

As we reflect on our call to follow Christ in word and deed, we are reminded of how radical true discipleship really is. We may well wonder, can we do it? Or better, can we even come close to true discipleship? In our finite, fallible, sinful world our work will only begin to embody these kingdom principles in shadowy, emerging ways. But not engaging in these high callings is not an option, and what's more, at our weakest, we must rely on God's strength. If we despair at what seems to be a hard, if not impossible, task, we have the comfort of the final words of the Great Commission, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Those words of comfort can sustain us in the midst of the hard work of a discipleship which seeks unity in the midst of division, a discipleship which works for reconciliation where there is alienation, and a discipleship that rolls up its sleeves, in the words of Amos, to "let justice roll down like waters." In this way, then, the Belhar can serve as an effective shorthand for the church's passion for Christian education and discipleship.

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). In response to Christ's prayer that we may all be one (John 17:21) and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA. The commission advises General Synod on ecumenical matters and communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies. The commission educates the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod refers ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The 2000 General Synod voted to instruct the commission to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13 amended, p. 100). The commission has made the Belhar Confession and the church-wide study its highest priority for the last seven years. An overview of how the General Synod has studied the Belhar Confession is available in the 2007 report of the commission (*MGS 2007*, pp. 271-274). The following constitutes a further elaboration of what can be found there.

Introduction

(This section of this report is from an introduction to the Belhar Confession written by representatives of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America to introduce the Belhar to delegates at their respective synods.)

From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world: Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are,

what we believe, and what we intend to do. These statements of faith, including the ecumenical creeds and the historic Reformed confessions, though centuries old and far removed from their place of origin, today still guide our understanding of Scripture and of faith, and of the life they call us to live.

In the late twentieth century the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, like those Christian leaders centuries before them, stepped forward to confront yet another critical issue that threatened the very core of the gospel message. In this case, the church and the society in which it functioned were torn by horrible internal conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and subjugation of those disenfranchised. From this crucible of suffering emerged the Belhar Confession, a biblically based doctrinal standard of justice, reconciliation, and unity, intended to guide not only the personal lives of God's children but the body of Christ in the world as well.

Like the confessions which preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from one particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world, a testimony for all of God's people in our time. For South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the downtrodden. This history of oppression in our own countries, and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time, calls for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—one that not only speaks against injustice but also offers a biblically faithful picture of hope, mercy, and reconciliation.

Our South African brothers and sisters have asked us to join them in confession, forgiveness, and healing by formal adoption of the Belhar Confession, that we might together say it aloud and live it together. May our prayer as we respond mirror the words in an "Accompanying Letter," which they ask always be read with the confession: "Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling-blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and unifying."

Historical Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What Is a Confession?

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

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

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

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

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

How Does a Confession Come About?

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

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

What Purpose Does a Confession Serve?

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

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

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

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

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

For nearly a decade the Reformed Church in America has been studying and reflecting upon the gift of the Belhar Confession. This gift was given to us from sisters and brothers who were faced with the challenge of how to live faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ in a culture of segregation and violence. To facilitate the process of our reception of this gift, the newly formed Commission on Race and Ethnicity in 1991 recommended to General Synod

“to endorse and use the theological foundation of the Belhar Confession to inform the RCA’s commitment to be a church freed from racism” (*MGS 2001*, R-115, p. 389) and “to invite members of congregations and classes to carefully study the Belhar Confession and the implications of its adoption for life and ministry in the RCA, using materials made available by the Commission on Christian Unity (*MGS 2001*, R-116, p. 389).

Having worked collaboratively, these two commissions, with ongoing support from other General Synod commissions, the General Synod Council, and the African American/Black Council, have now determined that the time has come to move to the final step in the process of our reception of the Belhar Confession. The Commission on Christian Unity believes the Reformed Church in America is now ready to receive this gift as its fourth confession and thereby join with one voice in confessing to the world that our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to be a church committed to work for unity, reconciliation, and justice. The commission therefore recommends the following.

REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEES ON THE BELHAR CONFESSION

When R-55 was presented to synod the advisory committees on the Belhar Confession writing team presented the following statement:

Three times in its history, the Reformed church has developed confessional statements. In 1561, Guido de Bres wrote the Belgic Confession, in the face of great persecution, seeking justice from the king of Spain. In 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism was written seeking reconciliation between Lutherans and Calvinists who were at violent odds with one another. In 1619 the Canons of Dort were composed to settle a theological dispute and bring unity to the church. The General Synod of that year confirmed these three confessions as standards of unity for the church.

For twenty-four years, the Reformed Church in America has been considering the status of another confession that has been put before us, the Belhar Confession. Like the confessions before it, it was written under persecution, confessing God’s desire for justice and reconciliation among people at violent odds with one another, and calling for unity in the church. Previous synods have passed this confession forward and outward for consideration. This General Synod has been offered the opportunity to consider another significant step. You have been given the task of deciding whether this confession will be adopted as a standard for your church.

As moderators of the issue advisory committees, we were given three tasks: to listen, to summarize, and to make recommendations based on your advice. As fellow delegates, we want you to know that your voices have been heard. We heard the passionate voices, we heard the questioning voices, we heard the hopeful voices, we heard the doubtful voices, and we heard every voice speak out of a love for God and the church.

We want to thank you for offering your voices and, more importantly, for the way in which you offered them. We feel privileged to share with you what you shared with us.

Some of you found it significant that the Belhar Confession is a gift from the hearts of a marginalized people. Some of you would like to offer a gift of your own by adopting the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. Some found in the language of the Belhar Confession the courage to take a stand and be held accountable. Some credited the Belhar Confession with the ability to raise our awareness of sins that we would otherwise ignore.

Some of you also spoke to us of your concerns. Some of you shared with us your fear

that this confession about unity could result in division within our denomination; you felt that adopting the Belhar Confession is made more complex by the potential connection to our ongoing discussion regarding the topic of homosexuality. Some of you wondered if the Belhar Confession deserved the same status as our current standards. Some of you felt it was too broad in scope, and others felt it was too focused on the situation of another time and place. You affirmed that a confession only has value if it is embraced and used, and some of you said you could not be certain that we could adopt the Belhar Confession with integrity. Finally, some of you shared a hesitancy to add to our doctrinal standards.

We listened to all of your voices. Ultimately, most of the voices spoke in favor of the recommendation to adopt the Belhar Confession.

We noticed a number of overarching themes in those more prevalent voices that serve as your reasons for the support of the Belhar Confession:

- The Belhar Confession expands and balances the RCA confessions to encompass the whole of Scripture. It speaks to unity and justice in ways that the other confessions do not.
- The Belhar Confession challenges the church to the hard work of unity and it gives a vision for unity and reconciliation in the global church and society. Many of you said we are ready to rise to that challenge and see this as an opportunity for unity in the church and around the globe.
- The Belhar Confession will help us add unity, justice, and reconciliation to our denominational DNA. So many of you told us you were ready to act out your faith and appreciated the Belhar Confession's emphasis on action as a response to belief.
- The Belhar Confession heightens our awareness of injustices around us and brings focus to specific areas of injustice, such as poverty and racism.
- The Belhar Confession strengthens the vision of Our Call.

For these reasons, many of you see this as the right moment to adopt a new confession. Many of you see the Belhar Confession as contemporary and relevant, and as resonating with the next generation of church members and new Christians and offering a meaningful answer to the cries of the oppressed around the world. Finally, many of you see the Belhar Confession as clearly defining our mission to a lost and broken world so loved by God.

The president called upon the Rev. Harold Delhagen, corresponding delegate from, and moderator of, the Commission on Christian Unity, to continue the report from the Commission on Christian Unity and the Rev. Donald Poest, moderator of the discernment and writing team for the Issue Advisory Committee on the Belhar Confession, to present the advice of the advisory committees regarding R-55. At this time the writing team presented the further statement:

- *As the Commission on Christian Unity brings the Belhar Confession before the church we ask that the journal record the following as we join with the church in affirming that scripture is the only rule of faith and life and further that our confessions are historic and faithful witnesses to scripture. The commission acknowledges that the Belhar Confession does not negate the statements of the General Synod on homosexuality including the 1978 and 1979 statements. We want to provide clear understanding that the Belhar Confession, as a faithful witness to scripture, acknowledges that membership in the Church is "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church" (The Belhar Confession article 2).*

- *We share with all delegates the profound nature of this moment—this is a rare moment in the life of the church and therefore one that must not be entered into lightly but rather with Godly fear and trembling, humbly trusting that we will be faithful to the Gospel. With these understandings we will now present a recommendation to adopt the Belhar Confession as a standard of Faith as the fourth confession of the Reformed Church in America.*

A motion was made to table R-55 until the next meeting of the General Synod:

VOTED: To defeat the motion (and therefore not table the motion).

VOTED: To adopt (with one abstention) R-55 (yes-166, no-65).

