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SECTION ONE

Chronological outline of the story of Belhar

ACCEPTANCE, ADOPTION, ADVOCACY, RECEPTION AND PROTESTATION

A chronology of the Belhar Confession

Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel¹

Historical background of the Belhar Confession

On 6 April 1652, Johan van Riebeeck representing the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Holland (Dutch East India Company) arrived in the Cape of Good Hope. His goal was to establish a refreshment station for ships in trade between Europe and Asia. The arrival of Van Riebeeck heralded the introduction of Christianity to the indigenous people of the Cape of Good Hope and the Reformed faith was established in South Africa (Van der Watt 1977:4). Until the end of the eighteenth century, indigenous people and slaves were fully fledged members of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) and participated fully in the sacraments (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). During 1828, several problems arose in Stellenbosch, Calvinia, Caledon, Riversdale and the Swartland relating to the admission of black Christians to the Lord's Table (Loff 1981:18-19). For example, during that year, Bentura Johannes (a black man), after being baptised, became a member of the DRC of Somerset West. His presence challenged the DRC members of the congregation regarding the inclusion of the black people at the Eucharist Table. There was a known practice in the DRC, namely, that 'such persons' will only share the Lord's Supper after the 'born Christians' had been invited, 'as it is done in Stellenbosch and Caledon' (Loff 1981:18-19).

During 1829, the Cape Town presbytery of the DRC dealt with an enquiry from the church council of the Swartland congregation regarding the administering of the Holy Communion to people of mixed descent. At the DRC Synod of that year, the Swartland church council submitted a motion relating to the issue. The question to be considered was, whether 'persons of colour', who were confirmed and baptised, should be allowed, together with 'born again Christians' (white people), to take the Lord's Supper or whether these people should take the Holy Communion

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separately: 'Of personen Van de kleur, die door het doen Van de belydenis en de toediening Van den H. Doop tot leden Van de Kerke zijn aangenomen – gelijk met geborene Kristenen het Avondmaal zal bediend worden.'² (*Acta NGK 1829:79, VI(6)*). The commissioners of politics, D.F. Berrangé and Sir J.A. Truter, also took part in the discussion and ironically stated that the discussion of the question was indeed unworthy of Christianity (Kriel 1963:55). The 1829 DRC Synod unanimously rejected the separation at the Eucharist on the basis of colour. The resolution reads as follows:

Te verklaren, dat men dit voorstel tot geen onderwerp Van deliberatie of beslissing by de Synode behoorde te maken; maar hetzelfde als een onwrikbaren stelregel op het onfeilbaar Woord Van God gegrond, behoort te merken; dat bij gevolg, alle Christen gemeenten, en elk Christen in het bijzonder, verpligt is overeenkomstig te denken en te handelen.
(*Acta NGK 1829:71-72*)³

With this resolution, the synod confirmed that all members, regardless of race, should have access to the sacraments. Although the 1829 Synod formally rejected discrimination on the basis of skin colour there was a growing practice to minister to people of colour at separate worship services and to administer the sacraments (separately from white congregants) to them. For example, the DRC Ceres generated funds to construct a building where the 'heathen' could receive catechism and where the sacraments could be administered to them. According to Chris Loff in Swellendam a separate building for 'heathen' had already been completed during 1838 (Loff 1981:22).

The synods of the DRC 1834, 1837 and 1857, nevertheless raised the issue of separate administration of the sacraments to the 'heathen'. In the *Ontwerp van bepalingen Der Hervormde Zending Genootschappen in de Ned. Herv. Gemeenten in Zuid-Afrika Van 1834*, provisions had been made for the establishment of separate congregations for natives, however, allowance was made for members of mixed descent to join existing DRC congregations (Kriel 1963:49). These provisions regarding mission can be seen as the DRC's first mission policy. The *Ontwerp van bepalingen* provided for racially segregated congregations as well as the integration of races in one church. The first mission policy of the DRC had already been accepted in 1835 and was reviewed in 1837 (Adonis 1982:78). In the policy provision was being made for the

2 Translation: Whether people of colour, who by being confirmed and having been baptised may be accepted as members of the church – together with born Christians will receive Holy Communion.

3 Translation: To declare that one should not make this recommendation a topic of consideration or decision at the synod; but take into account this topic as an unyielding principle in the infallible Word of God; that consequently, all Christian congregations, and each Christian particularly, are obliged to reason and act accordingly.

establishment of free, but separated seats in the church for so-called heathen. According to Coertzen (2010:51) there is a duality in the mission strategy of the DRC. On the one hand, new converts from the so-called heathendom could become fully-fledged members of the existing congregations of the DRC, while on the other hand provisions had been made for the separate ministry to the 'coloured' church members (Kriel 1963:54).

