

## **The Belhar Confession: born in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa**

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### *Abstract*

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. In this article attention will be given to the establishment of racially segregated churches by the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) exclusively for people of colour and the indigenous people of South Africa. Secondly cognisance will be taken of the impact of the ecumenical movement's (Reformed Ecumenical Council [REC], World Council of Churches [WCC] and World Alliance of Reformed Churches [WARC]) discourse on racism upon the ultimate drafting and adopting of the Belhar Confession. Finally, I will focus on the Belhar Confession as a guiding light for social justice issues, especially racism, both in the global south and the global north.

### **Introduction**

The Belhar Confession is a 20th-century confession which comes from a church in Africa and from the southern hemisphere. Born in the southern African struggle against apartheid it has wide implications beyond its original context. Apartheid was institutionalised in the laws, policies and structures in South Africa. Apartheid ("separate development") is according to Boesak not only a political policy, but constitutes also a pseudo-religious ideology (Boesak 1977:3-7). Apartheid, in its application through racist structures, led to exclusive privileges for the white section of the population at the expense of the blacks. Apartheid created a situation of injustice and oppression, large-scale deportation to racially segregated group areas and caused havoc to family life and suffering to millions of South Africans.

History shows that the Belhar Confession is growing into a wider tradition. 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. The Standards of Unity say little about the centrality of unity, reconciliation and justice in the church which are so eloquently expressed in the Belhar Confession. Numerous authors covered the historical background, the adoption and the reception of the Belhar Confession.<sup>1</sup> These contributions focus mostly on advocacy of the acceptance of the Belhar Confession, unity, reconciliation or justice issues. This article, however, will focus on the Belhar Confession as guiding light in the discourse on race, ethnicity, apartheid, the unification of racial segregated churches and so on, in both the global south and the global north. In order to do so the article will mainly concentrate on archival material: acts, agendas, minutes and newspaper articles covering this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> See also e.g. Boesak, A.A. *Black and Reformed*. Bellville: Skotaville Publishers. 1984. Botha, J. The Belhar Confession 1986 Belhar: Yes or no? in *Theological Forum* Vol. XIX, No. 2, July 1991. Botha, J. & Naude, P. *Op pad met Belhar. Goeie nuus vir gister, vandag en more*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 1998. Cloete, G.D. & Smit, D.J. (eds.) *A moment of truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1984. Botman, H.R. "Is Blood Thicker than Justice? The Legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa," in Lugo, L.E. *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, 342-361. Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000. Botman, H.R. "Gereformeerde en die Belydenis van Belhar," in Boesak, W.A. & Fourie, P.J.A. *Vraagtekens oor Gereformeerdeheid?*. Belhar: LUS, 1998. Kinghorn, J. On the theology of Church and society in the DRC. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 70, March 1990. pp 21-36. Kinghorn, J. (ed.) *Die NG Kerk en apartheid*. Johannesburg: Macmillan. 1986. Naude, P. Die Belharstryd in ekumeniese perspektief. *NGTT* xxxviii/ pp 226-243, 1997. Naude, P. The Dutch Reformed Church's role in the context of transition in South Africa. Main streams of academic research. *Scriptura* 76, pp 87-106, 2001. Naude, P. Confessing Nicea today? Critical questions from a South African perspective. *Scriptura* 79, 47-54, 2002. Naude, P. "Confessing the one faith: Theological resonance between the creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD)." *Scriptura* 85. 2004. Schrottenboer, P.G. The Belhar Confession 1986. *Theological Forum* Vol. XIX, No. 2, July 1991. Smit D.J. *Eenheid, versoening, geregtigheid*. "To live ... as if it were not!" , with R Botman, *JTSA*, pp 73-80. Dec 1989 ; "Seeing the power of Christ ... above all rule and authority and dominion..." (Eph 1:20-23). *JTSA*, June 1988, with GD Cloete; "The symbol of reconciliation and ideological conflict", in *Reconciliation and construction* (ed. W S Vorster), Pretoria: University of South Africa, pp 79-112. June 1988; "Resistance and Hope", *JTSA* 54, 61-71 1986; "Die droom van Bybelse geregtigheid", *Scriptura* No 15, pp 51-70. 1985; "A status confessionis in South Africa?" *JTSA* Vol. 47, 21-46; "... in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged..." in *JTSA* 53, pp 53-66, pp 127-150. 1984; "What does status confessionis mean?" in *JTSA* 53, pp 7-32. 1984 "...op 'n besondere wyse die God van die noodlydende, die arme en die veronregte..." , in *JTSA* 50, pp 62-75, pp 143-159.; "Wat beteken status confessionis?", in *JTSA* 50, 16-40, 137-142. 1984.

