Focus: Introduce the Belhar Confession study guide to the group. 

Gather for welcome and introductions. Open with prayer.

Group-building activity: Spend time exploring the following questions.
  • Why is each of you here?
  • What are your hopes and expectations for this study?

Optional activity: Pool your knowledge. On a white board or chart paper, record what your group knows about one or more of the following:
  • apartheid
  • Belhar Confession
  • racism

“Meet the Guide”: When everyone has a study guide, together look at “Using This Study Guide” on page 9.

Read the introduction on page 1 together. Answer the following questions.
  • What are Standards (or Forms) of Unity? (See definition in Appendix D, p. 91.) What do you know about the three creeds that form this theological basis?
  • What are the three main issues/themes addressed by the Belhar Confession? Which theme most interests you personally? Why?
  • How do you respond to the statement that the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa has offered the Belhar Confession as a gift to the worldwide family of Reformed churches?
  • What did you learn from the introduction that most surprised or intrigued you?
  • How do you respond to the assertion that radical biblical obedience is the key to meaningful, significant church growth? What does radical biblical obedience mean to you?

Read “Ground Rules for Constructive Communication” on page 10 together. Reflect silently on the rules for a few minutes. Which rules would you choose as your “top three”? Which rules might you personally have the most difficulty observing?

Closing: Spend a few minutes in prayer (led either by the leader or by participants), asking God’s Spirit to guide and protect your group as you seek to explore difficult issues together with love and respect.

In preparation for the next session, review the pre-session exercises for Session 2.
Session 2
All Creation Groans: The Universality of Exclusion and Discrimination

Focus: The Belhar Confession was created in the context of apartheid, but racism and other forms of exclusion are universal.

Human beings have an extraordinary ability, and seemingly, even a desire to break down the world into “them” and “us.” We do not know who “we” are, it seems, until we know who “they” are. And once we have identified “them,” it is open to us to disclaim responsibility for their welfare, their rights or, in extreme cases, their very existence.

Each of us inhabits a personal commonwealth, often more than one. Membership in each commonwealth defines for us those with whom we share a common dignity, common rights and common obligations. At the root of exclusion in all its forms lies the drawing of boundaries around that commonwealth for reasons of personal comfort, economic advantage or political power.

—“Exclusion, Inclusion and Participation,” by David Lawrence; included in study texts for the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches: www.warc.ch

Pre-session exercises

Scripture reading: John 4:1-30 (Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman)
Read the passage through once, and then again, slowly. On second reading, pause throughout to visualize in your mind the events of the story. Then reflect:

- What things about the Samaritan woman might have caused her to be excluded in her world?
- What do the woman’s responses to Jesus tell you about her?
- What do the woman’s responses to Jesus tell you about Jesus?

In your imagination, finish the story. How do you think the woman’s life changed after her encounter with Jesus?

Further exploration: Imagine Jesus in conversation with someone you know or have read about who is excluded. What living water might Jesus offer? What is the person’s response, and how could things change for that person? Record your thoughts to share with your group.

Readings: In preparation for Session 2, please read one or more of the selections in the appendix under “Session 2 Readings” (p. 55).
Choose from these options in preparation for Session 2.

1. List as many forms of exclusion as you can think of. Divide a piece of paper into two columns. Label the first column “same,” and list things that the various examples of exclusion have in common. Label the second column “different.” What are some of the ways the examples differ from one another?

2. Pay particular attention this week to how people from various excluded groups, particularly minority racial groups, are portrayed in the media. Are there distortions, imbalances, or injustices?

3. Talk to someone from a group often excluded or discriminated against in our culture (a person of color, an immigrant, etc.). What have their experiences been? How have those experiences made them feel? What do they wish was different?

4. Think about the animal world. What similarities can you find between animal and human behavior toward creatures who are different? How are humans different from animals in behavior and in potential?

5. Find or create a photo or a song or a work of art that expresses how you feel after reading the stories in the appendix of exclusion and discrimination.

Introduction: As the quote on page thirteen suggests, exclusion of humans by other humans is universal across cultures and down through history. It is an ever-present expression of the sinful human heart. Though the Belhar Confession arose in response to exclusion in a particular cultural and historical context, it speaks God’s truth to all forms of exclusion, and is thus universal in application.

In this session we will begin to explore what exclusion “looks like”—some of the forms it takes. Before we can be receptive to God’s truth, we must perceive the need for that truth in our own context and our own lives.

Songs:
“Perdon, Senor”/“Forgive Us, Lord”
“Nkosi! Nkosi!”/“Lord, Have Mercy”
“Psalm 51”
(Songs are found in Appendix B.)

In-session exercises
Reflect: Break into groups of two or three and share the results of your pre-session exercises. (Take two minutes per person.) You may wish to use the following questions to guide you.
• Which of this session’s readings or exercises particularly impacted you? Why?
• What did you learn from the readings and presentations?
• What questions have arisen in your mind as a result of what you’ve experienced?
• What do you want to think or learn more about in the coming weeks?
Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice

Connect: On chart paper, white board, etc., make two columns. Title one column “hopes” and the other “fears,” then share as a group, writing down the responses to these questions:
- What do you hope to gain from the study of the Belhar Confession?
- What fears, doubts, or hesitancies do you have as you begin this study?

Respond to what you’ve learned with one or more of the following exercises:
1. Share:
   - What is your earliest memory of an incident of prejudice or exclusion? How did it make you feel?
   - Have you ever been personally excluded by other people? How did it make you feel?
   - How do you think a lifetime of exclusion and prejudice would affect a person?

2. What color(s) best expresses your feelings about what you’ve learned this session? Pass around a basket containing crayons of various colors and let everyone choose a crayon or crayons. Then share and explain your choices.

Further options: Spend time trying out some of the songs included in this study guide. What is the value of using songs from other cultures in worship? Discuss how these songs might be included in your congregation’s worship.

Prayer: Read the following prayer together, or have one person to read it slowly, pausing between sentences. Afterward, spend some time in silent prayer or brief spoken prayers.

Lord, as you have taught us, we bow down before you in all humility, gentleness and patience, supporting each other with love and trying to keep the unity of the spirit by the bonds of peace, that we may become “one body and one spirit,” according to our common calling and vocation.

With one voice, repenting of our divisions, we commit ourselves to working together for reconciliation, peace, and justice, and we stand together in imploring you: help us to live as your disciples, overcoming selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence; give us the strength to forgive. Inspire our witness in the world, that we might foster a culture of dialogue, and be bearers of the hope which your gospel has implanted in us.

Make us instruments of your peace, so that our homes and communities, our parishes, churches, and nations might resonate more fully with the peace you have long desired to bestow upon us. Amen.

—From the World Council of Churches’ liturgies for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2004; based on Syriac liturgy used by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches; www.wcc-coe.org.
Digging deeper: Further explore (through books, magazines, film, and the Internet) one of the forms of exclusion you read about, or another form of exclusion that concerns you. (See suggested website below.) What are possible reasons for the discrimination? What are results of the discrimination?

The Understanding Prejudice website contains helpful information for educators and others on raising awareness of prejudice, including lists of organizations working against various forms of prejudice; print and multimedia resource lists; a directory of experts, exercises, and demonstrations; teaching suggestions; web links, etc. Go to www.understandingprejudice.org.

Exclusion does not end with the recognition that it is undesirable. Exclusion ends when the root causes are removed. Drawing the boundaries more widely involves more than a decision, it involves the practical action necessary to make inclusion a reality.

—“Exclusion, Inclusion and Participation,” by David Lawrence; included in study texts for the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches: www.warc.ch.

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 3.
Focus: The Belhar Confession is first and foremost an affirmation of Christian unity.