In 1855, forty-five white members of the DRC applied to the church council of Stockenström DRC to be allowed to celebrate the Holy Communion separately. The church council justifiably rejected the request and referred it to the presbytery of Albany. The latter unanimously recommended to the church council of Stockenström that due to the biases and weaknesses of some of the congregants, the Holy Communion should be administered separately to 'coloureds' and whites (Kriel 1963:58). Nicolaas Hofmeyer, a minister of the DRC and professor at the Theological Seminary of the DRC at Stellenbosch, saw the middle-way approach as the most feasible: 'De middenweg tusschen beide is de verkieslijke' (Coertzen 2010:52). According to Hofmeyer, there should not be separation between so 'coloureds' and whites. With regard to the efficiency of the ministry, members from the 'heathendom' should be ministered separately from whites, but they should remain members of the same congregation (Coertzen 2010:52). The issue of having separate Holy Communion services for different racial groups was discussed thoroughly at the DRC Synod in 1857. Rev. R. Shand of the DRC Tulbagh tabled the following with regard to the decision of the presbytery of Albany:

Of het de goedkeuring der Synode wegdraagt, dat in de Gemeenten der Nederduitsche-Gereformeerde Kerk, waar men het begeert, de gekleurden in een afzonderlijk gebouw, echter onder bestier en opzigt Van den Kerkraad, alle voorregten der Christelijke Godsdiens afzonderlijk genieten zullen. (*Acta NGK 1857:58, 60, 89, XII(5)*)⁴

His submission was keenly debated at the synod. The question that had to be considered was whether people of mixed descent who had been baptised and confirmed as fully-fledged congregants should be allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper together with white congregants, or whether the Holy Communion should be administered to them separately. On scriptural grounds, the synod could not approve the request. The DRC Synod of 1857, however, approved, due to the

⁴ Translation: Whether the synod approves that in the congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church, where the desire exists, coloureds can enjoy all privileges of the Christian religion separately in a separate building, but under administration and supervision of the church council.

'weakness of some', to allow the creation of separate buildings for believers from the so-called heathendom. The decision of the synod reads as follows:

The synod considers it desirable and according to the Holy Scripture that our heathen members (non-whites) be accepted and initiated into our congregations wherever it is possible; but where this measure, as a result of the weakness of some, would stand in the way of promoting the work of Christ among the heathen people, then congregations set up among the heathen, or still to be set up, should enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or institution. (*Acta NGK 1857:58, 60, 89, XII (5)*)⁵

This decision opened the door for the establishment of separate churches based on colour and led ultimately to the constitution of separate churches in the Reformed Family, namely, the establishment of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa (DRMC) in 1881, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa for Africans (from 1910) and the Reformed Church in Africa for Indians (1968). The 1857 decision officially introduced church apartheid into the DRC. One should, however, take note that many churches for people of mixed descent ('*oefeninghuise*' or '*gentisate*') already existed by 1857. In Wagenmakersvallei and Tulbagh and many other places, the sacraments had been administered separately to people of mixed descent long before the decision of 1857. At the 1857 DRC Synod, praxis merely became church policy. The 1857 decision led to the division of Christians on the basis of colour at the Table of the Lord as a matter of practice and policy and paved the way for the establishment of the first racially segregated Reformed church in South Africa, and ultimately societal apartheid (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014). The decision paved the way for the separation of Reformed churches in South Africa along colour and racial lines and the later theological justification of racism. The inability of the DRC Synod to take a qualified stand on the issue smoothed the way for church and societal apartheid.

In 1880, the DRC identified in 1880 twenty mission stations ("*gestichte*") who could become part of the DRMC and invited the missionaries from the selected mission stations to partake in a conference where, amongst other issues, the draft constitution for the envisaged separate church was to be discussed. No people of colour attended the conference. On 12 November 1880, the DRC Synod approved the Constitution for the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Zendingkerk Van Zuid-Afrika

5 Original wording: 'De Synode beschouwt het wenschlijk en schrifmatig dat onze ledematen uit de Heidenen, in onze bestaande gemeenten opgenomen en ingelijfd worden, overall waar zulks geschieden kan; maar waar deze maatregel, ten gevolge van de zwakheid van sommigen de bevordering van de zaak van Christus onder de Heidenen, in de weg zoude staan, de gemeenten uit de Heidenen opgerigt, of nog op te rigten, hare Christelijke voorregten in een afzonderlijk gebouw of gesticht genieten zal.'