R-55

To adopt the following amendment to the first paragraph of the Preamble to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions stricken out):

The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. Its Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, ~~and~~ the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures. (ADOPTED)

BELHAR CONFESSION

September 1986*

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

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2.11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4.1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already con-

- quered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17.20, 23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2.1-5; 1 Cor. 12.4-31; John 13.1-17; 1 Cor. 1.10-13; Eph. 4.1-6; Eph. 3.14-20; 1 Cor. 10.16-17; 1 Cor. 11.17-34; Gal. 6.2; 2 Cor. 1.3-4);
 - that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12.3-8; 1 Cor. 12.1-11; Eph. 4.7-13; Gal. 3.27-28; Jas. 2.1-13);
 - that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

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

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5.17-21; Mt. 5.13-16; Mt. 5.9; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21-22);
- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world (Eph 4.17-6.23; Rom. 6; Col. 1.9-14; Col. 2.13-19; Col. 3.1-4.6);
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal

to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

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

4. We believe

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

Therefore, we reject any ideology

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

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

Jesus is Lord.

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

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

The president invited the Rev. Edwin Mulder, corresponding delegate and General Secretary Emeritus, to lead the General Synod in prayer. The president then recognized the Rev. Godfrey Betha, ecumenical guest from the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, to address the General Synod.

**A MESSAGE OF GREETINGS FROM THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA TO THE 203RD GENERAL SYNOD OF THE REFORMED
CHURCH IN AMERICA**

By the Rev. M. Godfrey Betha,
Actuary of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

Sisters and Brothers,

I bring you warm greetings on behalf of the moderator of our General Synod, Professor Thias Kgatla, and the entire Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church. May all your deliberations and the challenges this synod may face be met with God's grace and wisdom.

Thank you for your kind invitation to URCSA. I am privileged to be with you today.

URCSA and the RCA have come a long way. Our path together spans more than thirty years. In 1976 your General Synod decided to enter in a special relationship with the then Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). In 1979 your synod voted to explore a relationship with the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). These dates are very significant, because it tells a story of significant moments in our liberation history, especially the year 1976, which marks what is known as the Soweto uprisings. It tells the story of the RCA being at our side through the many difficult times and enormous challenges we faced. These are challenges and times of which the Belhar Confession so eloquently speaks about. At this particular time in our history, as a church and a nation, God gave you as a gift to us. We thank God for you.

Twenty-three years ago when the church of Jesus Christ was confronted with a dark cloud of theological uncertainty, God placed on our lips and in our hearts how to respond to the challenges. In Roman 10:9-10 (NIV) we read: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

Twenty-three years later we are still questioned as to whether the Belhar Confession is relevant. Time and again we hear statements and comments that the Belhar Confession is an obstacle to true reunification within the DRC family, that it is outdated and irrelevant to present day South Africa, that it reminds people of emotional, historical, and symbolic events of the past, and that some are even going to an extent of questioning whether we are trying to correct the past with a confession. There is sheer ignorance about the role the Belhar Confession has played, is playing, and will play in the future within the DRC family and the Reformed world as a whole. In some instances the comments are shrouded with racism and indignation because the confession did not originate from the dominant community, that is, those who are reputed to be sent by God to bring civilization and progress to the world. But it originated from the underside of history and the majority of people of color. The Belhar Confession is a homegrown statement of Reformed faith that emerged from African soil and context. Instead of building on our experiences as guided by God through the Belhar Confession, we find ourselves going back and forward to make ourselves clear to those who do not want to accept this reality.

We are well aware that, to some, issues raised in the Belhar Confession are difficult to comprehend. We will continue clarifying them with love and compassion until they too understand the spirit of the Belhar Confession, assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking the stand we are taking. Christians are by definition people who make their own confession known: “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9-10). The Christian church, called and held together by Jesus Christ himself, lives only through the continual renewal of this fundamental confession of faith. A confession of faith may thus be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and the world of what a church believes. It is an officially adopted statement.

The Time in Which the Belhar Confession Came into Being

From time to time there are controversies surrounding the question of who really wrote (or didn't write) the Belhar Confession, and all sorts of conclusions are drawn from this. What has not been highlighted yet in these debates, according to Prof. J.N.J. (Klippien) Kritzinger in his unpublished article titled “To Stand Where God Stands: Nurturing Justice and Solidarity through Liturgy,” is the role of the 1979 Theological Declaration of the Broederkring (later Belydende Kring), from here referred to as the BK Declaration. It was published in 1982 in a collection of contemporary Reformed confessions entitled *Reformed Witness Today* (Vischer 1982). It is clear that this declaration was used by the authors of Belhar, since certain of its phrases have been incorporated almost verbatim into Belhar, particularly the words: “As God's property the church must be busy standing where God stands, namely, against injustice and with those who are denied justice” (Vischer 1982:22). Various other phrases from the BK Declaration have also been incorporated in Belhar, to the extent that one could almost regard it as a prototype of Belhar, even though Belhar is much longer and developed the theological ideas of the BK Declaration in various ways. The other significant difference is that the BK Declaration did not address reconciliation at all; it limited itself to unity and justice.

I mention the BK Declaration not merely as a historical footnote, but to make the fundamental point that the precise “authorship” of Belhar is theologically a non-issue. Many ministers and theologians played a role in the shaping of Belhar and its prototype, the BK Declaration. It was, in the best sense of that word, a community doing theology (Schreier 1985...). At the Hammanskraal BK conference in 1979 where the BK Declaration was drafted, ministers from all three black Reformed churches in South Africa were present. The team of people who sat down one night to write the BK Declaration came from all three churches, so we can say without any fear of contradiction that the message of Belhar did not emerge out of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church alone. It was also not the brainchild of two or three authors. There seems to be a popular perception in the Dutch Reformed Church that Belhar was the idea of Dr. Allan Boesak and that it is part of liberation theology because basically it was written by him. There was an interesting moment at the 1979 BK conference when Dr. Chris Loff, the coordinator of the drafting team, presented the draft Declaration to the plenary. Dr. Allan Boesak questioned the phrase “to stand where God stands” since it was, to his mind, not dynamic enough. He suggested something like “to move where God moves,” but Dr. Loff insisted that the declaration should read as proposed—and the meeting agreed with him.

Let me conclude this section by emphasising that this “standing where God stands” should not be seen as an arrogant claim to know exactly who God is and what God's will is, elbowing every other view aside. It is with fear and trembling that we go to stand out there, outside the gate, to bear the shame of Christ where he stands among the abused little girls, the raped women, the evicted farm workers, the HIV-positive youth, the AIDS orphans, the fearful, and the confused.

Throughout the history of the Christian era, churches have written confessions of faith because they were compelled to do so, not just because they thought it would be a good idea, or acceptable to the world. But they did so fully aware that the world would most probably hate and persecute them precisely because of the stand they were taking. In some instances, confessions of faith resulted from a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and certain claims on the gospel that threatened the integrity of the church's faith and life within it (the church). The confession might result from some political or cultural movement outside the church that openly attacks or subtly seeks to compromise the church's commitment to the gospel. Sometimes the urgency to confess came from the church's conviction that it has a great insight into the promises and demands of the gospel that is desperately needed by both the church and the world.

In the case of the Belhar Confession all three scenarios played a crucial role in its genesis. There was a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and the claim of the gospel that threatened the integrity of the church's faith and life on one hand. Apartheid ideology was eroding the fundamental truth of the gospel. On the other [hand] it had been defended and justified by the church that brought the gospel to South Africa. South Africans, particularly people of color, were on the verge of forsaking and rejecting the gospel because of what was being done to them. The white churches were involved in practising heresy because of their theological justification of the system. There was urgent need not only to correct the wrong teaching but also to provide Christian authentic witness to the world. We are, however, thankful to God because the DRC has publicly denounced apartheid and apologized to the South Africans.

The Belhar Confession was an appropriate response by and a voice of the people-of-color Christians within the DRC family in South Africa. It brought necessary clarification to hard and pressing theological questions of the time. The apartheid ideology and the role the white church played called for an urgent public witness. Something had to be done to correct the perceptions and refute the liars. It was in this milieu, when there was a huge confusion, that God intervened and blessed his church with a gift of a confession that will remain a guiding light forever.

The confession was not their invasion but their verbalization of what God was leading them to say. The church confessed what it confessed out of gratitude and humility, not out of arrogance, blame-portioning, condemnation, self-exaltation, holier-than-thou-attitude, or self-gratification, but out of hope for all (black and white) in the country.

The Belhar Confession offered the church new hope and understanding of their social conditions in the light of God's revelatory word. Through the Confession of Belhar we were ushered into a new common human good that is warm, rich, and self-correcting despite the pain we had to endure. The confession gives us a new understanding of who we are and recognizing ourselves and each other in our common history, hoping, grappling with our collective pasts, struggling creatively for freedom, working, celebrating, worshipping, and welcoming all in our midst including those who benefited from our oppression, without any hint of bitterness and arrogance.

The Impact the Belhar Confession Has on the Life of URCSA

The Belhar Confession revives our old memories lest we forget them. It is these memories and scars we carry in our souls that keep reminding us that we were oppressed and we should never dare to oppress others. We are constantly reminded never to adopt a stance towards the future in which we place and interpret ourselves, our desires, our choices, our actions as the central subjects in the creation and destiny of a new united church. We are reminded in the Belhar Confession never to use our memories to retaliate, or to ground our

grudges or use them to promote our selfish agendas and subjugate the aspirations of others. We are constantly reminded to be vigilant against any in creeping ideology that feeds on racial prejudices. We are called to see in others the image of the liberating God who seeks to liberate others through us.