Pre-session exercises:

Scripture reading: John 17:6-26 (Christ’s high-priestly prayer)

Read the scripture passage for this week using lectio divina (pronounced LEX-ee-oh dih-VEE-nuh), which is Latin for “divine or sacred reading.” Lectio divina is a pattern for reading scripture prayerfully, or praying with scripture. The pattern is described below. Focus particularly on Jesus’ prayer for the unity of the believers.

Lectio Divina
Read—Slowly read a brief passage of scripture. Read it as though you are hearing it read to you. Read it silently and aloud. Experiment by reading it with different emphases and inflections.
Meditate—Mull over the text; internalize the words. Listen for the phrases that stand out for you as you read the passage. Turn them over in your mind. Reflect on why these words catch your attention, what they bring to mind, and what they mean for you today. Jot down the meaningful words, noting associations, reactions, feelings, or challenges.
Pray—Turn your meditation from dialogue with yourself to dialogue with God, which is prayer. Share with God in all honesty your reflections, questions, or feelings. Offer your thanksgiving, confession, petitions, or intercessions as they arise within during your dialogue with God. Listen for God’s response and inner nudging.
Contemplate—Rest your mental activity and trust yourself completely to God’s love and care. Relax in God’s presence. Pick a phrase from the text to which you can return again and again as you keep your attention on God. Allow this prayer-phrase to sustain your presence to God throughout the day. After a few minutes of “practicing the presence of God” in this way, you might close with the Lord’s Prayer, a song, or a final moment of grateful silence.

Capture your meditation, prayer, and the new insights and possibilities God gave you in writing. Consider one token—one small act—you can offer today in grateful response to God’s life-giving word to you during this special time with scripture.

Other readings: In preparation for your study session, please reread the Belhar Confession (at the front of the study guide) in its entirety. We recommend you read it several times during the week to become thoroughly familiar with its language and content.

Choose one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session.

1. Write down five phrases or sentences from the Belhar Confession that particularly impacted you.

2. Outline the structure of the Belhar Confession, including main points and sub-points. Write your outline on chart paper or poster board to share with your group.

3. Choose one or more favorite sections of the Belhar Confession and study the biblical texts listed. Reflect on how they support or augment the Belhar’s assertions.

4. Write a song or poem based on phrases from the Belhar Confession.

5. Choose a specific portion of the Belhar Confession and rewrite it in your own words. You may wish to make specific reference to a situation in your own context.

6. What situations in your world cry out for the prophetic challenge and hope contained in the Belhar? Record what you see and hear this week in the media or closer to home in your own church, family, workplace, etc. Consider making a brief audio-visual presentation or a collage of newspaper and magazine articles.

7. Draw a picture or design a graphic that illustrates the connection between a “gathering, protecting, and caring” God and the human pursuit of unity, reconciliation, and justice.

8. One of the blessings of Christian unity is the rich gifts we receive from other Christians. Look for something from a racial group different from your own that has enriched your life, particularly as a Christian. It might be a song, a work of art, clothing, food, a household item, a dance, a tool, a story, etc. Bring it to the next session to share with the group.

Introduction: In this session we explore the text of the Belhar Confession, noting that the central theme of the confession is the unity of all believers in Christ.

Song:
“¡Miren que Bueno!”/“Behold, How Pleasant”—Psalm 133
(Song is found in Appendix B.)
In-session exercises

Reflect: Share your explorations and creations from the pre-session exercises. What did you learn from your observations, reflections, and creative engagements with the Belhar Confession over the past week? What questions did your explorations raise? What do you want to explore further?

Connect: Reread paragraph 2 of the Belhar. The writers of the Belhar refer to unity as a gift. What does the word “gift” mean to you? Explore the meaning of this together using one of the following exercises:

- On chart paper, white board, etc., list all the connotations or meanings the word “gift” has for your group. Which of these meanings relate to unity as a gift from God? Do the same thing for the word “obligation.”
- Break into groups of two or three. Invite each group to create a pantomime that depicts the gift of unity being offered by God and accepted or rejected by humans, and the consequences of each action. Share your depictions with the entire group.

Respond to what you’ve learned with one or more of the following exercises:

1. The Belhar states that unity is a reality “which the people of God must be continually built up to attain.” The scripture reference is Ephesians 4:11-13. Read these verses together. Then, on chart paper, white board, etc., list the various leadership roles and groups in your congregation (pastor, Sunday school teacher, choir director, evangelism committee, consistory, etc.). Discuss ways each of these leaders could help your congregation grow toward greater unity with other Christians in your community, especially with congregations that have a different racial composition than yours. Be as specific as possible. For each idea shared, place a puzzle piece from a simple children’s puzzle on a flat surface. When all the pieces are have been set down, distribute them and assemble the puzzle as a group. Afterward, discuss how the process of putting the puzzle together is like working for unity.

   (Suggestions: Have someone record your group’s ideas to share with your pastor, consistory, etc. If you don’t have a puzzle, make your own, or do the exercise without it.)

2. Discuss why Christians have had such immense difficulty honoring the “last request” of our beloved older brother and head, Jesus Christ, as stated in John 17:20-23. On a white board, chart paper, etc. list as many impediments to unity as you can think of as a group. Then list specific examples of disunity among Christians. To stimulate thinking, you may want to create your lists under headings such as: 1) our world, 2) our nation, 3) our community, 4) our church.

3. Share personal struggles by completing the following statement: “It’s hardest for me to love Christians who (or when)…”
Further options:
As a group, add your own verses to the song “Behold, How Pleasant.” What is it like for you when God’s people live together in unity?

Prayers:
Read the following prayer (John 17:20-23, 26, paraphrased) slowly, pausing between phrases.

O God, who calls us all, we pray for all who follow Jesus. May we all be one, as the Father and the Son are one. May Christ’s followers be one with each other and with God, so that the world may believe in Jesus. May Jesus’ glory be seen in our oneness, as God’s glory is seen in Jesus’ glory, as God’s love is known in Jesus’ love. May God’s name be known in the words, actions, and love of all in whom Jesus lives, in all who follow Jesus. Amen.

Follow this prayer with your own sentence prayers asking forgiveness for dissension and lack of love toward other Christians.

Close with this prayer: “May the almighty Son of God, Jesus Christ, who prayed in deepest anguish to his eternal Father that we in him might be one, mercifully unite us all” (Phillip Melanchthon).

Close the session, if you wish, by singing “Behold, How Pleasant,” “Bind Us Together,” “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” “We Are One in Christ Jesus,” or another song that speaks of unity in Christ.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches links more than 75 million Reformed Christians in more than one hundred countries around the world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Member Churches</th>
<th>Countries</th>
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<td>31</td>
</tr>
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<td>Asia</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>218</strong></td>
<td><strong>107</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What does this information tell you about the diversity of the Reformed family? What surprises you? What challenges you? What gives you hope?

For more information go to www.warc.ch.
Digging deeper

1. Is there one phrase in the Belhar Confession that you would like to post in your home, your workplace, or your church? If you are gifted in calligraphy, needlepoint, wood-burning, decoupage, banner-making, etc., why not do so? Consider offering your gift as a service to the others in your group as well, rendering their favorite Belhar excerpts creatively. Or create a “Belhar banner” for use in your church.

2. The Belhar Confession asserts that unity is both a gift and an obligation. Reflect on the meaning of the words “gift” and “obligation.” In what way might unity be a gift? In what way is it an obligation?

The Belhar Confession is the confession of a particular denomination, but it has important ecumenical significance and potential...It has, in fact, opened up fresh possibilities for the emergence not only of a united Reformed church but also of an ecumenical confessing church that transcends traditional confessional boundaries.