(Dutch Reformed Mission Church or DRMC). Soon after the synod, invitations were issued to all mission stations of the DRC to attend the first Synod of the Mission Church. On 5 October 1881, the Constituting Synod of the DRMC met in Wellington. The attendance at the synod was poor with only five congregations represented, namely Wellington, Wynberg, George, Zuurbraak and Beaufort West. Reverend Paul Teske of Beaufort West strongly objected to the constituting of a racially-segregated church controlled by the DRC. Notwithstanding Teske's objections, the synod approved the constituting of the Reformed DRMC of South Africa, primarily for people of mixed descent. Initially, African people could also become members of the DRMC (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2009:250-265).

From the above, it seems clear that church apartheid developed long before the National Party (NP) took power in 1948 and adopted the policy of apartheid (separateness). In the editorial of *Die Kerkbode*, the official newspaper of the DRC, on 22 September 1948, shortly after the National Party came to power, it became clear that the DRC supported apartheid as state policy and justified it on a scriptural basis. The editorial referred to apartheid as church policy (*'apartheid is 'n kerklike beleid'*) (Van der Watt 1977:84).

The policy of apartheid brought widespread opprobrium. After its election victory, the National Party institutionalised and consolidated existing discriminatory and segregative policies and bills. Numerous apartheid laws were passed from 1948 onwards, which confined the people of South Africa's life in minute detail. These laws were attempts to keep South African citizens apart on racial and ethnic lines. For example, the apartheid laws laid down legal provisions on the specific areas where different population groups could own property, reside, work and even enjoy leisure. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (No. 55 of 1949) prohibited marriages between white people and people of other races; while the Immorality Amendment Act (No. 21 of 1950) prohibited adultery, attempted adultery or related 'immoral' acts, such as sexual intercourse between white and black people. The primary aim of the Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950) was to make residential separation compulsory. The Population Registration Act (No. 30 of 1950) provided that all South Africans be racially classified in one of three categories: white, black or coloured. According to this act, Indians fell in the coloured category. In disputed cases, a Race Classification Board took the final decision on what a person's race was. The Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act (No. 67 of 1952), commonly known as the 'Pass Law Act', forced black people to carry passbooks with their fingerprints, photo and information, in order to access non-black areas. It was a criminal offence to be unable to produce a pass when required to do so by the police. No black person could leave a rural area for an urban one without a permit from the local authorities. On arrival in an urban area, a permit to seek work had to

be obtained within 72 hours. Families were torn apart due to the racial classification laws. The University Education Act (No. 45 of 1959) provided for the establishment of separate tertiary institutions for blacks, Indians, coloureds and whites, of which the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was one. Black people were not allowed to attend 'white universities' without special permission from the government and vice versa.

Although the members of the congregations of the DRMC and the DRCA suffered directly from the results of apartheid (e.g., forced removals, pass laws, migrant labour, group areas, racially segregated education systems, prohibition of mixed marriages, and 'Bantustans') the decisions of the DRMC and DRCA synods from 1950 to 1974 reflect a perplexing apathy towards the socio-political situation in South Africa (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014).

The DRC played a pivotal role in the theological justification of what later became known as 'separate development'. At a conference organised by the Federal Mission Council of the DRC family, which took place from 4 to 6 April 1950 in Bloemfontein, the '*naturellevraagstuk*' (native question) was discussed. The 'native question' tried to spell out exactly how different nations could live equally but separately in one geographical area (Van Schalwyk 1950:12-22). The solution arrived at during that mission conference later became known as the policy of separate development. There was also an inexplicable absence of critique from both the DRMC and the DRCA on the 'native question' (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014).

In 1970, the DRC General Synod appointed a permanent commission for the study of race and ecumenical issues (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK* 1970:785; Van der Merwe 2010:154). The report from this commission, approved by the General Synod in 1974, was published in 1975 under the title: *Ras Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* (RVN) (*NGK Algemene Sinode* 1975:1-16). The RVN supported the policy of separate development, of which the outline can be traced back to the 1950 Bloemfontein conference. The RVN in its reflection on racial and human relations emphasis that the church of Jesus Christ must accept the Word of God as the starting point and norm. The presumption is that although the Bible is not a scientific textbook, it provides fundamental principles that have normative meaning for all areas of life, including racial and ethnic relationships (*NGK Algemene Sinode* 1975:1-16). The commission's report (RVN) was translated into English under the title *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of the Scripture* (DRC 1976), as well as into other languages (Dutch, French and German) in order to disseminate the DRC's policy on race and ethnicity both nationally as well as abroad.

