ecclesial, political, and economic consequences of that *kurios*-confession would be. In a sense, the act of confession is—humanly speaking—an irresponsible action, because you never know what might follow. When the DRM Church confessed in 1982 they and us in the DRC also did not know what would follow. It was politically dangerous and seen by some as ecclesial schism. We now know it was indeed a prophetic witness.

But exactly for reasons of uncertainty, Belhar is a confession both of faith and *in faith*. Because of his faith, the Scriptures tell us, Abraham left his land and his family *without knowing where he would come*. He sacrificed Isaac, his only son, because in faith he knew that the God of his faith-promise would provide—even if he (Abraham) did not know how (Hebrews 11).

That is why we need to keep in mind the foundational theme of Belhar—its reconfirmation of our Trinitarian faith, explicit in the first and last articles, and implicit in the three middle articles: We are one because God is one; we seek reconciliation, because the three Persons of the Trinity exist in perfect, eternal co-existence; we seek justice, because the Trinity exhibits justice; and we are disciples exactly to make known the name of this God to the entire world.

The Triune God—so eloquently confessed in Article 1 and praised in Article 5—is the One who not only called the church into existence, but is also the One who will keep it, now and forever more.

In the name of this God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—I beseech you to confess. We in South Africa—and elsewhere—wait eagerly to hear good news from the RCA.

May God bless you.

Piet J. Naude

<sup>1</sup> Piet Naude, 2004. “Confessing the one faith: Theological resonance between the creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD).” *Scriptura* 85, 35-53.

<sup>2</sup> “Why we all can’t just get along: Racism as a Lenten issue,” *Theology Today* (53/4, January 1997), 485-490.

<sup>3</sup> “Strange fruit. The cross and the lynching tree,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Winter 2007), 47-55.