—Liberating Reformed Theology, John de Gruchy
(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001)

Ubuntu: an African word meaning “I am who I am because of who we all are.”

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 4.
Focus: The Belhar Confession helps us explore ways in which exclusion and disunity are present among us.

Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone but only his friends. He has other matters in his mind which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Pre-session exercises:

Scripture reading: John 10:14-18, 1 John 3:16-18
Enter imaginatively into the first scripture passage, John 10:14-18. Read the text through slowly, and then read it again, pausing throughout to visualize what is being said.

In your mind, watch Jesus as the good shepherd. Who are the sheep in the pen? Try to visualize the rich diversity of Jesus’ flock. How does Jesus care for them? How do they respond?

Now shift your gaze outside the pen. In your context, who are the sheep outside the pen? What do they look like? What are their circumstances? How does Jesus call them—who does he say? How do they respond?

With which sheep do you identify—the sheep inside or outside the pen? If you are inside the pen, visualize new sheep entering the pen with Jesus. What call do you hear from Jesus? How do you respond? If you are outside the pen, visualize yourself entering the pen with Jesus. What is your reception from the other sheep? How does it make you feel? How does the presence of Jesus make a difference? What would it take for all you of you to be one flock, with one shepherd?

(Optional) Read John 10:11-13. Imagine yourself as the hired hand. In your context, who are the wolves? How do you respond? Do you run, or do you stand with Jesus to fight, willing to lay down your life for the sheep? Imagine yourself in conversation with Jesus about your response.

Conclude by reading the second passage, 1 John 3:16-18. What call do you hear? How will you respond?

Other readings:
- Reread paragraph 2 of the Belhar Confession.
- Choose one of the Session 4 pre-session readings in Appendix A.
Choose one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session:

1. Find words in the Belhar Confession that address the situations described in the readings—words that, if heeded, could bring healing and unity.

2. Based on your life experiences and the readings so far, create a “top five” list of reasons why people exclude others. Which of these reasons have ever applied to you or your church? Now make a list of five groups of people most commonly excluded or discriminated against in our society. What connections can you make between your two lists? Finally, make a “top five” list of reasons why the excluded groups should be included. Be as specific as possible in your reasons for including these people. What lessons and gifts do they have to offer that we miss out on by excluding them?

3. Depict in some visual way (a drawing, a diagram, a painting, photographs, or modeling clay, for example) one or more of the following concepts: exclusion, disunity, inclusion, unity, the relationship between exclusion and disunity, the relationship between inclusion and unity.

Introduction: In this session we hear the stories of RCA people and look at exclusion close to home.

Song:
“Somos Uno en Cristo”/“We Are One in Christ Jesus”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)

Individual Racism vs. Institutional Racism
A distinction between the two forms of racism can be made by thinking about housing. If an African-American or Latino family moved into a predominantly white neighborhood and someone threw rocks at their house and told them to go live somewhere else, that would be an example of individual racism. But when an African-American person who looks at housing is routinely steered into neighborhoods with high proportions of minorities or has trouble getting a mortgage, that is institutional racism.

—“Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism,” a report prepared by the Reformed Church in America’s Commission on Christian Action. Read the full report at www.rca.org.

In-session exercises
Reflect: Break into groups of two or three and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.
**Connect:** Read the following paraphrase of paragraph 2 of the Belhar Confession slowly and thoughtfully in unison, or with each member of the group taking a turn. Read as expressively as possible. Then read the selection a second time, substituting the name of your church for “the church.” After the second reading, allow several minutes of silence, in which group members can reflect on the meaning and significance of the words.

**We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

- Christ’s work of reconciliation is made visible in the church, the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another.
- Unity is both a gift and an obligation for the church. This means that
  i. through the working of God’s Spirit, unity in the church is a binding force;
  ii. at the same time, the church must earnestly pursue and seek unity;
  iii. the people of God must be continually built up to attain unity.
- The unity of the church must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups is sin—sin which Christ has already conquered!
- Anything which threatens our unity has no place in the church, and we must resist it.
- We must display our unity as the people of God in a multiplicity of ways.
- The reconciling work of Christ allows the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, languages, and cultures present in the church to be opportunities for mutual service and enrichment.
- True faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership in the church.
- It is wrong to allow natural human diversity or sinful human distinctions to break the unity of the church, all the more so if a separate church is formed.
- It is wrong to say the church has unity when, in fact, it doesn’t, and people have given up hope of reconciliation.
- It is wrong to base membership in the church on birth or any other human or social factor, either explicitly or implicitly.
- It is sin for the church to refuse earnestly to pursue unity.

After several minutes of silent reflection on the paraphrase, reflect together on one of the following questions.

1. What things most threaten the unity and witness of your congregation? (Group members may write down their responses to this question, then post them on a wall or bulletin board in the room for others to view without comment.)

2. Are there conditions for membership or inclusion in your church, written or unwritten, spoken or unspoken, that hinder your unity with other Christians and your witness in your community?

3. Which of the words of the Belhar Confession paraphrase do you feel called to accept as God’s challenge?

4. Which of the words of the Belhar Confession paraphrase do you wish to claim as God’s promise?
Respond to what you’ve learned as you read the following skit aloud:

Clint: Hi, Joe and Barb! Missed you at the Neighborhood Association meeting last night.
Joe: Yeah, I had a church council meeting, and Barb was tutoring at the Literacy Center.
Clint: The Literacy Center, eh? I’m guessing most of your students are green people, right? I’ve heard so much about green people just not making the grade academically. You know, so many single-parent families, drugs, teen pregnancies, dropping out of school, the whole ball of wax.
Barb: Actually, most of my students are pink people, new immigrants. The only green people at the center are tutors. Oh, and the director.
Joe: Speaking of green people, I hear Roy down the street is selling his property to a green family.
Clint: Well, they put in the highest bid, but…
Joe: I am so ticked off! We all know what happens to property values when green people start moving into a neighborhood. I lost my pension when my company went under, and our house is the only significant investment we’ve got.
Barb: I’m not prejudiced—I get along great with green people. But we just can’t afford to lose our only real asset. I’m mad about this too.
Joe: Yeah, Roy gets out with a tidy sum, and what does he care about the rest of us?
Clint: As I was going to say, a bunch of us in the Neighborhood Association felt the same way. We’re not racist, but we feel it’s our responsibility to protect the neighborhood. So we offered to pay Clint the difference between the green family’s bid and the next highest bid—by a real nice family from my church. Clint accepted.
Barb: Thank goodness! You feel bad for the green family, but there are some real nice green neighborhoods in this city. I really think they’d be happier there. It’s just easier to get along with people who are more like you.
Clint: I agree. Well, see you guys around!
Joe: See you, Clint.

• Discuss: What are Clint, Joe, and Barb afraid of? What motivates their discriminatory behavior? How might they have behaved differently (more justly) in this situation? In what ways does the situation in the skit resonate with your personal experience?

• Imagine yourselves as the green people. What were your hopes and dreams for your new neighborhood? What did you feel when you learned of the action taken against you? As Christians, how will you respond?

Further options:
• Create a skit portraying the situation from the point of view of the green people. (If your group is large, you may wish to break into smaller groups for this exercise, allowing time for groups to share their skits afterward.)
• Discuss where you see stereotyping, prejudice, and racism portrayed in the skit. (See definitions at the end of the materials for this session.)
• Take ten or fifteen minutes to complete the “Welcoming Diversity” inventory (Appendix E) to see how your church measures up in the area of multicultural awareness and inclusion. Afterward discuss what you have learned from the inventory. What areas does your church need to work on? (Make a “top five” list of areas for improvement.) How could this inventory be used to help your church become more welcoming of diversity?
Prayers:

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly union and concord: that, as there is but one Body, and one Spirit, and one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all; so we may henceforth be all of one heart, and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.