Throughout the years the white Afrikaans Reformed churches of South Africa worked out in considerable detail the theological and moral justification for the

system of apartheid (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014:310). The DRC theologically justified the system of apartheid, which deprived black people of their right to vote, the right to freedom of speech and assembly, and basic labour rights, for example, the fundamental right to live where they please, work, and receive education and social security without discrimination on the grounds of race or gender (*General Synodal Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church* n.d:6-11)⁶

This policy was based on the DRC theological anthropology. According to Christina Landman, the theological anthropology of the DRC is dualistic by nature and can assume one of three forms:

1. In the basic form, a dualistic anthropology accentuates the difference between groups of people; between white and black, between men and women. The distinction is usually made on biological level.
2. In a more developed form, dualistic anthropology acknowledges that people are equal but different. In a dualistic anthropology, it is argued that white and black are equal in value before God, but belong separately because of cultural differences. This anthropology presupposes that men and women are equal but different, precisely to complement/supplement each other. Man and woman are therefore equal, but by divine decree men must lead and women must follow.
3. In the most sophisticated form, a dualistic anthropology acknowledges the liberation of people but still presupposes that groups of people must be polarised to enable emancipation. A dualistic anthropology, therefore, works with the presupposition that people should necessarily be polarised to achieve the expected outcomes (Landman 1991:33).

The RVN was the DRC's first official answer to the call of Cottesloe. The Cottesloe Consultation, initiated by the World Council of Churches (WCC), was held from 7 to 14 December 1960, shortly after the Sharpeville massacre, at the Cottesloe hostel of the University of the Witwatersrand. Representatives of the eight member-churches of the WCC in South Africa attended. At the end of the conference, the so-called 'Cottesloe Declaration' was released. Van der Merwe is correct when he maintains that the content of the document was nothing else than a confirmation of the church's support for the policy of the National Party government, giving separate development a biblical foundation (Van der Merwe 2010:157). Marriages between racial groups were seen as undesirable and forbidden and common worship was only permissible in special situations.

6 See also Apartheid laws in the Bibliography.

The DRC sent a delegation spearheaded by F.E. O' Brein Geldenhuys to their partners overseas to enlighten them about the RVN. The Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) and the Swiss Federation of Reformed Churches ('*Reformierter Bund*') condemned the RVN (Geldenhuys 1982:61). The RVN was strongly critiqued for, among other things, the interpretation of Scripture, the biblical foundation and the sanctioning of the political policy of separate development as well as the dualism between theology and practice in the document. In a report published after the discussions, the *Reformierter Bund* declared that they regarded the RVN as a theological confirmation of the political system in South Africa, in which the separation of races meant in practice the dominion of the one and the discrimination, denial of rights and exploitation of the other (*Handelinge Algemene Sinode NGK* 1982:157; Van der Merwe 2013:6). On 22 September 1979, the *Reformierter Bund* released the following press release:

Against the background of the terrible consequences of the Homeland policy, against the background of the news we get about torture and banning, against a background of a church divided according to race, we have asked their advocating for the disadvantages of the oppressed and their involvement in the struggle for church unity. Our dialogue partner could not give a satisfactory answer, because they had to hold on in general to the present official line of the NGK as outlined in the 1974 Synod report. (Van der Merwe 1990:157)

The churches in Germany as well as the GKN not only severely criticised the RVN, but by 1982 had severed all relations with the DRC (Van der Merwe 2013:56).

Early resistance to apartheid within the DRMC

Not everybody in the DRMC passively accepted the theological justification of apartheid. An early protestation against the apartheid policy and the theological justification of apartheid came from Rev. Isaac David Morkel (1910–1983). Morkel studied at the Stoffberg Theological School (for Africans) in the Orange Free State and completed his studies in 1943. On 2 January 1945, he became part-time minister of the Word in charge of the Rondebosch Congregation of the DRMC in Crawford. On 22 December 1945, he was ordained as the full-time minister of the congregation. During the 1940s, only six people of mixed descent had been legitimised by the DRMC, namely, A.D. Andries, P. Solomon, A. Ontong, J. Prinz, W.A. September (who, like Morkel, studied at The Stoffberg Theological School) and Morkel himself. Rev. Morkel, therefore, struggled to let his voice be heard in a church where the missionaries had been members of the DRC and had been trained and commissioned by the DRC to work in the Mission churches. On 7 October 1946, Morkel was elected as chairman of the Presbytery of Wynberg of the DRMC. He was outspoken against discrimination,

particularly as it applied to mixed-race communities at the Cape. Subsequently, he became known as an opponent of apartheid and thus an embarrassment to his church (Carstens 1959:48).