## The ecumenical movement paved the way

In 1652 the Dutch formed a station at the Cape and simultaneously introduced Reformed theology to the Cape. Up until 1875 people of mixed descent as well as from African heritage were fully fledged members of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA). On 29 April 1829 the DRCSA Synod dealt with an enquiry from the Somerset West congregation on separate facilities and services for congregants of mixed descent. At the infamous synod of the DRCSA during 1857 separate services for "coloured" members were approved. This decision led to the division of Christians on the basis of colour at the table of the Lord as a matter of practice and policy. This decision can be seen as a denial of the spirit of holy communion. The holy communion, by its nature, expresses the unity of believers in fellowship with Christ and each other. In 1881 the DRCSA constituted the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) exclusively for people of colour. During the 20th century churches were established for blacks in the different provinces: for example NG Sendingkerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat (1910), NG Sendingkerk van Transvaal (1931), NG Bantoeerk in Kaapland (1951) and NG Sendingkerk van Natal (1952). These four churches unified during 1963 in order to constitute the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). In 1968 the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) constituted a reformed church, namely the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), for descendants of immigrants from Asia. According to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) it should be borne in mind that the establishment of the racially segregated churches (DRMC, DRCA and RCA) did not flow from any desire of the members of these churches, but was the direct result of racism within the DRC (*Submission of the URCSA to the TRC 1997:2*). During 1974 these racially segregated churches decided to work towards church reunification (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1975:253*).

Both the DRMC and the DRC had been members of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Race relations had been long on the agenda of the REC, founded in 1946. From 1958 on the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) (the former name of the REC) declared there was no Scriptural evidence for or against mixed-race marriages. In 1968 the RES took the additional step of saying that the state may not prohibit mixed-race marriages. In 1968 the RES declared that the unity of the body of Christ should come to expression in common worship, including Holy Communion, among Christians regardless of race. The RES/REC held a series of consultations with South Africans. In 1971, 1978, 1981, 1982 and 1989, the RES/REC Interim Committees met with churches in South Africa to discuss race relations. During 1980 the RES called on its members to work to remove the structures of racial injustice and to use their influence with the South African Government to effect such changes. The RES did not declare that the South African churches were de facto guilty of heresy, but asked the South African member churches to answer whether this applied to them (Van Houten 1997:3). It set the table for the discussions on race, ethnicity and apartheid at the synods of above-mentioned racially segregated churches.

The WCC's Programme to Combat Racism was launched in 1969 in response to a 1968 mandate from the Council's Fourth Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Programme to Combat Racism played a highly visible and controversial role in international debate about white minority rule in South Africa (Adler 1974:1-98). The white Afrikaans Reformed churches of South Africa through the years have worked out in considerable detail both the apartheid policy itself and the theological and moral justification for the system of apartheid. This situation brought a particular challenge to the church in South Africa. In 1964 the WARC General Council, held in Frankfurt, declared that racism is nothing less than a betrayal of the gospel. The exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church, contradicts the very nature of the church. This programme was extensively discussed at the DRCM Synod 1982 where a *status confessionis* had been declared.

The WARC General Council held in Nairobi during 1970 confirmed that the church must recognise racism for the idolatry it is. "The church that by doctrine and/or practice affirms segregation of peoples (e.g. racial segregation) as a law for its life cannot be regarded as an authentic member of the body of Christ."<sup>2</sup> The DRC as well as the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk (NHK) did not pay attention to the above declarations of the WARC. During August 1982 the WARC General Council in Ottawa declared that the apartheid situation in South Africa with the theological and moral justification for the system of apartheid constitutes a *status confessionis*, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God is a theological heresy.

*Status confessionis* meant it was considered impossible to disagree on the issue of apartheid without the integrity of the common confession as Reformed Church being seriously endangered. According to Dirkie Smit, one of the co-drafters of the Belhar Confession, the expression *status confessionis* means "that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church or a group of churches judges that a situation has arisen, a moment of truth has come, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most basic confession concerning the Christian gospel, is at stake, so that they feel obliged to testify and act against that situation" (Cloete & Smit 1985:22). The

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<sup>2</sup> WARC Ottawa 1982, *Proceedings of the 21st General Council, Geneva*: <http://www.warc.ch/dcw/bs25/11.html>.

declaration of *status confessionis*, like in the case of the theological justification of apartheid, becomes necessary when the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake. The aforementioned decisions of the REC, WARC and WCC on racism and apartheid paved the way for the declaration of a *status confessionis* by the DRMC during September 1982. The WARC declaration on apartheid was reaffirmed by the WARC General Council in Seoul in 1989.<sup>3</sup>