Lord Jesus, we pray for the church which is one in the greatness of your love, but divided in the littleness of our own. May we be less occupied with the things that divide us, and more with the things we hold in common. Amen.


When someone asks me what it feels like to be discriminated against, I have to pause and think, not just think a little, but a lot. It’s a difficult question to answer because each act of discrimination, even perceived discrimination, elicits different thoughts and emotions. Some times it is anger, other times it’s confusion, and other times it’s an absence of both thinking and feeling—a numbing shock that is to some degree a coping state that my body engages when in utter disbelief. Still other times it’s a complex combination of many thoughts and emotions that leaves me feeling awkwardly alone. Though each incident fuels unique initial responses, the resulting and overwhelming feeling I am left with is that I am very tired.

—Steve Long-Nguyen Robbins

To read Steve Robbins’s full reflection on the affects of racism, see p. 57.

Digging deeper

1. How do the following equations relate to the problem of discrimination/exclusion?
   
   Same = Safe
   
   Different = Dangerous
   
   What role does fear play in discrimination and exclusion?

2. Go online to the Multicultural Pavilion (http://www.edchange.org/multicultural) and take the multicultural awareness quiz. Check out other resources and information on increasing multicultural awareness at http://www.mhhe.com/multicultural.

3. Go to www.implicit.harvard.edu and take the Race Implicit Assumption Test (RIAT). The RIAT tests assess your unconscious prejudices in a number of areas by recording the speed with which you are able to make certain associations. What do you learn about yourself?
What can we do about personal prejudices?

If you are a white person who would like to treat black people as equals in every way—who would like to have a set of associations with blacks that are as positive as those that you have with whites—it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren't betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort.


One solution is to seek experiences that could undo or reverse the patterns of experience that could have created the unwanted preference. But this is not always easy to do. A more practical alternative may be to remain alert to the existence of the undesired preference, recognizing that it may intrude in unwanted fashion into your judgments and actions. Additionally, you may decide to embark on consciously planned actions that can compensate for known unconscious preferences and beliefs.

—Harvard University’s Project Implicit implicit association test (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/faqs.html)

**Definitions**

**Stereotype:** Generalization about a group of people
Example: “Green people gravitate toward jobs in the service sector.”

**Implicit stereotype:** A stereotype that is powerful enough to operate without conscious control.
An implicit stereotype is embedded in this oft-told riddle: A man and his daughter are in a car accident. The father dies, and the daughter is rushed to the hospital. The surgeon is called in. After looking at the patient the doctor exclaims, “I can’t operate on this girl—she’s my daughter!” If the girl’s father died, how could this be?

—*The surgeon was the girl’s mother.*

**Prejudice:** Stereotype plus judgment
Example: “Green people have no work ethic!”

**Discrimination:** Prejudice plus action
Example: “I refuse to hire a green person—I want people who will work!”

**Racism:** Color prejudice plus institutional power
Example: 32 percent of Acme Extrusion employees are green, but only 2 percent of Acme Extrusion managers are green.

**Internalized racist oppression:** Internalization of negative stereotypes about one’s race.
Example: A black person who believes black people are ugly, stupid, and immoral suffers from internalized racist oppression.

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 5.
Focus: The Belhar Confession speaks of the church’s responsibility toward those who suffer injustice.

Faithfully following Jesus’ way in respect of one ethical issue (e.g. “apartheid”) opens our eyes for many other unresolved issues (e.g. violence, power relations in politics, economics, families, poverty, marginalization of the “other”).

—Christo Lombard, member-in-residence at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey

Pre-session exercises:

Read the scripture through slowly. Then read the passage a second time, using imaginative reading, pausing throughout to picture in your mind the events as they unfold.

• Fix your eyes on Jesus. Listen as he reads from the prophet Isaiah. What impresses you about Jesus? What do you sense is the source of his power? What draws you to him? Does anything about him make you nervous or apprehensive?

• Now read the passage again, this time bringing Jesus into your own context. Who are the people about whom Isaiah speaks—the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed—in your world? Are any of them in your congregation?

• Picture them in your mind as they enter the place where Jesus is about to speak to you and your congregation. Watch them find seats. How do the people in your congregation respond? Are some offended or made uncomfortable by the presence of these “Isaiah people”?

• How do you respond as they enter? Listen again as Jesus reads the Isaiah passage, and observe the various reactions of those gathered. What rebuke do you hear from Jesus? What challenge? What encouragement and hope?

• What happens when Jesus has finished speaking? Imagine how this story would end in your congregation.

Other readings: Reread paragraph 4 of the Belhar Confession, or choose one or more of the pre-session readings for Session 5 in Appendix A.

Choose one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session:

1. Compare the language of paragraph 4 in the Belhar Confession with the words of Isaiah. Write down phrases that are similar. Read the biblical references listed in paragraph 4. How do the biblical texts support or augment the assertions of the Belhar?

2. Do a print media search. Clip magazine and newspaper articles and photos reporting unjust situations in your community and your world. Try to include as many types of injustice as you can (economic, social, personal, racial, educational, employment,
gender, political, medical, housing, ecclesiastical, etc.). Note the effects of these injustices in the lives of those directly affected and in the wider community. How do those who are unjustly treated respond? What connection do you see between injustice and disunity?

3. Identify a justice issue in your community that concerns you. Research local groups that are trying to address the issue, talking to people involved in the groups if at all possible. How are the groups addressing the issue? In what ways could you help? If you are already involved in a justice group, how has your involvement changed you? What results have you seen? What have been your joys and frustrations? How could others become involved?

4. If you like statistics, research statistics related to poverty and injustice, locally and globally.

5. Look for a true story—preferably from your community—about a person (or persons) whose life has been impacted by injustice, especially racial or economic injustice. Or look for a story about people whose lives have been changed for the better through the efforts of a justice group. Share the story with your study group. How did the story make you feel? In what way, large or small, has the story changed you?

**Introduction:** Injustice has many faces. In this session we explore God’s call to address issues of justice wherever they arise, and how the Belhar Confession helps us to do so.

**Song:**
“Canto de Esperanze”/“Song of Hope”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)

**In-session exercises**

**Reflect:** Break into groups of two or three and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.

**Connect:** The Belhar asserts that 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” (paragraph 4). Discuss one or more of the following:

- As someone from your group slowly reads those words, imagine how a person who is destitute, poor, and wronged might respond to that statement. As the words are read a second time, imagine how the wealthy and privileged might respond.
- From a global perspective, to which group do you belong—the destitute, poor, and wronged, or the wealthy and privileged—or neither? Explain your answer.
- What are your feelings personally about the Belhar’s assertion?
- Would taking this statement seriously change the ministry priorities of your congregation? Your denomination? If so, how?
Respond to what you've learned with one or more of the following exercises:

1. The Jewish prophetic tradition saw God strongly as a God of justice who was particularly concerned with the plight of the lowly. In Luke 4:16-21 we see Jesus embracing that tradition. Compare and contrast your family and culture with the family and culture in which Jesus grew up as a Jew under Roman oppression. (The Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 also gives some insight into what Jesus learned at his mother's knee.) How has your upbringing influenced your concern for justice and your involvement in justice work (or your lack thereof)?

2. Break into groups of two or three and reread Luke 4:14-21. Together identify one or more justice issues in your community. Brainstorm specific actions your congregation could take to be agents of Christ in fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in your community.