We are petitioned with the prayerful petition of the Lord's Day 49 in the Belgic Confession: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." The Belhar Confession reminds us that God's kingdom is founded on the conviction that the God in whom we trust is not indifferent to human history. He is immediately and imminently interested and is able, through his grace, wisdom, and power, to intervene and transform our world. He has demonstrated this when the Word of God was incarnated and assumed human nature.

The Belhar Confession keeps on [prompting us to ask], what sort of church are we? What sort of church must we become? It keeps reminding us to live authentically—that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly—under the dictates of the reign of God and to guard against falling into the distortion and deformation of other people. It calls us to be a united uniting reformed church for we cannot be a uniting church without first becoming united ourselves. The Belhar Confession energizes us to pray to the Lord of hosts to purge all disunity, strife, and tensions that may arise among ourselves.

It takes us along the path of rethinking ways of being a Christian church by constantly taking up a place before the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is at the cross where we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the poor, exploited, and marginalized of our society. We are constantly reminded to confess and repent of our ethnocentricity, sexism, cultural superiority, and marginalization of others. We are called upon to beg forgiveness from those whom we have offended and commit ourselves to emancipate those who are oppressed and denied excess to the wealth of our country regardless of who does that.

In the Belhar Confession we are cautioned never to embrace tendencies that lead to utopian or romantic schemes. We are reminded to recognize ourselves and one another in our past, our hopes, and to grapple with our collective efforts and struggle creatively for a common future which can be celebrated together. Never must we indulge in a selective interest that hides our evil intentions and presents us a picture of black or white innocence before one another. Our Christian journey remains a sterile and routine gesture unless we continually expose ourselves to the searching light of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, where our racism, sexism, cultural superiority, and marginalization of others are revealed and condemned.

The Belhar Confession cautions us never to be agents of any other force—including the state—in spite of how convinced we might be of its programmes. We should rather grasp opportunities to cross all barriers to proclaim the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth to all the people. It is in the Belhar Confession where we are reminded of the enormity of the true suffering of Jesus Christ and are oriented to commitment of emancipating ourselves to become agents of transformation. Far from us should be the temptation or complicity of distorting our experiences of the way Jesus taught us to love others as we love ourselves. (We are exhausted to become a uniting church that is purpose-driven according to biblical perspectives.) The starting point in our mission is: Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our life? What is God's purpose for our lives?

The Belhar Confession helps us to answer these questions. We are a uniting church that strives for reconciliation and justice within the Reformed family of churches. It is in our discovery of our purpose that we will be a revitalized and rejuvenated uniting church. We

can become a hope to those who do not have hope. We know that if the purpose for which we exist is well-articulated among our members it builds morale among our members and those who rub their shoulders with us. Our purpose helps us to focus and have greater impact on what we do. This is a new fertile ground we are challenged to explore as a uniting church.

En route to reunification of the DRC family in southern Africa, the Belhar Confession remains our guiding resource for cooperation, restoration, revitalization, and reconciliation. Thus the Belhar Confession can never become irrelevant to our existential issues. The Belhar Confession is a living and motivating reality within the life of the URCSA alongside the other three standards of faith; it directs and informs every dimension of our congregation's ministry, including its worship, instruction, care, witnessing, and service as well as its budgeting and administration.

May the King of kings be with you as you stand on the edge of your journey as a denomination in which you must decide to confess what you believe. You received this gift (Belhar) from the southern hemisphere way back in 1985 and you brought the wise and helpful voices from faith partners around the globe and from within your own tradition to help you discern on the Belhar Confession. In 2007 your General Synod voted to adopt the Belhar Confession provisionally for two years, testing it in worship, teaching, discernment, and confession, for possible approval in 2009 as a fourth confession. You did so prayerfully. So during this synod you will consider adopting Belhar as the fourth standard of your church. Your decision on the Belhar Confession will be the most important and historically significant one. As URCSA we do not want to put any pressure on you in this regard. This is a decision that you must take freely and prayerfully before God. We believe in his providence.

I bring you these warm greeting from URCSA as the youngest member (40 years) of the Moderamen and mindful of the intelligent voices you heard on your journey with Belhar and would like to reflect as follows as I conclude:

I was personally present at the General Synod of URCSA in 1997 when Dr. Oliver Patterson brought greetings as an ecumenical delegate from RCA and said, "We are proud to affirm the centrality of the Belhar Confession, and I could not be personally prouder that this confession, which speaks of the unity of humanity, emerges from Africa. I sincerely hope that you will resist, however, the temptation to localize its message to South Africa."

In 2002 the late Rev. Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe, an ecumenical guest from URCSA, addressed the RCA General Synod and hinted that "the implications of Belhar are far wider than its original context."

Dr. Christo Lombard of Namibia from URCSA addressed the RCA General Synod in 2004 and noted prayerfully: "As someone with a passion for our confessional heritage, including this gift of God to his church worldwide, I can simply pray that the RCA may ultimately benefit from the power of the Spirit released through this simple text of confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ in all our worldly affairs, in a similar way as we have experienced it in our context."

I remind you with humility, lastly, of the closing remarks of Professor H. Russel Botman in his address to your General Synod in 2007:

My brothers and sisters, in considering the implications of the Confession of Belhar for the Reformed Church in America, you are actually challenged to confirm once again that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and thus, that justice and unity are the

indispensable public duties of the church of Jesus Christ in this divided world and this terrifying time. You will be saying to the world and to Americans, if you are seeking ecclesial support for racism, disunity, and injustice or if you want a theological justification for racism, disunity, division, and injustice...don't come looking for it in our church!

I thank you, and God bless you!

The president called upon the general secretary to introduce the Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Rev. Dr. Nyomi addressed the General Synod.

**THE BELHAR CONFESSION: THE TIME HAS COME
A REFLECTION ON A MODERN DAY REFORMED CONFESSION**

Presented by the Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), at the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, June 7, 2009

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? When Nathanael was told about Jesus as recorded in John chapter 1, he was speaking out of prejudice. Philip's witness to him was critical in transforming him from a person who knowingly or unknowingly was prejudiced. Philip's witness to him was powerful—three little words: "Come and see." It was as if once he has seen, his prejudiced statement will be made, all doubt and confusion will be clear, and he will be able to make a "Here I stand" statement. The role Philip played is the role Reformed confessions have played since the sixteenth century—clear doubt and confusion so that the witness of Christians could be clear and based on the Word of God. The Belhar Confession stands in that tradition. Modern day Nathanaels may look at the Belhar Confession in the light of sixteenth and seventeenth century European confessions and ask, "Can anything good come out of Africa?"

It is significant that this evening's event is coming just one week after celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 in which faithful Christians spoke clearly on the Christian stance vis-à-vis the evil of Nazism. That document proved to be a gift not just for a few Christians in Germany but a real instrument of witness to the rest of the world, and is still relevant seventy-five years later.

The Belhar Confession was very much inspired by the Barmen Declaration. When it was issued in the 1980s, apartheid was alive and well. There were many who would wonder whether anything good will come out of a situation like this. Committed Christians praying for change were led to craft this confession. Today, apartheid is officially gone, but its legacies continue on. Plus racism exists in many forms in many contexts including in this country, the U.S.A. Like the Barmen Declaration, the Belhar Confession continues to be relevant for our times.

While I cannot dictate to the RCA synod on how to vote, I can say this: When the RCA adopts the Belhar confession, you will be demonstrating your commitment to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and to live out that faithfulness through addressing lingering issues of racism and the injustice of exclusion.

It will be a strong signal to the South African community which is still struggling to overcome the legacies of apartheid. The sad outcome of a recent survey carried out by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa demonstrated that a large number of members of

the church were uncomfortable with the Belhar Confession. Very often such a stance demonstrates a fear of embracing a more just community. This is painful for sisters and brothers in the Uniting Reformed Church and other Christians who have committed themselves to transformation of societies and who have been victims of injustice.

So the signal that the RCA adoption would make is to show that the Reformed family worldwide has the courage to embrace life. This could challenge the elements of the Dutch Reformed Church who are hesitant about taking courageous steps forward for the transformation of their societies.

Through voting to adopt the Belhar Confession, the RCA will clearly be responding to that question which is a veiled characteristic of modern day racism—"Can anything good come out of Africa?"—with a resounding answer: "Yes!" The Belhar Confession is a faithful, non-violent, life-changing instrument which can foster the building of communities consistent with what our Lord Jesus has called us to be. It beckons us towards healing and reconciliation in dealing with how sin has distorted and glorified separation and prejudice. In modern society in which separation and prejudice is often met with a response of frustration and vengeance, the Belhar Confession stands firm in faith and rather calls for rejection of the evil of injustice and commitment to reconciliation and unity. This is even more relevant in our today than in the 1980s.

This brings us to the question: "What could be the stumbling block to adopting the Belhar Confession?" It boils down to one thing: fear. I have referred to the hesitation of some in the Dutch Reformed Church. An analysis shows that the problem is not with theological depth of the Belhar Confession. I have used the Belhar at least twice in the southern African context, without naming what it was, and this was embraced as a solid confession consistent with Reformed theology. So the hesitation is mainly caused by fear by certain Afrikaners.

Therefore my message to the Reformed Church in America is do not let your decision one way or the other be based on fear. As good Reformed people, the only criteria should be what confessions have been measured by for centuries. The two yardsticks we cannot compromise are:

1. A confession must be biblically based.
2. It comes to give clarity to Christian stance vis-à-vis issues which could be confusing.