### **The drafting and acceptance of the Belhar Confession**

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982 by the DRMC, has its roots in the above-mentioned racially segregated churches' struggle against apartheid. The deliberations between the DRMC, DRCA and RCA on apartheid, racism, the migrant labour system, apartheid laws and so on played a critical role in the ultimate drafting of the Belhar Confession by the DRMC in 1982. Already in 1978 the DRMC Synod declared that apartheid (separate development), and the moral and theological justification of it, is a ridicule of the gospel and a theological heresy. The racism of apartheid was seen as a structural and institutional sin. The 1982 DRMC Synod, which took place shortly after the 1982 WARC General Council, declared that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis* in which integrity of the gospel and the Reformed faith was at stake. The DRMC affirmed that apartheid contradicts the very nature of the church and denounced apartheid ("separate development") as a heresy (*Agenda en Handelingne NGSK* 1982:21). The DRMC reasserted that apartheid is a misrepresentation of the gospel. This led ultimately to the declaration of a *status confessionis*. Professor Gustav Bam, lecturer in Pastoral Theology at the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), elucidated that the acceptance of the *status confessionis* should inevitably led to the formulation of a confession (*Agenda en Handelingne NGKA* 1983:22).

The Synod appointed a committee, consisting of two ministers delegated to the Synod, Reverend Dr Alan Boesak and Reverend Isak Mentor, as well as three lecturers from the UWC, Professors Dirkie Smit, Jaap Durand and Gustav Bam, to draft a concept confession of faith, known today as the Belhar Confession. The name Belhar in the Confession refers to the suburb of Belhar (in the Cape) where the Synod met. Within one day the committee presented the Synod with a draft; according to Murray La Vita, a journalist from *Die Burger*, Professor Smit played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Belhar Confession. The Confession of Belhar was born in a moment of truth. The draft Confession dealt with three issues: (1) the unity of the church, (2) reconciliation in Christ, and (3) the justice of God. At the time the DRMC deliberately did not mention apartheid, racism and ethnicity in the Confession. The Synod approved the draft as well as an official accompanying letter which explained among other things the attitudes and expectations behind the decision to draft a confession. The DRMC embarked on a long church judicial process of discernment by the local congregations of the DRMC in order to accept the Belhar Confession as part of their confessional basis. The Belhar Confession was tabled for final adoption at the DRMC Synod 1982. In the Belhar Confession the DRMC denounced the claims of an unjust and oppressive government as well as the theological justification of the system of apartheid. The Belhar Confession was a response of the church in faith at a time of tremendous challenge and adversity. The DRMC committed themselves to a common witness to injustice and equality in society and to unity at the table of the Lord. The Belhar Confession's great strength is its Christological foundation for the unity of the church.

The Belhar Confession was ratified and adopted in 1986. Solemnly on Friday 26 September 1986 in the synod hall in Belhar, 399 of the 470 delegates of the DRMC rose to express their endorsement of the Belhar Confession. Altogether 71 delegates voted against the adoption of the Belhar Confession, including Reverend Isak Mentor, Assessor of the Synod, ironically one of the co-drafters of the Belhar Confession. Reverend Mentor's proposal that the Belhar Confession should not be accepted but should rather be referred for the greatest possible unity to all other Dutch Reformed Churches, in order to reach consensus within the Dutch Reformed family, was rejected by an overwhelming majority. The acceptance of the Belhar Confession held profound judicial implications for all clergy of the DRMC. Eventually it was expected of all ministers to sign the Belhar Confession. The Synod, however, decided to allow pastoral sensitivity to those who were not ready to accept the Belhar Confession. The Belhar Confession was a response of the church in faith at a time of tremendous challenge and adversity. Professor Bam affirmed at the Synod that the retention of the Confession would not hinder or accelerate the unification process between the DRC and the DRMC (*Die Burger*, 29 September 1986).

The DRMC requested the REC Assembly of 1988 in Harare to include the Belhar Confession in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the REC constitution, to which all member churches had to subscribe. The REC Harare Assembly asked the member churches to consider accepting the Belhar Confession and to report their decisions to the REC Assembly in 1992. REC members were obliged to evaluate the acceptability of

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<sup>3</sup> Seoul 1989, *Proceedings of the 22nd General Council*, ed. Edmond Perret, <http://www.warc.ch/dcw/bs25/11.html>.

the Belhar Confession and to answer the request in the affirmative or negative (Botha 1991:1). None of the member churches answered in the affirmative in 1992.