3. Using the following scenarios, explore aspects of justice and the relationship between justice and unity. As one member of the group reads the following scenarios aloud, the other group members should indicate whether they think justice and/or unity are present in that situation. (They can do this by holding up cards labeled “justice” and “unity.”) After all the scenarios have been read, discuss the issues raised.
   - Mother comes home from the bakery with an apple pie. She gives Ronnie and Bonnie equal-sized pieces. What is the relationship between fair distribution of goods, justice, and unity?
   - Mother comes home from the bakery with an apple pie. Because Ronnie, who is in the living room, is her favorite, she gives him a large piece, and she gives Bonnie, who is upstairs in her bedroom, a smaller piece. Can unequal distribution of goods be acceptable if the shorted party is unaware of the inequality? Can there be true unity of two parties when one party is aware of an inequality and the other is unaware?
   - Mother comes home from the bakery with an apple pie. She gives Bonnie, who has finished vacuuming her bedroom, a large piece, and she gives Ronnie, who has not vacuumed his bedroom, none. Is it just to base distribution of goods on effort, merit, or achievement? Is it always just?
   - Mother comes home from the bakery with apple pie. She gives Bonnie, who has finished vacuuming her bedroom, a large piece, and she gives Ronnie, who has not vacuumed his bedroom, none. Ronnie informs Mother that the vacuum hose is plugged with Bonnie's dirty sock, which Ronnie has been unable to dislodge. Is it just to base distribution of goods on achievement when there has been unequal opportunity?
   - Mother comes home from the bakery with an apple pie. She gives Bonnie a large piece, and to Ronnie she gives a very small piece. Mother explains to Ronnie that because he is diabetic, he must watch his sugar consumption. Is it just to base distribution of goods on need? If so, what sorts of criteria could be used to determine need?
   - Bonnie comes home with an apple pie given to her by the baker, who was clearing out an end-of-day surplus. Bonnie thinks about three options: eating the whole pie herself (after all, it is her pie), giving a small piece to Ronnie and eating the rest herself, or dividing the pie in half and sharing with Ronnie. How do things change for Ronnie and Bonnie when one of them suddenly acquires ownership? What are the obligations of the owner with respect to justice and unity? In
which of the scenarios could justice be maintained, and with what conditions? In which
scenario(s) can unity be maintained?

Further options:
• For each of the scenarios in which you didn't see justice and/or unity, discuss what
would be required for their restoration.
• Use the questions raised with each scenario to address the just distribution of wealth,
medical care, educational opportunities, etc. in a larger context—for example, your
community or the world. Note the connections between justice and unity.

Prayer:

We beg you, Lord, to help and defend us.
Deliver the oppressed,
have compassion on the despised,
raise the fallen,
reveal yourself to the needy,
heal the sick,
bring back those who have strayed from you,
feed the hungry,
lift up the weak,
remove the prisoners' chains.
May every nation come to know that you are God alone,
that Jesus is your Son,
that we are your people, the sheep of your pasture.

—Clement, Third Bishop of Rome

Digging deeper

1. Reflect: What connections do you see between injustice (in housing,
education, employment opportunities, health care, etc.), hopelessness,
and violence? Can you point to examples from your own community?

2. Explore restorative justice (typing “restorative justice” into your Internet
search engine will produce lots of entries). How is it different from retribu-
tive justice? Evaluate each approach to justice from the perspective of the
Belhar Confession. What are the end results of each approach for the
offender, for the victim, and for the wider community? (The Christian
Reformed Church (CRC) has produced a study paper on restorative
justice. The 2005 report of the CRC’s Committee to Study Restorative
Justice is available online at www.crcna.org.)

3. The website of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches contains a
wealth of resources and Reformed perspectives on social and economic
justice. Explore the material on this website relating to inclusion, justice,
and Christian unity by going to www.warc.ch.

4. Reflect more deeply on the points Mitri Raheb raises about “the option for
the poor” in the excerpt from his address to General Synod 2004 (see Session 5 Readings in the Appendix). The Belhar Confession emerged in a context in which Christians—predominantly Christians of color—were addressing other people who identified themselves as Christians—white supporters of apartheid. The contemporary North American situation is considerably more diverse. Do Christians have an obligation to pursue justice for people who are not Christians? Is the obligation different than the obligation of Christians to fellow Christians? Can Christians work for justice with people who are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, of some other faith, or of no particular faith? On what basis?

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 6.
What does the Belhar Confession say about reconciliation? Why is reconciliation impossible without restoration of justice? What besides restoration of justice must happen to restore unity? What conditions are necessary for reconciliation to occur? What are some of the impediments to racial reconciliation and unity?

**Focus:** The Belhar Confession calls the church to the ministry of reconciliation in our world.

**Pre-session exercises:**

**Scripture reading:** 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Engage with this scripture passage using the *lectio divina* pattern described in Session 3. In 2 Corinthians 5:16, the apostle Paul says that, from now on, “we regard no one from a human point of view.” What is a human point of view? Pay close attention this week to occasions when you regard people from a human point of view. How might God's view differ from yours? What difference does taking God's view make in your attitudes and behavior?

**Other readings:** Reread paragraph 3 of the Belhar Confession, or choose one or more readings from the Session 6 selections in Appendix A.

**Choose** one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session:

1. The first step in the process of racial reconciliation is recognizing the need for reconciliation. Research one or more of the following:
   - Find out what your denomination is doing to become more aware of racism within it, and to begin to deal with the issue.
   - Find out what your denomination's ecumenical partners are doing to make themselves more aware of racism in their denominations. Here are web addresses to check:
     - Christian Reformed Church in North America: [http://www.crcna.org/justice/issues/antiracism](http://www.crcna.org/justice/issues/antiracism)
     - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: [http://www.elca.org/programs.htm](http://www.elca.org/programs.htm)
     - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): [http://www.pcusa.org/racialjustice/training.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/racialjustice/training.htm)
     - United Church of Christ: [http://www.ucc.org/justice/anti.htm](http://www.ucc.org/justice/anti.htm)
   - What groups in your community are working to raise awareness of racism? Which offer anti-racism training or could assist your congregation in exploring racism in your community and in your church? What steps need to be taken to make it happen?
• Identify congregations in your community with an ethnic-racial composition different from yours. Talk with a member of one of those churches about ways your two churches—and other churches in your community—might begin to work together toward racial reconciliation and unity. If you are unable to talk with someone from another church, brainstorm ways your congregation could meet and get to know a congregation different from yours. Develop a strategy for making it happen.

• If you are a white person, talk with a person of color: How free does he feel to share his experiences and feelings with respect to racism? Where does she feel safe, and where not? What makes a place safe for honest sharing, and what makes it unsafe? How could the number of safe places be increased? If you are a person of color, reflect on these questions and share your answers with your group.

2. In his book *Reconciliation*, South African John De Gruchy says that one element of the reconciliation process is listening to the “sound of fury,” those actions of vengeance that express legitimate rage rather than pardon. That statement has particular poignancy in a world where the sounds of fury, expressed in acts of violence and terrorism, seem to be everywhere and escalating. Record examples from the media or from your own experience of actions of vengeance that, no matter how unacceptable or even loathsome, nevertheless express legitimate rage at injustice. To what extent do you believe that “justice restored” could reduce destructive acts of vengeance and open the door to reconciliation?

3. Reflect on a situation where reconciliation is needed in your own life. Do the elements of the reconciliation process suggested by John DeGruchy (see below) point the way to healing in that situation? Pray for the strength and courage to begin the process.

4. Some have suggested that the media, through the presence of a few prominent people of color (e.g. Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey), have contributed to an illusion of integration, a virtual integration that is not carried over into everyday life and that deceives people into believing that racial reconciliation is much farther along than it actually is. What do you think?