For Reformed Christians, if these two criteria are met, we have a confession. The Belhar Confession certainly meets these two.

Confessions in the Reformed tradition give us a biblically based standard for addressing the questions of how we live faithfully as children of God in a given circumstance. Without confessions, we will have only social movements to look up to. The confession frees Christians from looking up to only the political parties to lead the way. Without it in South Africa, the only instrument available to counteract the vicious form of racism called apartheid was the ideology of parties. You either follow the ideology of the ANC or the PAC or of the Nationalist Party. With it Christians are moved to take action on the basis of our faith—not ideology. This is why it is relevant in the U.S. context today.

With security concerns compounded by the financial crises, new challenges have come up in terms of how we view one another in multiracial contexts. These have come to add to the years of racism and trying to deal with the legacies of the era of slavery in this country. With what instruments do we equip ourselves to be faithful to God? This is where the Belhar Confession is a gift of God.

How do we respond to the tendency in multi-ethnic, multicultural situations to address those who want to institutionalize fear of others as a response to the insecurity in our world and the economic crises? The Belhar Confession points the way. It is relevant in the U.S.A. context because it gives us the solid basis with which to live faithful Christian lives when it is so tempting to follow the crowds and succumb to excluding those who are not like us. If we should live faithfully as Christians in multiracial societies, our departure point cannot be simply the laws of the land or what affirmative action initiatives bring our way. It should be from a faith perspective. The Belhar Confession points that way.

It needs to be seen first and foremost as a confession that calls for unity and reconciliation—rather than one which calls for the liberation of a particular race. What the Afrikaners in South Africa in the 1980s did not realize, and what some even today do not realize is it frees everyone and moves us to receive the gift of unity and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. Take for example these words:

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21-22).

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

In adopting the Belhar Confession, the RCA affirms the faithful witness of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. In addition, you affirm your own desire to be faithful to God in these times in your own contexts. The world needs such witnesses for our Lord Jesus Christ, and you are setting the example.

I end on the note that the Belhar Confession ends:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

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

COVENANT AGREEMENT WITH IGLESIA REFORMADA DOMINICANA

The general secretary introduced the ecumenical delegates from the newly formed denomination in the Dominican Republic, Iglesia Reformada Dominicana (IRD): the Rev. Ruperto Medina Beltre, the Rev. Nelson Polanco, Elder Juan Cruz, Elder Felix Carabello. The members of the RCA's "coaching team" who participated in the process of encouraging and enabling the formation of IRD were the Reverends Jhonny Alicea-Báez, Kenneth Bradsell, Brigido Cabrera, Bruce Menning, Jon Norton, Luis Perez, and Andres Serrano.

The Rev. Kenneth Bradsell informed the General Synod of the recent formation of IRD, and commended it to the RCA as a covenant partner in mission and ministry. A covenant agreement was signed by the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson and the Rev. Dr. Carol Bechtel on behalf of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, and the Rev. Ruperto Medina Beltre and the Rev. Nelson Polanco on behalf of the General Synod of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana.

Juan Cruz addressed the synod, and presented a flag from the Dominican Republic to the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson and the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell.

**Covenant of Partnership
The General Synod of
The Reformed Church in America
and
The General Synod of
The Iglesia Reformada Dominicana**

June 5, 2009

The undersigned representatives of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America and the General Synod of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana affirm before God and the minister and elder delegates of our General Synods a covenant of mutual support as our two churches engage in cooperative ministry to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all other Christian good works.

Mindful of God's call to mission and ministry and seeking God's continued grace, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America covenants to:

- Pray for the mission and ministry carried out through the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana and for the work of ministry we are able to accomplish together.
- Support the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana in its efforts to provide biblical, theological, and practical pastoral education for pastors, elders, deacons, lay leaders, and student candidates for pastoral ministry through Reformed Church in America leadership, and in partnership with other Christian churches and agencies.
- Assist the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana in the establishment of a church order and practice of governance that is grounded biblically and reflective of the church's confessional standards: the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession.
- Consult with the leadership of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana in all areas of mission and ministry including strategic planning for mission engagement, evangelization, and ministries of education and discipleship throughout the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and assist in the formation of administrative and financial struc-

tures to support the mission and ministry carried out through the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana.

- Share print and electronic resources where applicable for cooperative work in ministry and mission.
- License for shared use certain trademarks of the Reformed Church in America and other identifying materials to support the mutual work of our churches in the Dominican Republic and Haiti and as cooperative partners in mission in other agreed upon locations.
- Cooperate, where practical and advantageous, in the development and translation of new resources.
- Provide financial assistance by seeking mission support from RCA congregations, assemblies, and agencies, and encourage the involvement of mission teams and other forms of direct engagement in the life and witness of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana.
- Continue to serve the General Synod of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana and its officers, executive committee, and staff as ministry advisors in all areas of mission and ministry as may be requested.

Mindful of God's call to mission and ministry and seeking God's continued grace, the General Synod of the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana covenants to:

- Pray for the mission and ministry carried out through the Reformed Church in America and for the work of ministry we are able to accomplish together.
- Establish in the Dominican Republic a Reformed Church that is grounded biblically and receives into its life and ministry as confessional standards the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession.
- Identify, educate, support, and equip ministers, elders, deacons, church planters, disciples, and other church leaders for the work of ministry in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and throughout the Caribbean region.
- Seek to support its existing congregations and multiply its ministries throughout the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Caribbean region.
- Seek to become a self-supporting church within five years and a church engaged in new mission in partnership with the Reformed Church in America and other Christian churches.

Carol Bechtel
General Synod President
Reformed Church in America

Rev. Ruperto Medina Beltre
Iglesia Reformada Dominicana

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
General Secretary
Reformed Church in America

Rev. Nelson Polanco
Iglesia Reformada Dominicana

THE ECUMENICAL LIFE OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

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

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

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

The RCA is a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches, and a charter member of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Most recently the RCA has become an originating member of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. Several regional synods, classes, and local congregations hold memberships in the National Association of Evangelicals.

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

Interreligious dialogue is an emerging subject of discussion in the commission. This is a period in human history in which people of different religious traditions are meeting and interacting more than ever before. We live in a time of religious pluralism. For earlier generations in our context religious pluralism or diversity meant Judaism, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. But there is more that these religious traditions share in common than any of them share with Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, all of which have become increasingly prominent in several of the communities in which RCA congregations serve. Ignorance of the faiths of others can breed mistrust, and mistrust hostility. This is among the reasons why Christians need to be open to learning about people of other faiths through study and dialogue. The commission has been witnessing a need among RCA congregations for resources that will enable them to enhance their understanding of different religious traditions so as to make interreligious dialogue mutually profitable. The commission has begun to research the subject of interreligious dialogue and intends to continue to explore ways in which to foster interreligious understanding and communication.

Ecumenical Appointees of the Reformed Church in America

The RCA is represented at ecumenical tables and events by persons elected or appointed who willingly give of their ecumenical gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity we have in Christ. Following participation in events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches

The RCA is a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which has a membership of over 75 million Reformed Christians in its four area councils. The RCA is a member of the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAAC). WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council have agreed to join together in the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. WCRC will represent 80 million Reformed Christians around the world. WARC's priority program is the Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth Project. It works with churches and communities in its area councils to assess systemic injustice and is active in the struggle for justice and peace by preparing resources, hosting educational forums and conferences, and networking diverse community based organizations committed to human rights and justice. In 2008 the Pan African Family Gathering Planning Committee met in Accra, Ghana. The 2010 conference will continue the work begun in the Pilgrimage to Nelson Island, Trinidad, on October 24, 2007, and in Runaway Bay, Jamaica, December 10-15, 2007, which produced the paper "Abolished But Not Destroyed: Remembering the Slave Trade in the 21st Century." (To read the paper, visit www.oikoumene.org and enter "Abolished But Not Destroyed" in the search box.) CANAAAC's North American Covenanting for Justice Working Group is completing a website from which it will be possible to download exemplary missional workshops. Gretel Van Wieren coordinates this project.

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

The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A. continues its work on the church's exercise of authority in the world, the doctrines of justification and sanctification, and full communion.

The World Council of Churches

In 2006 the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued a call to member churches to respond to a text on ecclesiology that came out of the Porto Allegre assembly "Called to Be One Church." (To read the paper, visit www.oikoumene.org and enter "Called to Be One Church" in the search box.) This text is meant to be read in conjunction with a Faith and Order study document, "The Nature and Mission of the Church." (To read the document, go to www.oikoumene.org and enter the title of the study document in the search box.) The purpose of these texts is to invite member churches to reflect on what they can say together about the church of Jesus Christ as well as to open up renewed conversation about the issues that continue to divide them. Both texts contain a set of questions that are intended to guide the responses of the member churches which accept the invitation. The responses are due January 10, 2010.

In the course of its deliberations about how to move forward on this agenda, the commission has determined to invite selected RCA theology professors and clergy to read the texts and prepare papers addressing those questions that relate to their respective areas of expertise. The commission will serve as a kind of clearinghouse for those papers and will try to determine how to consolidate them into a report which it will then send as the RCA's response to the WCC.