On 3 September 1948, Morkel convened a meeting in Crawford to consider means to oppose apartheid. Approximately 116 members from twenty-eight DRMC congregations unanimously supported a motion tabled by him to oppose apartheid on scriptural grounds. They protested the proposed race classification legislation and appealed to the National Party government not to implement these laws. The result of this event resounded within the Presbytery of Wynberg. On 7 October 1948 and under the leadership of Morkel the Presbytery of Wynberg declared that it could not find any grounds for the policy of apartheid in the Bible (Loff 1998:234). The Presbytery rejected the unbiblical implementation of forced apartheid, which gave rise to discrimination against 'coloureds', and in so doing destroys Christlikeness among 'coloureds' (Submission of the URCSA to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1997:15). On the contrary, they found that apartheid was evil, sinful, and harmful and out of harmony with human laws. A system that must be rejected in all its forms. Furthermore, under Morkel's leadership, the Presbytery approved an overture to the next synod of the DRMC regarding the biblical justification of apartheid. The premise of the Wynberg Presbytery was that the DRMC should express itself regarding apartheid and the theological justification thereof (*Acta NGSK* 1950:160; Fortein 2016:55). The next year, in a lengthy statement, the Presbytery denounced apartheid as unbiblical (*Notule, Ring Van Wynberg* 1949:1-2).

Furthermore, on the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument on 16 December 1949, Morkel called for a day of prayer in supplication that the Lord deliver the land from the affliction of apartheid. The official structures of the DRMC did not welcome Morkel's objections against the theological justification of apartheid. Morkel wrote several letters to the editor of the *Cape Times* newspaper, focusing on racial discrimination. Rev. Morkel announced that he could no longer preach love and practise apartheid. He decided to leave the DRMC to establish a separate church. For Morkel, the abolition of the race classification laws was an existential issue. His family has been separated by the apartheid laws. Of his ten brothers and sisters, five were classified white and the rest coloured South ('Africa minister wants race laws changed', published in *The New Courier*, 21 January 1967, p. 3).

It was clear to Morkel that the leadership of the DRMC and congregations were not ready to support the request of the presbytery of Wynberg to denounce of the theological justification of apartheid (Fortein 2016:57; Loff 1998:248; *Notule, Ring Van Wellington* 1948:174). This left Morkel with no choice other than to leave the DRMC. On 30 September 1950, days before the meeting of the DRMC Synod, Morkel announced that he and 26 church council members of the Rondebosch congregation

would leave the DRCM to form their own Calvyn Protestantse Kerk (Calvin Protestant Church) (Loff 1998:248). Morkel gave his farewell sermon on 8 October 1950 in Athlone from the back of a lorry since the DRMC had forbidden him to use the Rondebosch church building. On 15 October 1950, the Calvin Protestant Church was established in the Glenmoore town hall in Athlone, Cape Town. The Calvin Protestant Church did not differ in its doctrine, rites or confessional basis from the DRCM or the DRC, but strongly denounced the theological justification of apartheid. In due time congregations were constituted in Worcester, Malmesbury, Paarl, Retreat, Newtown, Komaggas, Ravensmead and Macassar.

The Calvin Protestant Church was welcomed enthusiastically by the inhabitants of Komaggas, one of the 'coloured reserves' in Little Namaqualand in the North-West Cape. On 8 December 1956, Rev. Morkel visited Komaggas and held a service in the open. Nearly a third of the population of the reserve attended this service, while only twenty-six people were at the service in the DRMC (Carstens 1959:49). During the first fourteen months after Rev. Morkel was invited to Komaggas, 256 children were baptised and 90 young people confirmed. By 1960, there were about 600 confirmed members and many baptised members who had not yet been confirmed. On 5 May 1957, a petition containing more than 700 signatures was presented to Dr I.D. du Plessis, Commissioner for Coloured Affairs, asking for permission to acquire land on which to erect a church (Carstens 1959:51). The request was refused.