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**Elements of the Reconciliation Process**

- Create space within which the process of reconciliation can take place, a place in which victim and perpetrator can speak face to face.
- Tell the truth about the past.
- Listen to the “sound of fury,” those actions of vengeance that express legitimate rage rather than pardon.
- Recognize that victims have the right to decide about and pronounce forgiveness. This helps to restore the balance of power between perpetrator and victim.

—*Reconciliation*, John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002)
Introduction: In this session we explore the Belhar's call to reconciling ministry, the need for reconciliation—especially racial reconciliation—in the church, some of the steps we might take to begin the process of reconciliation, and some of the obstacles we may encounter.

Song: “Mayenziwe”/“Your Will Be Done”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)

We, all of creation, in fact, have been reconciled to and made new in Christ, and because of this, we have been entrusted with the gift of reconciliation—to bring and be the message of reconciliation for others. A true mark of the church, using the language of the Belgic Confession, then, is the presence of the ministry of reconciliation for others...Belhar provides an opening for us to turn and walk toward one another based on our shared reconciliation in Christ.

—Gretel Van Wieren, RCA pastor

In-session exercises

Reflect: Break into groups of two or three and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.

Connect: In Reconciliation, John De Gruchy says, “But reconciliation as a final achievement is, in a sense, always beyond our grasp.” If reconciliation and freedom from racism will never be fully realized on this earth, what is the point of the struggle? What does the Belhar Confession have to say in answer to this question (particularly paragraph 3)?

Respond to what you’ve learned with one or more of the following exercises:

1. Read together one of the selected readings for this session (if not everyone in the group has read it). Then discuss:
   - Montoya letter: What are some of the changes that need to happen in the RCA and/or your congregation if racial reconciliation is to be fully realized?
   - Damascus Road: What does the Mennonite experience with Damascus Road have to teach us about difficulties of racial reconciliation? Does your experience match theirs?
   - Danney letter: Divide into two groups and brainstorm ways you might better use your congregation’s resources (human and physical) to foster racial unity, justice, and reconciliation in your community. Don’t limit yourselves to facility-sharing.
Reconvene and share your ideas. Discuss together, based on learnings from the Danney letter, why sharing facilities is a first step but not a last step in achieving reconciliation and unity. How can groups move from being “co-habitors” to “co-partners in Christ”?

2. Discuss: Is your church a safe place for people who feel excluded for any reason to speak up? How could your congregation deal with expressions of pain and anger by persons of color or other excluded groups in a way that healed rather than further alienated? What resources are available in your community to help you?

3. Time of reflection and prayer for reconciliation in your community (each group will need a large wooden or plastic building block):
   - Reflect: What are examples of division and hatred within your church and your community?
   - Share your examples. As each example is shared, write the example in brief form on a sticky note and attach it to your block. Then add the block to a wall you construct together.
   - When everyone has had a chance to share, reflect silently on the situations named, and then have a time of prayer, either silent or spoken.
   - While one person reads the paraphrase of paragraph 3 of the Belhar Confession (on p. 39), the others should retrieve their blocks one by one to dismantle the wall.
   - Pray together to find one small thing you can each do to promote healing in your specific situations during the coming week.

4. Revisit Ronnie, Bonnie, and the apple pie.

Mother comes home from the bakery with apple pie. She gives Bonnie, who has finished vacuuming her bedroom, a large piece, and she gives Ronnie none since he has not vacuumed his bedroom. Ronnie loudly informs Mother that the vacuum hose is plugged with Bonnie’s dirty sock, which Ronnie has been unable to dislodge. Ronnie then grabs Bonnie’s pie and hurls it against a kitchen wall, shouting that Mother always favors Bonnie, which is true, if truth be told. Mother slaps Ronnie and banishes him to his room, where he can be heard sobbing, swearing, and throwing things around.

Using De Gruchy’s elements of the reconciliation process (see p. 36), discuss what would be necessary in this situation to restore not only justice, but also unity. Discuss why restoration of justice alone is insufficient to restore unity. Discuss how the principles illustrated in this scenario relate to situations involving injustice and vengeance locally and globally.

5. On a white board, chart paper, etc., list as many situations as you can think of, both locally and globally, in which the behavior of Christians (whether internal fighting and disunity, or discrimination and injustice against others) has damaged the credibility of the gospel. If you have a world map, place stickers on each of these locations where Christians have brought dishonor to Christ. Next, name Christian people and groups who have, by their actions, borne witness to the light.

If you have time, close this session by reading together the paraphrase of paragraph 3 of the Belhar Confession.
Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the way of peace. Come into the brokenness of our lives and our land with your healing love. Help us to be willing to bow before you in true repentance and to bow to one another in real forgiveness. By the fire of your Holy Spirit, melt our hard hearts and consume the pride and prejudice which separate us. Fill us, O Lord, with your perfect love which casts out fear and bind us together in that unity which you share with the Father and Holy Spirit. Amen.

—Celebrating Community (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993)

Digging deeper

1. In Reconciliation, John De Gruchy comments that many Christian churches lack a sacrament of confession or penance (Protestants typically recognize only two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper). He wonders about the consequences of this in the life of a church. Research the meaning of sacraments in the Reformed tradition and in traditions in which confession and penance are sacraments (for example the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches). Do you think De Gruchy’s question warrants further consideration? Might confession, if given more emphasis in some formal way, strengthen reconciliation, particularly racial reconciliation, and unity within the church?

2. Develop a reader’s theater presentation based on paragraph 3 (or the following paraphrase) of the Belhar Confession for use in your congregation’s worship. (One option is to accompany the reading with drama to suggest applications of the Belhar’s affirmations to your context.)

Paragraph 3 Paraphrase:
We believe
• That God has entrusted the church with the good news that we have been reconciled 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 witnesses by what it says and by what it does to the new heaven and the new earth, where righteousness dwells;
• That through the life-giving work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, God has conquered the powers of sin and death, and so also of alienation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;
• That Christ through his Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience, obedience that can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;
• That when those who proclaim the message of reconciliation nevertheless separate people by race, promoting and perpetuating alienation, hatred, and enmity, the credibility of this message of reconciliation is seriously
affected, and the beneficial work of this message is obstructed.

• That anyone who 1) attempts to justify racial separation by appealing to the gospel, 2) is not prepared to venture on the road to obedience and reconciliation, or 3) denies that the gospel has the power to reconcile because of prejudice, fear, selfishness, and unbelief, that person holds to false doctrine—which doctrine we reject!

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 7.
Focus: The Belhar Confession calls us to obedient action.

Pre-session exercises:
Scripture reading: Acts 4:13-22
Read the scripture passage twice. The second time, stop along the way to visualize the people, the place, and the events of the story. What words especially draw you? Can you think of a stand or an action you might take for the sake of Christ, especially with respect to Christian unity, reconciliation, and justice for the oppressed, that would cause friction with or alienation from your family, friends, community, and/or society? What holds you back? Where could you find the support you need to be obedient? Ask God for wisdom, strength, and courage to hear and obey God's call, whatever it may be.

Other readings: Reread paragraph 5 of the Belhar Confession, or choose one or more of the readings for Session 7 in Appendix A.

Choose one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session:
1. Do something this week to increase your understanding of and appreciation for a racial group different from your own. Get out of your comfort zone! Here are some suggestions:
   - Worship with a racially different congregation.
   - Visit a soup kitchen, welfare clinic, or some other place where people gather because they have no alternatives.
   - Visit the cultural center of an ethnic group different from yours.
   - Plan a group ethnic meal. Ask people from an ethnic minority to bring food from their own ethnic traditions, and ask everyone else to bring an ethnic dish they've never cooked before.
   - Go to an ethnic restaurant and eat food you've never tried before. (Eating pizza at Pizza Hut doesn't qualify as Italian!) Use your fingers or chopsticks if the tradition typically requires it.
   - View a foreign film that's not European.
   - Read a book written by someone from a racial minority.