The commission welcomes this opportunity to prompt the RCA to engage the ecclesiological issues that the WCC has put before it. The commission is of the opinion that the process in which the study of these texts would involve the RCA will only serve to clarify further the issues that the Belhar has challenged it to confront. The commission envisions the RCA's response as an important complement to its stance on Belhar.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) is the most recent ecumenical initiative in the United States. It is comprised of members and representatives from the five ecumenical families: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical/Pentecostal, historic Protestant, and racial and ethnic, representing forty-three churches. In addition, there are members from parachurch organizations such as the Salvation Army, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, Evangelicals for Social Action, American Bible Society, and World Vision. CCT provides the broadest national “table” for gathering in prayer, theological dialogue, and fellowship and aims to foster a common understanding of each tradition.

Since its inception, CCT has focused on the issue of poverty in the United States. It has committed itself to reduce and overcome domestic poverty in the next ten years. Toward that end, CCT embraces four objectives: 1) strengthening families and communities; 2) reducing child poverty; 3) making work “work” by combating racism and guaranteeing full-time employment and good health care; and 4) strengthening educational systems with particular attention to public schools.

The 2009 annual meeting was held in Baltimore, Maryland, in January. As part of the annual meeting, attendees were invited to the U.S. Capitol building, where they met with their members of the House and Senate. Discussions focused on poverty issues and initiatives before Congress. Breakout groups were held to study more closely the four objectives. Daily worship was led by representatives of each of the five ecumenical families.

RCA representatives were Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Douglas Fromm, Jessica Bratt, Tom DeVries, and Earl James. Seminarians attending were Marla Rotman and Duane Brown.

Roman Catholic/Reformed Dialogue

For the past several years a dialogue has been held under the auspices of WARC member churches and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The dialogue has focused on the sacrament of baptism with the goal of producing a common statement on baptism. RCA members of the dialogue are Renee House and John Paarlberg. Douglas Fromm serves as RCA staff to the dialogue.

The most recent round of the dialogue was held in February 2009 on the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary in California. A final draft of the common consensus paper was prepared and readied for presentation to the participating churches, which include the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Roman Catholic Church. The participating churches are reviewing the paper with the aim of receiving it “at a deeper level that will give it authority” among them.

The common statement will be reviewed by the Commission on Christian Unity for presentation to the 2010 General Synod.

APPENDIX

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BELHAR CONFESSION
AN ESSAY COLLECTION

Introduction

The church does not live *for* itself—it becomes who it is by responding to the Word and Spirit of God. Nor does the church does live *by* itself—it lives within a lost and broken world and carries out God’s mission there.

When the church is fully responsive to God, it hears God’s voice clearly. Then it declares and enacts God’s intentions in practice. The dual movement of confession—proclaiming what God says, and therefore what God wills—characterizes a church that is both Reformed and reforming.

In the sixteenth century, reformers led by Word and Spirit discerned that the church had come to embody its own intentions before God’s will. So they wrote statements of faith—statements about God. They also professed the way the reformers believed God was calling them to live in the world.

In the twentieth century, the dominant church in South Africa openly declared that God’s intentions for the world were disunity and irreconciliation, and thus it supported a regime of brutal injustice. The Belhar Confession was written to respond to the voice of God in that situation. The Belhar says nothing new about God. Rather, it affirms the truth of Scripture that God is one, that God dwells in eternal, triune community, and that God is just. Therefore, for God’s will to be done on earth, God calls the church to proclaim and to practice unity, reconciliation, and justice.

At its heart, then, the Belhar Confession is far more than a programmatic guide for how the church ought to act. It testifies to the nature of God. While it prods the church to reform its practice, more deeply it calls the church to renew its praise.

The Belhar Implementation Team offers this collection of essays, which look at the Belhar Confession from different angles and consider its potential impact on the RCA. Will Belhar compel us to respond to racism or sexism? Is it truly scriptural? Will it make a difference for our faith development? Are confessions still valuable in the twenty-first century?

The essays are intended to provoke thought and to inform, not to persuade. May they serve their purpose as the Reformed Church in America continues to discern and discuss the formal adoption of the Belhar Confession.

The Belhar Implementation Team includes Jim Daniels from the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, Harold Delhagen and Oliver Patterson from the Commission on Christian Unity, general secretary Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Paul Janssen representing the Commission on Christian Worship, Mark Kellar from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, general secretary emeritus Ed Mulder, Pam Pater-Ennis from the Commission on Christian Action, and GSC staff Paul Boice, Ken Bradsell, Doug Fromm, Earl James, Christina Tazelaar, and Jennifer Vander Molen.

**The Belhar Confession
Where Are We Now?**

By Ed Mulder

Whenever we take a trip by car I love to stop at a rest stop, find the big map board, and see where we are. It is helpful to see how far we have come and how far we have yet to travel.

Join me as we consider the Reformed Church in America's engagement with the Belhar Confession, a journey that covers many years. In order to understand where we are today, we need to understand when this journey really began.

On a hot summer day a tourist from South Africa stood in front of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City and asked me, "Is this the same Dutch Reformed Church as we have in South Africa?" My answer was, "Yes and no."

The Reformed Church in America shares its roots with the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. In 1628 the Dutch West India Company established a colony on Manhattan Island providing, among other things, religious services. The Company provided ministers who were trained and ordained by the Classis of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In 1642 the Dutch East India Company established a Dutch colony at Cape Hope in South Africa. The policy of the East India Colony was the same as the West India Company. Churches established in the United States and South Africa would eventually become autonomous. Yes, there was a Dutch connection between the Reformed Church in America and the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

In 1792 the Reformed Church in America became an autonomous denomination. In 1824 the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) became autonomous. Over the years these two denominations maintained close fraternal relations. They adopted the same confessional standards, exchanged correspondence, and sent fraternal delegates to their respective General Synod meetings. But while similar, the two denominations would evolve differently. During the mid-1900s the DRC in South Africa developed a mission policy of separate development that became the blueprint for a national policy of apartheid. As a result of the missionary efforts of the DRC, three separate Reformed denominations were formed: the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for the colored, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for the blacks, and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for the Indians. What began as permissive separation along racial lines over time became an enforced policy.

While the Reformed Church in America was not void of racism and injustice, the relationship between the RCA and the DRC became increasingly estranged. The DRC blatantly justified apartheid on scriptural grounds. The RCA began aggressively to deplore the beliefs and practices of apartheid. Are the two denominations the same? The answer has to be no. In order to understand the Belhar Confession it is important to connect the dots from the RCA perspective.

In 1948 apartheid became the law of the land in South Africa. It was put into practice with full approval of the DRC, which at the time was called "the Parliament at prayer." Apartheid was approved scripturally. Beginning in the 1950s the General Synod of the RCA took strong actions opposing the practices of apartheid and the distorted views of Scripture associated with it. Again and again the RCA pleaded with the DRC to change its ways. The DRC published a document entitled "Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture." The DRC was relentless in justifying apartheid.

Historically the Reformed Church in America has had a strong social consciousness. It has insisted that there needs to be a consistency between word and deed. A strategic role would

be played by the “minority councils” of the Reformed Church. The African American Council in particular played an important role in advocating the dismantlement of apartheid. Relationships were developed with an organization in South Africa known as the Broederkring. Members of this association consisted primarily of colored, black, and Indian ministers, along with a few whites. Increasingly the Reformed Church had strong ties to South Africa through individuals. In 1979 a Task Force on South Africa was formed, and it functioned until 1995.

In 1981 the General Synod took an action to discontinue its ecumenical relations with the DRC. The reason for this action was the DRC’s refusal to acknowledge that apartheid was a sin. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid a *status confessionis*, a situation where the truth of the gospel is at stake. The DRC was excommunicated from WARC and subjected to conditions for reinstatement. It was at this same time that RCA entered into church-to-church relations with the DRMC, the DRCA, and the RCA in South Africa. As a denomination we committed ourselves to standing in solidarity with our black, colored, and Indian brothers and sisters in their struggle. The RCA was the first Protestant denomination to divest itself of investments in corporations doing business in South Africa. We urged sanctions against South Africa. The eighties were a time when the international community and churches began to put pressure on South Africa’s draconian practices.

In 1982 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church drafted “The Confession of 1982”; a few years later it came to be known as the Belhar Confession. This confession emerged out of incredible suffering. It lifts up the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. It expresses the hope that the DRC would adopt this confession and agree to join with its daughter churches to become the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Steeped in the Scriptures, it sought reconciliation, justice, and unity among all people. In 1985 the DRMC sent a copy of the Belhar Confession to the RCA, requesting a response. The text was received and distributed throughout the church.

That is now 24 years ago. In 1986 the Commission on Theology wholeheartedly affirmed the Belhar Confession. For the next five years the Commission on Christian Unity made the Belhar Confession its highest priority.

In the year 2000 a new sense of urgency developed regarding Belhar. The Commission on Christian Unity commended the Belhar to churches for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA’s commitment to deal with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the URCSA and other Reformed bodies. (In 1995 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, or URCSA. Upon the union of the two churches the Belhar was adopted as the fourth confessional statement of the newly formed denomination.)