### **Reception of the Belhar Confession in South Africa**

#### *Dutch Reformed Church in Africa*

The Synod of the DRCA dealt with the question of the Group Areas Act, migrant labour, the Homeland policy, mixed marriages, the reunification of the DRC family and so on from 1975. The reunification of the racially segregated churches was then stated as the ideal. During the previous decade the DRCA had claimed they never made a formal evaluation of the Belhar Confession or decided to accept the Belhar Confession as part of the united church (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 2007:145, 184-185, 223). History shows the opposite. At the sixth General Synod of the DRCA constituted in Barkly West in 1983 a study document of the DRMC on the church and apartheid was tabled. It entailed a petition of the DRMC to the DRCA to assist the DRMC in the *status confessionis* and to endorse the draft Belhar Confession (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1983:19-28). The DRCA Synod was not willing to take this step, but took note of the DRMC petition and referred it with existing decisions about church unity to a commission for further study (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1983:379).

The DRCA Synod 1987 referred the Belhar Confession to the Commission for Scripture and Confession in order to decide the desirability of accepting the Confession by the DRCA and to discern to what extent acceptance by the DRCA may promote or delay the unification of the Dutch Reformed family. The commission was tasked to table their findings during the recess to the Federal Council of the Reformed Churches in South Africa and to serve the next DRCA Synod with proposals to include the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1987:413-414). On 1 October 1990 the extraordinary session of the DRCA General Synod was constituted in Cape Town with representatives from the six regional synods: Orange Free State, Phororo, Southern Transvaal, Northern Transvaal, Cape Province and Natal (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1990:205-298), who approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRCA (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1990:28-30, 49-50, 142-149). At the 1991 DRCA Synod, article 36.1 of the DRCA church order was amended in order to make the Belhar Confession part of the confessional basis of the DRCA. In doing so the DRCA became the first church to include the Belhar Confession in their Standard of Faith. In 1998 this decision was ruled *ultra vires* by the Supreme Court. According to Appeal Judge Harms the confession of faith of the DRCA could only be amended in compliance with the three formal requirements in article 36.1 of the church order of the DRCA, namely (i) consultation of all churches of the DRC family, (ii) a two-thirds majority vote in favour of the change by each regional synod separately and only then (iii) a two-thirds majority vote of the General Synod (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (OVS), Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (Phororo) vs. Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika (case no 536/96)*). Two thirds of each regional synod should have voted ahead of time in favour of the proposed amendment. The involvement of the regional synods in this regard means in effect that two thirds of all congregations should vote in advance in favour of the proposed amendment. The DRCA repeatedly claimed, especially after 1998, that they could not accept the Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis of the envisioned united church.

#### *Reformed Church in Africa*

Following the WARC decision in 1982 the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) rejected the theological justification of apartheid as unscriptural and any attempt to support it in practice as unchristian. The Synod refrained from labelling apartheid as a heresy (*Acts RCA* 1986:31). The RCA Synod 1990 declared that it could identify with the content of *Belhar Confession*, but could not accept it as a confession on the same level as the Standards of Unity, because the social issues to which the Belhar Confession refers are subject to constant change. According to the RCA The Belhar Confession is more doctrinal in nature (*Agenda RCA* 1990:3; *Agenda RCA* 1990:40-41). The RCA Synod 1990 committed itself to strive for a united, nonracial reformed church in southern and central Africa (*Acts RCA* 1990:34). The RCA Synod 1998 reaffirmed its belief that church unity was of paramount importance and urgency, and requested that the Laudium Declaration should be an integral part of the life and ministry in the envisaged united church (*Acts RCA* 1998:73). The Synod 1998 also recommended that the Belhar Confession should form part of the confession of faith of the envisaged united church. The RCA changed their viewpoint on the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis at the consecutive synod.

#### *The URCSA and the Belhar Confession*

From 1881 up to April 1994 four racially divided churches existed in South Africa. On 14 April 1994 two racially segregated churches, namely the DRMC and the DRCA, unified in order to constitute the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) (*Agenda en Handelinge VGKSA* 1997:26,504). The amalgamation of the two churches represents a watershed in the history of the DRMC and the DRCA. This union represents a *kairos* moment in the life of the church in which it departs from apartheid and contradicts the justification of racially divided churches (*Submission of the URCSA to the TRC* 1997:2). At their founding synod the URCSA approved the Belhar Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619) and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619) as their confessional basis (*Agenda en Handelinge VGKSA* 1997:26,504). With regard to the Belhar Confession in 2005 the URCSA affirmed that the Holy Spirit had enabled them to rise above political realities, economic hardship, social injustices and the denial of their very humanity (*Handeling VGKSA* 2005:151-152). The URCSA works with the premise that the Belhar Confession is the acid test for the DRC's renunciation of apartheid. URCSA's proposition is that the Belhar Confession should be a full confession of the envisioned united church and that everyone will work together to help the church to grow to a full acceptance of the Confession (*Agenda General Synod URCSA* 2008:533-534).