2. Pope John XXIII said words to the effect of, “See it all, let most of it go by, and do what you can to make a difference.” Someone else has said that to be an agent of change you must “start where you are, use what you know, and do what you can to
make a difference.” If you are not at present actively involved in justice work, here are some possible arenas for action in response to the issues raised by the Belhar Confession:

- Work for racial reconciliation and unity among Christians.
- Work for reconciliation and unity among Christians from different denominations.
- Work with other Christians on a justice issue (e.g. housing, literacy, tax reform, education reform, prison reform, abortion, environmental protection, animal welfare, employment equity, health care access, etc.).
- Work with people of various faiths (or no particular faith) on a justice issue.
- Work for greater respect and understanding among faith groups (Christian and non-Christian).
- Volunteer your gifts and experience to serve in God’s world (e.g. food or clothing bank, literacy center, prison ministry, foster parenting, tutoring, income tax preparation, sharing music or art with seniors—the possibilities are endless).

3. If you are already involved in community service or justice work, think and pray about what you are doing. Do you feel excited and passionate about your work? Do you sense God’s call? God’s blessing? Does the work you are doing make good use of your gifts and experience? Where do you need to stretch and grow to become a more effective servant of Christ?

4. Go online and research what resources, information, and service opportunities are available through your denomination.

**Introduction:** Why must we act for justice, reconciliation, and unity? What is the cost of inaction? What can God accomplish through our obedience? These are some of the questions we explore in this session.

**Song:**

“Sikhulule”/“Liberate Us, Lord”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)
In-session exercises

**Reflect:** Break into groups of two or three and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.

**Connect:** Read the excerpt from Ronald J. Sider in Appendix A (p. 64). Reflect on this reading in light of the Belhar Confession. Do you know anyone for whom, as the Belhar puts it, the credibility of the gospel was seriously affected, and in whose life the beneficial work of the gospel was obstructed because of the failure of Christians to behave as Christians, particularly in response to injustice and suffering? On the flip side, do you know of anyone who was brought to Christ through the love and faithfulness of Christ-followers?

**Respond** to what you’ve learned with one or more of the following exercises:

1. Discuss: Some Christians believe that Christians should indeed be involved in politics, social justice, etc., but as part of separate, non-church organizations (whether secular or Christian) and not under the umbrella of the institutional church.
   - What arguments can be made for and against such an approach?
   - How specific should the institutional church become in addressing racism and other justice issues? Should it restrict itself to broad proclamations of biblical principles, or can it legitimately endorse specific policies, parties, and leaders? What is the line between

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**Jesus’ Third Way**

Seize the moral initiative  
Find a creative alternative to violence  
Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person  
Meet force with ridicule or humor  
Break the cycle of humiliation  
Refuse to submit or to accept the inferior position  
Expose the injustice of the system  
Take control of the power dynamic  
Shame the oppressor into repentance  
Stand your ground  
Make the Powers make decisions for which they are not prepared  
Recognize your own power  
Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate  
Force the oppressor to see you in a new light  
Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective  
Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws  
Die to fear of the old order and its rules  
Seek the oppressor's transformation

—Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way, Walter Wink  
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003)
political meddling and prophetic witness? Does the Belhar Confession successfully tread this line?

- What are the pros and cons for Christians of working with interfaith or secular organizations versus strictly Christian organizations? How much must people have in common to work together? Common purpose? Common motivation?

2. Read together and discuss the Barker selection in Appendix A (p. 64). Why is it often easier to respond to needs and injustices far away than in our own communities? Reflect on the ministries and missions of your church. On chart paper, a white board, etc., list what you see as your congregation’s goals and priorities. What changes might your church make to be more faithful to Christ’s call?

3. Read together Liala Beukema’s reflections at the end of the Church of the Good News story (p. 67). What is meant by “doing with” rather than “doing for”? Is there a justice situation in your church’s neighborhood in which your church could get involved? How could you get involved in a way that respected, engaged, and empowered your neighbors? With whom could you work? Where would you get the strength to stay the course?

4. Read together the first four paragraphs of the Orange City–Bronx churches story (p. 67). How does the relationship of these two churches go beyond the common “one-time” mission trip? List benefits that might be received by congregations in mutual ministry. What “mutual mission” possibilities do you see for your congregation? Designate someone in your group to explore the possibilities further and report back.

5. In the Isaiah 61 Project story (p. 69), two inner-city RCA churches are offering their facilities, along with their time and money, to meet the very real needs of children and young people in their neighborhoods. What very real needs in your neighborhood would be helped by offering the use of your church’s facilities? What steps would you need to take to make dreams reality?

If there is time, read once again paragraph 5 of the Belhar Confession. Close with a time of prayer, using the prayer below and/or prayers of your own.

Prayer: A Tourist’s Prayer

O Lord, I don’t want to be a spectator
A tour passenger looking out upon
the real world,
An audience to poverty
and want and homelessness.

Lord, involve me—call me—
implicate me—commit me—
And Lord—help me to step off the bus.
—Freda Rajotle ©World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland. Used with permission.
Digging deeper

1. There are many possible responses to evil and injustice, including anger, violence, defiance, apathy, despair, helplessness, passivity, creative action, and militant nonviolence (Walter Wink). Read and reflect on paragraph 5 of the Belhar Confession, then respond with art (painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, poetry, music, etc.) to one or more of the following:
   • How do you see those around you responding to injustice and evil?
   • How do you respond, or wish to respond, to injustice and evil?
   • What call do you hear from the Belhar Confession in this regard?

2. In a speech to graduates of Berea College in May 2005, Desmond Tutu suggested that in situations where God seems to be failing to act against suffering and injustice, it is because God is waiting for humans who are willing to act with God to bring change. Think of a situation of injustice or disunity that you have prayed God would change. How could you work with God? Spend time in prayer seeking God’s leading.

3. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 8.
Focus: The Belhar Confession is an expression of hope.

Pre-session exercises:
Scripture reading: Isaiah 66:5-13, 22-23
Read this session's scripture passage several times, soaking in the rich imagery of hope. What is the basis for hope? To whom is the message of hope given? This passage tells us that God will finish in a spectacular way what God has started. Claim this promise for yourself and for your world. Talk with God about your hopes and fears, then entrust them to the one who is completely worthy of trust.

Other readings: Read paragraph 1 of the Belhar Confession, or choose one or more of the Session 8 readings in Appendix A.

Choose one of the options below in preparation for the upcoming session:
1. What is the basis of your hope for our world? Write a personal statement of faith, or find or create a poem, a song, a dance, or a piece of art that expresses where your hope lies.
2. What things in your world (organizations, movements, people, trends, etc.) give you the most hope?
3. Robina Winbush's story in Appendix A raises important questions about how we can address the fundamental faith needs of children, especially children of color, in a world that is hostile not only to their faith, but to their very existence. Find out about your church's programs for children and youth. What is your church doing to instill hope and vision in a new generation? How are you equipping your children and youth to be agents of reconciliation and hope in a “lost and broken world so loved by God”? What changes might you need to make to better equip and enable your young people to follow Christ in mission?
4. Imagine a letter that might be written by the grandparent of a child of color being raised amid violence and poverty. What might that letter say? Where might that grandparent find hope?
5. Write a letter to a child you care about, expressing your hopes for her or his future, or write a prayer or poem in which you express to God your hopes and fears for the child and for the world in which he or she lives.

**Introduction:** The Belhar Confession testifies that God calls the church to work for unity, reconciliation, and justice. As we seek to obey God’s call, what is the source of our hope? How can we be bearers of hope in a world grown weary and cynical?