With the invitation of URCSA before it, the RCA set out in a most intentional way to consider adopting the Belhar as its fourth confessional statement. Beginning in 2002, presentations were made at each General Synod meeting regarding Belhar, including:

- The RCA’s history with Belhar (2002)
- The theological implications of Belhar (2003)
- The practical implications of Belhar (2004)
- Confessions—what they are and how they inform the church (2005)
- The use of Belhar as an educational/formative work in nurturing the witness and mission of the church (2006)

In 2007 the General Synod was asked to vote on a provisional approval of the Belhar. The synod approved this recommendation. It further agreed that in 2009 the General Synod would vote on whether to adopt the Belhar as a fourth confession of the Reformed Church in America.

We have come a long way since we began this journey with Belhar. Understanding where we have come from and understanding the history out of which Belhar has emerged helps us to appreciate how relevant this confession is for our time, for our world, for the Reformed Church. We are called to confront the racism that exists in our society. We are called to strive for unity among Christians everywhere. In a broken and fragmented world, we are called anew to be reconcilers.

Last but not least, God calls us to do justice. Could it be that God is using a people who have suffered much to challenge us to become more fully the people God wants us to become?

Ed Mulder is general secretary emeritus for the RCA. He began his journey with Belhar on a 1980 trip to South Africa as General Synod president.

Why Confess?

By Paul R. Fries

The Reformed Church in America is a confessional church. But is it a *confessing* church?

This question alerts us to a distinction generally overlooked in discussions about the place of confessions in the church. It is one thing for a denomination to formulate and adopt confessions; it is another thing for a church to *confess* its confessions. A confession per se is merely a document, a document which may lie inert in the dusty archives of a community of faith, the passion and hope inspiring its writing long forgotten. Or a confession may spring to life—guiding, energizing, and shaping the mission and ministry of the people of God. When this happens a church not only possesses its confessions, but is possessed by them. It confesses its confessions!

The three confessions acknowledged by the RCA clearly served as instruments of confessing when they were first adopted by the churches which wrote them. The Belgic Confession proclaims the faith of congregations living under the sword of persecution in what today we know as Belgium—a faith bringing its author, Guido de Brés, to a martyr's death. The Heidelberg Catechism, while not serving its desired purpose of uniting Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Palatinate (a region of Germany), became the vehicle for unifying continental Reformed Christianity and a tutorial of faith for countless men and women through the centuries. The sometimes icy articles of the Canons of the Synod of Dort defended a high Calvinism against its detractors; formulated the theology, worship, and order soon to be imported to structure what would become in America the RCA; and unhappily triggered persecution in the Netherlands. While the consequences of confessing the confessions were not always admirable, no one could believe for a moment that at their inception these testimonies were some kind of doctrinal ornamentation. They were not made to be admired and preserved, but to be confessed!

Like the historic confessions of the RCA, the Belhar Confession was born in strife and was fashioned to sound the clear notes of evangelical faith in a situation where the baptized no longer responded to its call. The South African social and political matrix in which it was composed is well known, as is the history of its writing, adoption, and reception—these

need no further elaboration here. As the RCA “imported” its confessions from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, is the church now prepared to “import” and adopt a confession from South Africa? And not only to import and adopt it, but to own it? The church is faced with one of the potentially most important decisions ever made in its long history. Will the church adopt the Belhar Confession, and if adopted will our denomination confess it?

What would confessing the Belhar Confession mean? Confessing is a way of speaking, and as I have written elsewhere, confession as speech calls “...into being who and what we are and at the same time determines our purpose and commitment.”¹ Our personal and corporate identity is located in speaking—not speech or language, but speaking. In speaking, identity is actualized. The identity of a person, community, institution, or nation is not static like an image stamped on a coin; it is dynamic—not something we are but something we do.² Guido de Brés suggests this when he begins the Belgic Confession with the words, “We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths...” But another beginning far more profoundly reveals the dynamic character of speaking. John in the prologue to his gospel writes, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) and “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). Through the Son’s words and deeds God is disclosed to us. Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the Father “speaking” to us, and through that speaking we identify him as the one true God; in response to this speech we are called to our true identity and purpose: to be the sons and daughters of the living God whom we serve. Confessing is identity and it is also destiny.

It is by that special kind of speaking in word and deed—confessing—that we come to be what God is calling us to be. Confessing is far more than the formal acknowledgement of a statement of faith, although this is the indispensable beginning point. It is also far more than finding a new way to speak about ourselves. Confessing the Belhar will alter our denominational DNA. A new coordinate will be factored into the course charted by the church—a coordinate orienting its worship, theology, and order, its *kerygma*, *liturgia*, and *diakonia*. Confession is identity and destiny; by adopting and then confessing the Belhar Confession, the RCA will gain a new sense of self and mission, a new identity promising to deepen and broaden the church’s witness to and participation in the kingdom of God.

Confessing understood in this way is an act of faith. The implications of confessing the Belhar Confession cannot be foreseen, and to so confess is certain to change the church in unexpected ways. A new identity will mean sloughing off aspects of our present identity, and this can be painful. A new sense of our God-given destiny will lead the church into yet unknown arenas of mission. Whatever the RCA will become after five, 10, or 15 years of confessing its fourth standard, this much is clear: God’s call to unity, reconciliation, and justice, which has hovered on the periphery of denominational life, will move to its center. These are the heart passions of the confession. If they do not awaken passion in the denominational heart then the RCA may have adopted the Belhar Confession, but it will not have confessed it.

¹ “Reflections on Confessing,” Paul R. Fries. *The Reformed Review*, Fall 2006, vol. 60, #1, online issue. I have been instructed in my reflections on speaking by the thought of Georges Gusdorf in his work *Speaking*.

² *Ibid.*

Paul Fries is a General Synod Professor of Theology emeritus for the RCA. He is a member of Lebanon Reformed Church in Lebanon, New Jersey.

**The Belhar and Race:
The Dream Fulfilled**

By Gregg Mast

“The Dream Fulfilled”—those words were in very large type across the top of *USA Today* on November 5, 2008, heralding the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America. No matter how one voted in this election, one can hardly be immune to the historic nature of what we have done as a nation. “Everything is possible in these United States,” intoned Obama as he stood before us as the first African American to be elected to the highest office in the land. Indeed, the world seemed to hold its breath as it watched and then cheered the news that a person whose blood flows from Kansas and Kenya will now help chart the course of global events.

But the headline portends some very real challenges for the U.S. as a country and for us as a church. The headline makes it sound as if we have forded the Jordan and taken up residence in the Promised Land. It sounds like the struggle is over, the battle has been won, and the dream of a more perfect union can now be put on the shelf as a great trophy to be honored.

This challenge goes to the very heart of what it means to be an American, but it also speaks clearly to the Christian vision of a world where peace will reign because all of God’s children have found justice. Just a few days after the election, an incident was reported in New Jersey where a cross was burned on the lawn of a family that supported Obama. The father of this family explained to his eight-year-old daughter that sometimes people hate to lose. I wish it were that simple and that innocent.

As we turn our eyes to the Belhar Confession and ask why the Reformed Church in America might consider adopting it as a fourth confession and what role it could play in our life and faith, allow me to share with you a portion of a letter that was penned a little more than 20 years ago about the relationship the writer believed God expects between different races:

We believe in regard to the races that the Bible in its entirety clearly indicates that God has separated people for his own good purpose. He has erected barriers between nations—not only land and sea barriers, but also ethnic, cultural and language barriers. God has made some people different one from another and intends for those differences to remain.

In biblical history, any effort to bring men together in oneness was judged and cursed by God. He wants nations to remain segregated one from another (Acts 17:26; Genesis 10:5, 32; Genesis 11:8, 9; Daniel 7:13; Zechariah 14; Revelation 11:15; Revelation 21:24).

Any violation of God’s original purpose manifests insubordination to him (Romans 9:12-24), and no Christian has any business being involved in any such practice (as reported in the newsletter *Black Caucus RCA*, the official voice of the Black Council, RCA, August 30, 1985).

This letter summarizes well the warped theological foundations of apartheid in South Africa. I wish I could tell you that these words were penned by a racist South African pastor or theologian 20 years ago. But alas, the words are from a letter written by Bob Jones III, president of Bob Jones University, and sent in response to an inquiry about the ban on interracial dating on campus. Again, I wish I could suggest that such a position was unique

to a fundamentalist, Southern school. But they summarize well the quietly whispered words from my parents 40 years ago when I wondered why I could not date a young black woman. We have all received from this land we love, and this country of which we are justifiable proud, legacies of suspicion, deep-seated feelings of superiority and inferiority, and even hatred—and these were not swept away in a remarkable election on one Tuesday evening in November. I believe that the election of President Obama presents us with a profound challenge and opportunity to deepen the conversation about race and racism that remains very much unfinished. There are still confessions to be made, hurts to be healed, covenants to be created, and hopes to be nurtured—made even more possible as we have taken a significant step forward with the election of an African American, a person of “mixed race,” as our national leader.

The Belhar Confession speaks of unity, reconciliation, and justice and, if adopted as a part of our denominational identity, I believe it will begin to help us answer these questions:

- Why is it important to seize this moment as an opportunity to deepen our commitment to wrestle with the demons of racism that have afflicted this nation from its inception?
- Why is it important to seek a way forward *together* as the RCA tries to become a more richly diverse community of God’s children?
- Why is important for us to find in the painful experience and great wisdom of our brothers and sisters in South Africa some paths for us to trod in the years ahead?