### *The Dutch Reformed Church*

The Belhar Confession challenged the DRC on their moral and theological justification of apartheid, which therefore became an object of intense discussion within the DRC and URCSA over the past 25 years. According to Piet Meiring when the DRC General Synod convened in Pretoria, in October 1982, most delegates clearly did not know what to do with the *status confessionis* and the draft Belhar Confession (Meiring 1991:1). Eventually a resolution was passed, stating the "sadness and distress" the Synod felt at the "unfair accusations of theological heresy and idolatry leveled at the DRC", but without analysing the theological merits of the accusations contained in the Belhar Confession. Synod, however, declared itself willing to conduct future discussions with the DRMC on these and related issues (Meiring 1991:1). The WARC General Assembly 1992 in addition to calling apartheid a heresy, suspended the DRC and the NHK (i.e. sending delegates to general council and holding membership in departmental committees and commissions). In 1982 the WARC stated that the full privileges of membership would be restored to these two churches when the following changes had taken place:

- a. Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from holy communion.
- b. Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid ("separate development").
- c. Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the church to dismantling this system in both church and politics.

In October 1986 the DRC formally approved a new policy statement regarding the sociopolitical issues in South Africa, entitled *Church and Society – a testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church*. The DRC also withdrew its objections to mixed-race marriages in 1986. The DRC, however, was still not ready to accept the Belhar Confession. The DRC expressed concerns about article 3 of the Confession where God is declared to be "in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged". The 1990 DRC General Synod considered the Belhar Confession not to be in conflict with the contents of the Reformed Standards of Unity, namely the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619) and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619).

However, the Synod considered *Church and Society* to contain its answer to those paragraphs containing "rejections" in the Belhar Confession and presumed that the accusations levelled against the DRC in the Confession were no longer applicable. The Synod resolved that the Belhar Confession as well as *Church and Society* should be utilised in future deliberations on church unification between the two churches (*Acta Algemene Sinode NGK* 1990). In 1994 the DRC reported to the WARC that they had complied with the above-mentioned requirements of the WARC. However they were still not willing to accept the Belhar Confession. The DRC Synod 1998 stated that the substantive content of the Confession (commitment to the biblical witness about the Triune God, the unity of the church, and justice and reconciliation) was widely accepted (*Acta Algemene Sinode NGK* 1998). **The** DRC presumed that acceptance did not imply all pastors, church councils and members of the envisaged unified church would be obliged to endorse it as a confession.

Until 2004 the DRC strongly objected to the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as an official confession of faith. The DRC Synod of 2004 approved a consultative process and referred the decision on the Confession to the synods, church councils and congregations for comment and further recommendations. The Synod also recommended that the Confession should be one of the confessions in the reunified church. The DRC believes that the differences over the Belhar Confession are mainly about historical, emotional and symbolic factors rather than the material content itself (*Acta Algemene Sinode NGK* 2004). The church unification process between the DRC and URCSA came to a stalemate during 2005 after the DRC's General

Synod of 2004 had decided not all members of a reunited church would be required to endorse the Confession. The Executive Committees of the DRCA, the URCSA, the RCA and the DRC met during 23-25 April 2007 at Achterbergh near Krugersdorp and reached consensus on the confessional basis, namely that the Belhar Confession should not be a precondition for church unity; discussions between all four churches with the purpose of agreeing to the Biblical content of the Belhar Confession and writing a joint commentary on it should continue; it would not be expected of members and ministers who are not ready or willing to underwrite it as a confession. The growth to a full acceptance of the Belhar Confession was seen as an integral part of the processes of the envisaged unified church. The DRC Synod of 2007 did not approve the proposals at Achterbergh. The indecisiveness of the DRC about the Belhar Confession led ultimately to the declaration of a moratorium on unity talks by the URCSA General Synod of 2008. The URCSA's presupposition was that the DRC departed from the points of consensus reached at the Achterbergh consultations. The decisions of the DRC Synod 2007 were seen as a rejection of the Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis of the envisaged united church. Therefore, the 2008 URCSA General Synod put a moratorium on the re-unification talks between the URCSA and DRC (*Acts URCSA 2008*). The General Synod mandated the executive to invite the WARC to facilitate the process of re-unification of these churches who were both members of WARC. A meeting between the WARC, URCSA and DRC took place on 4--6 March 2009 in Benoni. The result was a statement issued by the WARC delegation. Five key principles which emerged, particularly following the WARC declaration in 1982 that apartheid is a sin and its theological justification a heresy, are emphasised in the declaration:

Churches must openly invite all people, regardless of race or class, into full participation in the life of the church. Further, they must welcome all believers to the Lord's Table. We reject apartheid in church or society as contrary to the will of God. We call on all churches to reach out with justice and compassion to the victims of apartheid. We are committed to pastorally accompanying the churches of the Dutch Reformed family through the reunification process. We support the Belhar Confession as a common confession of the reunited church.

At the DRC Western and Southern Cape Synod of 2011 in Goudini (with about 700 delegates) the meeting dealt among other things with the Belhar Confession and church unification. The following proposal, which they brought to the table, was debated and adopted:

Synod is convinced that the Biblical claim for justice to all people, reconciliation among people and the unity of the church belongs to the essence of the Gospel. The Confession of Belhar expresses the Gospel claim for justice, reconciliation and unity in a different way than the other Confessions of the church. The Synod, as a church meeting, adopts the Confession of Belhar and therefore requests the General Synod to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional base of the DRC in a church orderly way.

The Synod decided the matter with ballot papers – 544 for and 124 against. Four ballot papers were spoilt. This meant 80% of the counted vote was in favour of the Belhar Confession.

Several meetings between the URCSA and the DRC leadership were held from 2009 until 2012 where Dr Jerry Pillay, president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), acted as a facilitator. The engagement between the URCSA and the DRC under the facilitation of the WCRC resulted in a decision by the DRC General Synod in Boksburg on 13 October 2011 to embark on a "church orderly" process in order to include the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRC. The Moderamen was tasked to implement the necessary "church orderly" processes in that regard. The Synod also proposed that the Belhar Confession should become one of the articles of faith of the restored denomination. The decision of the DRC, however, does not imply that all congregations, ministers, members of church councils, and members of the new denomination should automatically underwrite the Belhar Confession as an article of faith. The "church orderly" process stipulated in the church order of the DRC General Synod entails that two thirds of all DRC church councils must also approve these amendments with a two-thirds majority, thereafter each regional synod of the DRC should approve the amendment of the church order with a two-thirds majority, and finally the General Synod should approve the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRC with a two-thirds majority. In the light of what happened the URCSA was challenged to look at the moratorium again. The moratorium highlighted the issues which stand between the DRC and URCSA on the road to church unification, namely the acceptance of the Belhar Confession, the commitment to unity, and restorative justice and reconciliation. The 2012 URCSA General Synod noted with gratitude that the DRC Synod 2011 showed its intention to walk the path of authentic unity by accepting the Belhar Confession. The Synod therefore resolved to revoke the 2008 moratorium decision. The Synod also instructed all the regional synods, presbyteries and congregations to engage their counterparts within the DRC, DRCA and RCA on the basis of the Belhar Confession (*URCSA*

*General Synod Minutes* 2012:11-12). Over the past 25 years the Belhar Confession had surely been a guiding light to keep the discussions on church unification and restorative justice and reconciliation on track.

## **Reception of the Belhar Confession abroad**

The URCSA gave the Belhar Confession to the worldwide Reformed community as a gift and requested Reformed churches around the world to consider adopting the Confession so as to make it a part of the global Reformed confessional basis. Over the past 17 years a few churches abroad have embarked on the reception of the Belhar Confession. The Confession's relevance is not confined to southern Africa. It addresses key issues of concern to all churches, namely unity of the church and unity among all people irrespective of race or ethnicity, reconciliation within church and society and God's justice. The Belhar Confession helps the church to approach issues of justice in their own context and as such has engendered vigorous debate about the nature of confessions and the nature of the ministry of the church in the world. Various churches, based on their own historical moments, embarked on decisions to adopt the Belhar Confession as part of their confessional basis. Thus far it has been approved by the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (ERCA), the Protestant United Church (Belgium), the Reformed Church (Iglesia Reformada Dominicana [Dominican Republic]) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). [The Belhar Confession](#) has been recommended for reflection, study and response as a means of deepening these churches' commitment to dealing with racism and disunity.