**Song:**

“Cantai ao Senhor”/“Rejoice in the Lord”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)

**In-session exercises**

**Reflect:** Break into groups of two or three, and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.

**Connect:** Read aloud the first paragraph of the Belhar Confession. Why do you think the framers of the Belhar—Christians suffering the oppression of apartheid at the hands of other Christians—affirmed this belief before all others? Read the paragraph aloud again. Share your reflections.

**Respond** to what you’ve learned with one or more of the following exercises:

1. Discuss the Winbush story in Appendix A (p. 70). If not everyone has read it, take a few minutes to read it now, silently or aloud. How can civil disobedience be an expression of hope? How can civil disobedience bring hope to the oppressed and credibility to the gospel? What was at stake for the children in Rev. Winbush’s confirmation class? What sorts of things could tip the balance of their lives toward actions born of hope rather than of despair? What does Paragraph 5 of the Belhar Confession have to say about civil disobedience?

2. Discuss Session 8 pre-session exercise 3 concerning your church’s programs for children and youth.

3. Read and discuss the Huber piece in Appendix A (p. 70). What connection do you see between opportunity and hope in the situation described? How do you respond to the assertion that “injustice cannot and will not stand in a world ordered by a God who demands justice”? Has it been true historically? Have you experienced it as true in your own life? What does it mean to live “as people who know that redemption draweth nigh”?
4. Read the Mulder and Smith letters in Appendix A (p. 71). Discuss one or more of the following questions. (You may wish to divide the questions among group members, then come together to share your answers.)

- Where in the Mulder letter do you see privilege of birth?
- What hopes are expressed? How do those hopes compare with your hopes for the children in your life?
- What are some of the disadvantages or dangers of privilege?
- How can we help privileged children become aware of their privileges, develop sensitivity and compassion toward those with fewer privileges, and develop hearts for service?
- Contrast the Mulder letter with the Smith letter. What “different place” does the Smith letter come from than the Mulder letter?
- What might be the blessings of being raised in a family that has struggled for generations against racism, exclusion, and injustice?
- What might be the personal challenges of being raised in such a family (emotionally, spiritually, etc.)?

If there is time, read together the following words from the Belhar Confession. Close the session with prayer. If you have access to hymnals containing the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (“Make Me a Channel of Your Peace”), you may want to sing the prayer together.

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.

Jesus is Lord.

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

Prayer:
Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
Not so much to be understood as to understand,
Not so much to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—attributed to St. Francis of Assisi
Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice

Digging deeper

1. In *Theology of Hope*, Jurgen Moltmann asserts that those who live in hope, who trust in God's covenant promises, “can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it.” The result is that the church becomes “a constant disturbance in human society” because of its unwillingness to accept the status quo. The second result of hope is creative action, because new thinking and planning spring from hope.

Evaluate your life and your church in light of Moltmann's statement. Is there an aspect of human society that disturbs you enough to contradict it? Is the church you know a “constant disturbance” in human society? If not, why not?

2. Reflect on the following quote by Walter Brueggeman. Can you think of examples of the various distortions of prophetic hope he mentions?

Of course prophetic hope easily lends itself to distortion. It can be made so grandiose that it does not touch reality; it can be trivialized so that it does not impact reality; it can be “bread and circuses” so that it only supports and abets the general despair. But a prophet has another purpose in bringing hope to public expression, and that is to return the community to its single referent, the sovereign faithfulness of God.

—*The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggeman
(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001)

To prepare for the next session, please go through the pre-session exercises for Session 9.
Focus: In the Belhar Confession, we have received a wonderful gift. How best can we make use of that gift?

By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work. We are ambassadors for Christ, who reconciles and makes whole. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world.

—Order for Commissioning Christians to the Ministry of the Church, Reformed Church in America

Pre-session exercises:

Scripture reading: Isaiah 6:6-13
The angel of God purified Isaiah by touching a hot coal to his lips before calling him to service. Why? As you have progressed through this study, what parts of the Belhar Confession have been hot coals in your life?

God sent Isaiah to call the people to repentance and healing. The result? Dulled hearing, closed eyes, and calloused hearts. What must we do to avoid a similar fate when we hear God’s call in our lives? To what is God calling you? To what do you think God is calling your denomination?

Other readings: Since there are fewer pre-session exercises this session, please read all of the Session 9 readings in Appendix A.

Choose one of the reflection questions below:

1. How could the Belhar Confession be used to help your denomination better practice justice and racial reconciliation?

2. What would be required for the Belhar Confession to function in your denomination as it does in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, as an “instrument for profound self-examination, to help determine whether the church really lives by the faith it proclaims” (Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe)?

3. What are the pros and cons of each of the ways the Belhar Confession could be used?
Introduction: There are various ways our denominations could choose to make use of the gift we have received from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. We could use it as a guide to study and action. We could adopt it as a contemporary confession on par with “Our Song of Hope.” Or we could elevate it to the status of a standard of unity, standing alongside the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort as a document that defines who we are at the core of our theological being. What will we choose?

Song:
“Thuma Mina”/“Send Me Lord”
(Music is found in Appendix B.)

In-session exercises

Reflect: Break into groups of two or three and share what you have learned and produced through the pre-session exercises. Limit sharing to two minutes per person.

Respond to what you’ve learned using one or more of the following exercises:

1. On one side of an index card, write one thing you’ve learned from your study of the Belhar Confession that gave you joy. On the other side, write one thing you learned that caused you anger or sorrow. As a group, share what you’ve written.

2. Together, create a list of ways you could make use of the Belhar Confession in your own congregation. For each item, identify a person or persons in your congregation who could make it happen. What steps need to be taken next? Share your group list with the pastor of your church.

3. Create a list of ways your denomination could make use of the Belhar Confession. Send the list to a denominational leader.

4. Take a vote in your group on what status the Belhar Confession should have within your denomination:
   • Study document
   • Contemporary confession (e.g. “Our Song of Hope”)
   • Standard of unity (e.g. Heidelberg Catechism)
   • Other (specify)
Share the results with your pastor.

—Christo Lombard, member-in-residence at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, in an address to the 2004 RCA General Synod
5. Make a list of things you want the rest of your congregation to know about the Belhar Confession and about your experience with the Belhar study. Assign someone from your group to communicate these things to your congregation, perhaps through your church’s newsletter.

Close this final session of the Belhar Confession study by reading together these words from the Belhar Confession and praying the following prayer and your own prayers.

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.

Jesus is Lord.

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

Prayer:
Let not they Word, O Lord, become a judgment upon us, that we hear it and do it not, that we know it and love it not, that we believe it and obey it not; O thou, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, world without end. Amen.

—attributed to Thomas à Kempis

Digging deeper

1. Research the role of confessions in the life of the church. Under what sorts of circumstances do they arise? What functions do they serve? What is a “confessional church”? What are the confessions of our ecumenical partners?

2. Learn more about your denomination’s standards of unity. Do you agree that the Belhar Confession fills a gap left by the current confessions? Why or why not?

3. Read the contemporary confession “Our Song of Hope.” (It is posted on the RCA website: www.rca.org.) What difference does it make if a confession is not elevated to the status of a standard of unity?

4. Reflect on opportunities the Belhar Confession presents for church educators:
   • To learn about confessions.
   • To understand the theological basis for Christian social action and justice initiatives.
   • To explore the shift in the center of Christendom to the southern hemisphere.
   • To learn about our ecumenical partners.
5. Reflect on the possibilities the Belhar Confession presents with respect to ecumenical relationships (especially with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa). Find out about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)s work with the Belhar Confession by visiting their website.