To confess the Belhar as our own carries with it two distinct but complementary meanings: “to confess” means to genuinely admit how we have fallen short of what God expects of us. It also means that we recommit our lives to the divine vision that inspires our faith. The confession of our sin is the only way toward sanctifying our witness. The Belhar has come to us for such a time as this—I pray we will find within it God’s leading, as our feet edge ever closer to the waters of the Jordan.

Gregg Mast is president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

**Observe All Things:
The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship**

By Mitchell Kinsinger

One way to tell which passages of Scripture are beloved and influential in the church is by whether or not they have a name. Think of the “Great Commandment” or the “Great Commission.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the first, and I suspect you will get fairly uniform versions of “love God, love your neighbor.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the second and my hunch is that you will hear a little more variety of emphasis: “Go,” “make disciples,” “make disciples of all nations,” and perhaps even “baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Many people stop there, but the Great Commission actually continues into the next verse: “and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). “Teaching them to observe all things,” is the way that the King James renders it. Teach them. To obey. Everything. It is hard to find more sobering words in the Gospels. When G. K. Chesterton observed that the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, but rather found difficult and untried, he could have had this clause of the Great Commission in mind.

We struggle with this task because it is difficult, and we need help. From the perspective of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, the Belhar Confession offers help by way of its encouragement to live a Christ-like life characterized by unity, reconciliation, and justice. Since Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the Scriptures of the Old Testament, surely true discipleship is interested in obeying all the commands and teachings of Scripture. These three central tenets of the Belhar Confession—unity, reconciliation, justice—articulate what can be considered the heart and soul of what discipleship looks like. In fact, I am reminded of the Staples office supply store slogan, “Yeah, we’ve got that.” Unity? Yeah, we’re called to that. Jesus prays in John 17 that his followers would be one even as the he and the father are one. Reconciliation? Yeah, we’re called to that, too. “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Justice? Yeah, we’re also called to that. God has shown human beings what is good and required: that we “do justice” (Micah 6:8).

In this way, the Belhar provides a necessary corrective to the other three forms of union (the Heidelberg Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession), which seek to teach us how to think. The Belhar not only encourages us to continue to think well, but also to live well. It tells how to live in the world—how to live like disciples in unity, reconciled and reconciling, and seeking the justice that characterizes the reign of Christ.

As we reflect on our call to follow Christ in word and deed, we are reminded of how radical true discipleship really is. We may well wonder, can we do it? Or better, can we even come close to true discipleship? In our finite, fallible, sinful world, our work will only begin to embody these kingdom principles in shadowy emerging ways. But not engaging in these high callings is not an option, and what’s more, at our weakest, we must rely on God’s strength. If we despair at what seems to be a hard or even impossible task, we have the comfort of the final words of the Great Commission, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Those words of comfort can sustain us in the midst of the hard work of a discipleship which seeks unity in the midst of division, a discipleship which works for reconciliation where there is alienation, and a discipleship that rolls up its sleeves, in the words of Amos, to “let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24). In this way, then, the Belhar can serve as an effective shorthand for the church’s passion for discipleship and Christian education.

Mitchell Kinsinger is an associate professor of religion and Christian education at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. He is a member at American Reformed Church in Orange City.

Observations on the Belhar Confession and Scripture

By Tom Stark

1. When the predominantly black and colored churches in South Africa (now united as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa) adopted the Belhar Confession, they already subscribed to the same three doctrinal standards as their white mother church (the Dutch Reformed Church): the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. The dependence of these three standards on Scripture is overwhelming. The standards have footnotes of Scripture references; at many places Scripture texts are quoted, or quoted and applied, or longer sections are expounded (The Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments); or the language in the standards closely parallels or summarizes Scripture. A focused “doctrine” of Scripture can be seen in Articles 1-7 of the Belgic

Confession, but the full doctrine is found throughout the standards.

The Belhar Confession rests on and assumes a view of Scripture found in these three doctrinal standards, also shared by the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church, and others.

2. The CRC and a Reformed Church in Indonesia have officially concluded that the original wording of Question 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which addresses the mass, is not an accurate statement of the present day teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The RCA has put Question 80 in a footnote. The CRC decided that Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, on civil government, was to be amended in part as unbiblical. The RCA, when it became independent of the Dutch Church in 1792, no longer included the “Rejection of Errors” in its version of the Canons of Dort, and disavowed the condemnation of “Anabaptists” in the Belgic Confession.

There are minor variations in the texts of the three standards around the world, but the variations do not affect the commitment of the standards to scriptural authority.

3. In my earlier years as a campus minister, I discovered that the only Christian leader most students seemed to know was Billy Graham. Almost all had heard one of his television specials. On a number of occasions a student said to me, “Billy Graham always says, ‘the Bible says,’ and I don’t believe the Bible.” While that was a favorite expression of Billy Graham, those who knew the Bible realized that in every message he also paraphrased and quoted and summarized the Bible’s teaching without always saying “the Bible says.” I smiled inwardly at skeptics who got their guard up for every “the Bible says,” not realizing how much more Bible they were getting in all the rest of the sermon.

While the Belhar Confession does not say, “the Bible says,” it alludes to, quotes, and paraphrases the Bible throughout, and is in fact saturated with Scripture. In addition to those Scripture references given in Belhar, there are many other Bible passages on which the statements in the confession are based.

4. A Jewish student in Boston came to believe in Christ as her Messiah. Her parents reacted strongly. Her baptism was solemn, as the pastor knew what a costly step this was for her. She later prepared and led a small-group Bible study on John 9 at a training weekend. I was to evaluate afterwards, and I mentioned there had not been much application, and she said that had been hard for her since she hadn’t seen any applications in the text. I mentioned the blind man’s parents, who distanced themselves from him. She was amazed—she hadn’t seen that. I had thought that would leap out at her.

We know we don’t necessarily “get it” when we study Scripture. The Belhar Confession introduces us to the work of fellow believers who have struggled deeply to see what Scripture teaches about unity, reconciliation, and justice.

5. A Kenyan pastor at InterVarsity’s Urbana conference told of tensions that had developed between Western and national leaders in a congregation. Finally, a mediator assigned leaders of each group to preach on the next two Sundays on the main message of the story of Joseph. The Western speaker emphasized that, no matter how difficult life may be for you, God will always take care of you. The African speaker emphasized that, no matter where you are, you must always be concerned for your extended family.

We read and apply with cultural eyes, and exposure to “cross-cultural eyes” can enlarge our understanding of God’s Word. The question may not be who is more correct, but what we need to learn from Scripture through the experience of brothers and sisters in Christ from a different cultural context.

6. An early Unitarian leader is supposed to have said, “You can’t write a creed I can’t subscribe to.” Or sometimes the assertion is, “You can prove anything from the Bible.” Any of our creeds and confession can be twisted, as can the Bible itself (“The Canons of Dort teach fatalism,” “The Heidelberg is devotional and has no doctrine,” “The Bible doesn’t teach the Trinity,” and so on). No doubt the Belhar Confession will also be twisted. But the church must firmly resist any and all of these twisted meanings.

Tom Stark is a retired RCA pastor. He lives in Lansing, Michigan.

**The Belhar and Reconciliation:
The Confession’s Application to the Church’s Work in Sudan**

By Debbie Braaksma

When the church finds itself struggling through a painful crisis situation, we often discover some of its most profound work is taking place, both theologically and in terms of practical ministry on the ground. Confronted with the evil practice of apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa did superb theological reflection on how Scripture speaks directly to the issue of disunity, and the need for reconciliation and justice, and has given us the gift of the Belhar Confession.

In a similar way, as the churches in Sudan went through a period of intense pain and struggle during a brutal 21-year civil war, they looked to their Lord for guidance and help and have given the worldwide church the gift of a practical model for reconciliation. One might say that the New Sudan Council of Churches was “living out” the message of the Belhar Confession as it operated from the biblical mandate so beautifully stated in point three of the confession: “We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker...”

I have seen that biblical mandate lived out in Sudan, a country that has been described as “a nation at war with itself”—there have been only 11 years of peace since independence in 1956. So in response to Christ’s call to deliver the message of reconciliation to the world (2 Corinthians 5:19) the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), with the strong support of the Reformed Church in America, began the People to People Peace Initiative: 18 major peace conferences were held between 1997 and 2003, which prepared the way for the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. The process they developed draws upon Christian practices of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation as well as modern conflict resolution methods and indigenous and traditional methods. The NSCC received international acclaim for its work, which former Secretary of State Madeline Albright hailed as being essential to bringing peace to Sudan.

As negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement were being held, the NSCC felt that it was crucial to continue the peace-building process as it was evident that a “culture of war” had developed in Sudan and that it would take much more than the signing of a document to end the conflict. So in 2003 the NSCC created the training organization RECONCILE in an endeavor to mitigate inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts between communities in Sudan by providing training in trauma healing, conflict resolution, and civic education. My husband, Del, and I are privileged to serve with RECONCILE and, alongside our Sudanese colleagues, we have facilitated workshops in areas of Sudan where people have commented, “We have smelled the peace but we haven’t tasted it yet.” The process of doing the training has been extremely rewarding in itself as we watch the transformation of participants’ thinking. For example, a prominent Murle Presbyterian evangelist/chief

shared that although he came to our workshop ready to “finish” the Dinka Bor community (members of which had killed seven of his community members, while they were in the hospital) he left the workshop ready to lead his people in making peace between the Murle and the Dinka Bor.