### *Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa*

The Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (ERCA) was established on 3 July 1975 following DRC missionary activities among the indigenous people in Namibia (Lombard & Hunter 1995:32). This racially segregated church in Namibia became the first church abroad to approve the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. The Confession was seen to represent a Christian view on racism, natural division and suffering from the context of those who suffer the realities of such inhumane conditions. Therefore the 1994 ERCA General Synod decided to unify with the URCSA and approved, by a two-thirds majority, to include the Belhar Confession as a standard of faith. The ERCA expressed a desire to embrace this confession as one of their own, since the Confession addresses the issues of church unity, reconciliation and God's justice, and 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, so that the world might believe. This is precisely what this racially segregated church in Namibia did. The ERCA General Synod referred the decision of the Belhar Confession and unification with the URCSA to the various ERCA regional synods for final approval (Lombard & Hunter 1995:32; *Agenda URCSA General Synod 1997:57,426*). The Belhar Confession was adopted in 1993 by the ERCA after conversation with its "mother church", the Dutch Reformed Church. This adoption set the ERCA apart from the DRC. The *URCSA Church Order* makes provision for churches to be incorporated into the URCSA if they comply with the church order's regulations and accept the confessional basis of the URCSA (*Church Order Regional Synod 2004:182*). At the 1997 URCSA General Synod the ERCA's application to unite with the URCSA was approved by a two-thirds majority as they complied with all church judicial requirements. Permission was also given for the 11 URCSA congregations in Namibia to constitute with the congregations of the (ERCA) as a separate Synod of the URCSA.

### **The Reformed Church in America**

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) has been considering the Belhar Confession since 1985, three years after it was written in South Africa in response to divisions in the church during apartheid. In the 1990s, an RCA delegation visited the URCSA. The RCA asked what they could do to help with regard to the Belhar Confession, a confession then rejected by the DRC. The URCSA replied that they could take it, read it, study it and receive it. Consequently, the RCA has engaged in a study process and has provisionally accepted the Belhar Confession as a part of its Standards of Unity, which also include the Heidelberg Confession and the Canons of Dort. Since then, the confession has been referred to RCA congregations and classes for study. The General Synod of 1998 charged the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) to coordinate planning for "A Decade Freed from Racism" and to establish steps that would enable the denomination to work toward the goal of a multicultural denomination that was free of racism. The commission advised the RCA on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination. In 2000 the General Synod instructed the Commission on Christian Unity to [recommend 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 URCSA and other Reformed bodies. The RCA General Synod 2002 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 (*RCA General Synod Minutes 2002:175*). General Synod encouraged the church to use the Belhar Confession as they did their work, especially as it related to dealing with racism and strengthening ecumenical commitment (*RCA General Synod Minutes 2003:196*). The RCA embarked on a church-wide study on the Belhar Confession over the next six years. At the RCA 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. The Synod recommended that RCA congregations use the *Study Guide for the Belhar Confession* in teaching ministries in the years 2006 to 2007 (*RCA General Synod Minutes 2006:168*). The General Synod 2007 voted to [test the](#) Belhar Confession provisionally for two years in worship through the RCA liturgy, teaching through formation and nurture of faith for RCA witness and mission, 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” (*RCA General Synod Minutes 2007:271*). The church order of the RCA requires that for the final adoption to take effect the decision of the Synod must be ratified by a two-thirds majority vote of the RCA’s classes. During 2009 the RCA General Synod voted to adopt the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. The decision was [approved by two thirds of the RCA’s 46 classes](#), who reported their votes to the 2010 General Synod. The result of that vote was reported to the RCA Synod of 2010. During June 2010 the RCA General Synod officially declared the Belhar Confession the fourth confession of the RCA. The endorsement of the Belhar Confession has implications for life and ministry in the RCA. Henceforth they can use the Confession as an educational/formative tool in the nurture of faith for witness and mission.

#### *Presbyterian Church in the USA*

Because of the enduring problem of racism in the USA, the 216th General Assembly of 2004 requested the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) to consider how the Belhar Confession could address the problem of racism (*Study guide PCUSA 2010:6*). The PCUSA General Assembly recommended the Belhar Confession to the church as a “resource for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the PCUSA to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity” (McGarrahan 2010:6).