But what is even more rewarding is when we hear the stories of how the participants have actually used the training in their communities to achieve peace and reconciliation. RECONCILE has trained 46 key mobilizers, volunteers who are equipped to do peacebuilding work in their local communities. One of these key mobilizers, a pastor named Sarafino Modesto, reported that in the Imotong Mountains the Lotuko and Lango peoples were engaged in a serious and prolonged cycle of killing and cattle raiding that the government was unable to contain. During one particular raid there were 50 deaths. At his own initiative, and assisted by the training he received from RECONCILE, last May Rev. Sarafino walked to 15 villages in the mountains to meet with Lotuko and Lango chiefs. Because of his commitment to Jesus Christ he risked his life to stop the cycle of violence by using the skills he acquired to encourage the chiefs to promise to only defend their people if they were raided by the opposing group, and not to exact revenge by counter-raiding. Since that time there have been no outbreaks of fighting between the Lotuko and the Lango. We have much to learn from Sudanese church leaders such as Rev. Sarafino who have incarnated the message of the Belhar Confession by courageously following the Prince of Peace to bring about reconciliation and peace.

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**The Belhar and Women:
Overcoming Sexism to Embrace Unity**
By Stacey Midge

The Belhar Confession arises out of the context of a church divided along racial lines. Racism essentially creates multiple coexistent cultures, united in location but separated by skin color and ancestry. Even living next door to one another and speaking the same basic language, racial groups develop different terminology, rituals, and social mores. One culture may take on the terms and practices of assumed dominance, while another adopts phrases and behaviors that reflect its relative subjugation.

Racial reconciliation, therefore, requires the hard work of coming to understand and integrate one another’s language and practices into one united whole—and hard work it is, but necessary. The Belhar Confession’s significance lies in its call for the whole church to engage in this difficult work of justice, reconciliation, and unity.

But what happens to those whose own culture is oppressive? Does the Belhar Confession have anything to say about other types of injustice?

I once heard someone describe the effects of racism as a fortress. The dominant group lives within the fortress, but they also control those who live in the surrounding village. The divide between the two groups is clearly defined, a wall between insiders and outsiders. Should the outsiders decide that they want to share authority over their own lives with the insiders, they are forced to either storm the battlements or find some way to contact those within and cajole them into including the villagers in the power structures.

Within this metaphor, sexism might better be described as house arrest. A woman may

dwell within the fortress. She might be assumed to be part of the dominant group, and even assume herself to be part of the dominant group. Her location tells her that she is an insider, as do the popular terms and practices of her culture. However, if she steps outside the gates, or tries to take a seat at the table where decisions are made for the fortress, she may quickly find that she is a different class of insider. Unlike those who spend their lives outside of a clear boundary, she may be blissfully unaware of her lack of power—until she transgresses her limitations. Likewise, a woman in the village may run into the same troubles.

Such is the experience of many women in the RCA. We may sit comfortably in the pews of the church. In fact, membership statistics indicate that women may often be more comfortable in churches than men! We might assume that we have equal voice in the matters of the church, as the RCA has said that we do. But that equality breaks down when a woman's name shows up on the ballot for consistory and throws a congregation into tumult. Or when a woman goes to seminary, fully supported by her congregation and classis, and is cornered by male classmates who tell her she has no business being there. Or when, during classis exams, a woman is called to defend not just her theological learning and spiritual development, but also her lack of a Y chromosome. Or when a female candidate for ministry receives letter after letter from churches who say that they are waiting for the *man* God has called to be their pastor.

The boundaries of sexism may not be as clear or as ubiquitous as those of racism, but they do exist, invisible walls that often go unnoticed until unsuspecting women run into them. The separation of the church by racial lines is more visible, but no more divisive than the injustice that keeps women from full participation in the church.

The church is changing. Our denomination is changing. Increasing numbers of women serve on consistories, graduate from seminary, participate in RCA commissions and consultations, and pastor churches. And yet, as we focus on our multicultural future and strive to become a truly unified church, we cannot ignore the injustice that so often treats women as only partial members of the church.

The Belhar Confession explicitly challenges racism, but it also calls the church to embrace the gift and obligation of unity across all the boundaries that divide us. If we truly confess with the Belhar that “the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God,” then we confess by extension that the gifts and voices of women are valuable and necessary to the church. Only by including them fully and joyfully can we truly reflect the one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

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Why We Need the Belhar Confession

By Eugene Heideman

During the 1880s, Nicholas Steffens, the first professor of theology at Western Theological Seminary, argued that loyalty to the Three Standards of Unity—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—must be upheld as a defense against the inroads of the “mediating theologians” of Germany and the “New Theology” being taught at Andover Theological Seminary. However, his loyalty to the three confessions did not

dissuade him from criticizing them and the Church Order of Dort for their Erastian understanding of the relation of church and state.

Steffens's complaint was that especially the Heidelberg Catechism and the Church Order of Dort had an Erastian perspective that called the Reformed Church and its members to be loyal and obedient to the civil authority without adequately recognizing the prophetic right to protest against oppression and injustice.

Erastus was one of the advisors on the committee that supervised the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism under the direction of Frederick II. Question and Answer 104 make it clear that subjects must be loyal and obedient even when the ruler was weak or unjust:

Q. What is God's will for us in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show honor, love, and loyalty to my father and mother and all those in authority over me; that I submit myself with proper obedience to all their good teaching and correction; and also that I be patient with their failings, for through them God chooses to rule over us.

The catechism's requirement for patience was reinforced by Article 30 in the Church Order of Dort. It stipulated that in the assemblies of the church, "ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted, and that in an ecclesiastical manner."

Question 104 was further reinforced in the Belgic Confession, Article 36, that teaches:

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, the anarchists,
and, in general, all those who want
to reject the authorities and civil officers
and to subvert justice
by introducing common ownership of goods
and corrupting the moral order
that God has established among human beings.

In the century of political and social disorders that followed the outbreak of the Reformation, the three Standards of Unity played an important role in setting forth a Reformed theology based on Romans 13:1-8. They provided room for the civil authorities to act without being dominated by the papal hierarchy. They rejected the anarchical chaos predominant in some Anabaptist circles. In doing so, however, they neglected the prophetic office of the covenant community that was present in the Old Testament era, beginning with the prophets Nathan and Elijah. They left unrecognized the demonic aspects of the state so prominent in Revelation 12-18.

As a result of the imbalance, the language of the confessions was used in later centuries to urge patience and obedience to the law in the face of injustice and oppression. Prior to the Civil War, the Reformed Church in America General Synod favored support of the African-American Colonization Society while rejecting the abolitionists. Negotiation and cooperation with management was favored in labor relations while strikes were usually opposed even when the mistreatment of the laboring force was recognized. Article 30 (Article 36 in the 1874 RCA *Explanatory Articles*) was interpreted to allow the General Synod to have a committee on prevailing sins or public morals that could deal with personal morality, but not a commission on social justice that would advise the church on broader public issues such as international justice or racial discrimination in education and housing patterns. In South Africa, the perspective of the three Standards favored the call for patience and obedience to authorities who upheld the harsh apartheid policies.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession alongside the three Standards of Unity would rectify this serious imbalance in the three Standards of Unity. It would recognize not only the virtues of obedience and patience, but also leave open the possibility of godly impatience with injustice and oppressive policies. It would recognize that civil disobedience can be a Christian virtue in opposition to the enforcement of unjust laws. It would encourage the church to give weight to the message of the Old Testament prophets and Revelation 12-18 as well as to Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession would restore the ecumenical and social significance of the Lord's Supper that is inadequately developed in the three Standards. The three Standards did not function to oppose the practice of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa of having separate Lord's Tables for blacks and for whites. It was only in 1982 that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches acted to call apartheid policies and separate Lord's Tables a heresy and a sin. That late recognition of the evil of separate tables remains a signal that the language of the three Standards is inadequate. The language of the Belhar Confession thus adds an important dimension to what is already there in the intent of the Standards of Unity.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession by North American Reformed churches would mitigate the nationalistic tendencies that are present in so many Reformed denominations. The Reformed tradition needs to incorporate the South African theological experience into its historic European and American confessional stance. Although the Belhar Confession spoke in the first instance to the South African situation, it continues to address attitudes and circumstances that prevail in many forms in every church, including North American Reformed churches. In North America the past is still very much with us, not only in terms of race but also gender, ethnicity, and immigrating populations. As a confession that originated in Africa, it would function in North America as a sign that the Reformed confessional tradition is intercontinental rather than simply European or North American in scope.

Finally, adoption of the Belhar Confession alongside the three Standards of Unity would help to clarify the role of historic confessions in relation to present day needs. Attempts to amend the language of sixteenth century documents to deal with twenty-first century issues usually serve only to create new ambiguities and problems as compromises are made in order to reconcile quite different historical circumstances and theological perspectives. By placing confessional statements of differing eras alongside each other, a greater intergenerational ecumenicity can emerge in which spiritual experience and urgency of the present is constantly informed, not overwhelmed, by the wisdom of our fathers and mothers.

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