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly of the PCUSA took the first step in adopting the Belhar Confession. Approval by two consecutive General Assemblies and ratification by two thirds of the 173 presbyteries between those assemblies are required. One reason for the PCUSA to engage in a discussion on the Belhar Confession is that one of their partners, the RCA, is doing so. The premise of the PCUSA is that the acceptance of the Belhar Confession would strengthen their ecumenical partnership with the RCA and therefore join them in reflection on the Belhar Confession. A second reason to study the Belhar Confession arose round issues of the unity within the PCUSA. In the *Report of the Task Force to Study Reparations, 216th General Assembly 2004*, the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns asked that the church study the Belhar Confession, affirming “that Jesus Christ calls us to repair wrongs done to one another and to work for personal and social reconciliation and renewal”. The General Assembly of 2004 agreed and commended the Belhar Confession to the church as a “resource for reflection, study and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the PCUSA to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity, bearing in mind that the Belhar Confession emerged from the context of racism in South Africa”. Because of the enduring problem of racism in their culture, the 216th General Assembly asked PCUSA members to consider how the Belhar Confession could address them. The PCUSA General Assembly Mission Council's Theology and Worship staff had produced a [study guide](#) about the Confession, *A Study of the Belhar Confession and its Accompanying Letter*. The 219th General Assembly of the PCUSA in 2010 approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in *The Book of Confessions*, and approved also that the amendment be sent to the 173 presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2011 (*PCUSA General Assembly Minutes 2010*). The presbyteries could not reach a two-thirds affirmative vote at the General Assembly of 2011.

#### *The Christian Reformed Church of North America*

In 1990 the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA) took official action on the request of the REC Interim Committee on the Belhar Confession (Klooster 1991:1). The Synod declared it had no objection to its inclusion in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the REC constitution. The Synod also declared that the Belhar Confession is in basic agreement with REC and CRCNA decisions on race made over the past decades. The decision of the CRCNA reads as follows: “that the Belhar Confession is in harmony with 'the Reformed faith as a body of truth' articulated in the historic Reformed confessions and is in basic agreement with the REC and the CRC decisions on race made over the past decades; and, therefore ... that it has no objection to its inclusion in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the REC Constitution” (*CRCNA Acts 1990:625*).

The CRCNA Synod 2007 encourages the ongoing work of the Interchurch Relations Committee to inform and engage the churches concerning the Belhar Confession and the issues raised by it, through “(1) a greater dissemination of the Belhar Confession to the congregations in order to familiarise the denomination with it and the issues raised by it, and (2) regional level dialogues to be initiated by the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) as part of their process of expediting a recommendation to Synod 2009” (*Acts of Synod CRCNA 2007:592*). The CRCNA Synod 2007 mandated the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) to study and assess the Belhar Confession and to present recommendations concerning it to Synod in 2009. The EIRC offered a copy of the study guide *Unity, reconciliation, and justice: a study guide for the Belhar Confession* to every congregation in the CRCNA. This study guide was produced by the RCA which granted the CRC permission to promote its use in the CRCNA. Several hundred requests for copies were fulfilled. The IRC also initiated a series of focus group discussions about the Belhar Confession.

The CRCNA Synod 2009 recommended that Synod 2012 adopt the Belhar Confession as the CRCNA’s fourth Standard of Unity, equal in doctrinal authority to the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort. The CRCNA spent three years learning about the Belhar Confession and discussing it. John W. Cooper, professor of Philosophical Theology at the Calvin Theological Seminary objected to the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a full confession (Cooper 2010:10-12). The CRCNA General Synod 2012 opted to adopt the Belhar Confession as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration rather than a full confession: “That synod adopt the *Belhar Confession* and its accompanying documents (the Accompanying Letter from the URCSA and the joint statement of the RCA and CRC) as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration and recommend it to the churches for study and for incorporation of its themes into their discipling and liturgical ministries.” In the end, the Synod voted by a large majority to create the new category, namely “Ecumenical Faith Declarations” for statements such as the Belhar Confession. The Synod also voted against a recommendation to appoint a study committee to explore and define confessions and the role they play in the church. Another motion at the General Assembly to revisit the Belhar Confession in three years was withdrawn.

## Conclusion

The Belhar Confession emerged out of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and is a guiding light today in the discourse on racism both in the global south and north. Racism lurks in both the global south and north; therefore churches across the globe are scrutinising a document from the global South to help them. To this end in this article the author put the Belhar Confession in the historical setting of the discourse on racism. Although the Belhar Confession came out of a specific context, it provides the global north a historic opportunity to stand in solidarity with the voices of the global south. The Belhar Confession is not limited to the moment and South African context. It represents a Christian view on racism and natural division. The Belhar Confession calls the church to denounce all forms of racism and injustice. The three central themes of the Belhar Confession, namely unity, justice and reconciliation, have deep Biblical resonance for Reformed Christians. Through the Belhar Confession churches across the globe discern the action of the triune God in their lives and in history, and learn resistance in the face of behaviour that is dehumanising. The Belhar Confession has also engendered vigorous debate about the nature of confessions and the nature of the ministry of the church on social justice issues. The confession provides a scriptural and theological foundation for churches to stand where God stands with the marginalised and in so doing to become a church that is multiethnic and multicultural.

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