The Calvin Protestant Church met with opposition from the government regarding access to Komaggas. On 25 October 1957, the Minister of the Interior promulgated Regulation 88. According to Carstens, Sub-regulation (i) of Regulation 88 stipulates that any person, without the approval of the commissioner or the magistrate of the area concerned,

- (a) Holds, presides at or addresses any meeting, gathering or assembly at which more than five persons in the area under the control of the Board of Management are present at any one time; or (b) Permits any such meeting, gathering or assembly to be held in his house or on other premises or land under his control, shall be guilty of an offence.

(Carstens 1959:51)

It was, however, possible for more than five persons to gather, without permission, for events such as funerals, weddings, political meetings presided over by members of parliament and religious services held by the established church or churches in the area (Carstens 1959:51). According to Regulation 88, the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs had first to consult with the established church in the area concerned before granting or refusing the Calvinist Protestant Church permission to continue its work. The regulation was nothing more than a virtual ban on all religious services or

meetings held by any denomination other than the DRC. According to Carstens, it could be assumed that also the DRMC did not grant permission to the Calvinist Protestant Church to do missionary work in the area (Carstens 1959:53). When the churches in the area sought approval to do missionary work in the area, only the DRMC was allowed. The others, including the Calvinist Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches had to obtain permission for every service they held.

In January 1957, shortly after Rev. Morkel had been first invited to the reserves, a party of DRC officials visited the various DRMC congregations, expressly to warn them against what they termed the 'Morkel danger' (Carstens 1959:53) They tried to show that Morkel was an unreliable and irresponsible character and that his church was a new sect completely alien to the DRC. On 7 March 1958, the first prosecution against the Calvin Protestant Church took place. Three members of that church were found guilty of holding a prayer meeting of more than five persons in the Komaggas Reserve. Meetings of more than five persons needed special approval of the Commissioner. The regulation allowed for events such as funerals, weddings and religious services, but only if held by an established church. The three men were fined and suspended for three years. In this way, the government played a role in silencing the voices that objected against apartheid in the church (Carstens 1959; Morkel & Thebus 2011:1-4). Morkel, in vain, called upon the apartheid government to appeal the race laws. He, among others, called for the end of the 'torture and inhumanity created by devilish race classification laws' ('South Africa Minister wants race laws changed', *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 January 1967, p. 3). The DRMC was unresponsive to Morkel's objections against apartheid. The present-day Calvinist Protestant Church consists of 35 congregations spread over the Western Cape, Southern Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape (Namaqualand) and Namibia.

The ecumenical movement paved the way (1964–1982)

The international ecumenical movement played a critical role in the anti-apartheid struggle and the ultimate decision of the DRMC during their synod in September 1982 to draft a confession. Race relations had been long on the agenda of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC), founded in 1946. Already in 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations condemned apartheid. From 1958 on, the REC declared there was no scriptural evidence for or against mixed-race marriages. As mentioned, in December 1960, shortly after the Sharpeville massacre, the consultation at Cottesloe took place. At that stage, the DRMC was not a member of the WCC and was, therefore, not obliged to prepare a response to the questions which the WCC had put to the member churches. Even after Cottesloe, both the DRMC and the DRCA did not directly reject the basic philosophy of segregation. Rather a deafening silence on the issue prevailed in the Acts of the Synods of the RCA and the DRMC until 1974.

In 1968, the REC declared that that church and state may not prohibit mixed-race marriages and furthermore stated that the unity of the body of Christ should come to expression in common worship, including Holy Communion, among Christians regardless of race. The REC also held a series of consultations with South Africans in 1971, 1978, 1981, 1982 and 1989, when the REC interim committees met with churches in South Africa to discuss race relations. In 1980, the Council called on its members to work to remove the structures of racial injustice and use their influence with the South African government to effect such changes. The Council did not declare that the South African churches were, in fact, guilty of heresy, but asked the South African member churches to answer whether this applied to them (Luke & Van Houten 1997:4).

In 1964, the General Assembly of the WCC, meeting in Frankfurt, declared that racism is nothing less than a betrayal of the gospel and that the unity in Christ of members, not only of different confessions and denominations but of different nations and races, points to the fullness of the unity of all in God's coming kingdom. The WCC stated clearly that the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church, contradicts the very nature of the church. The WCC Programme to Combat Racism was launched in 1969 in response to a 1968 mandate from the council's Fourth Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden. The programme played a highly visible and controversial role in international debate about white-minority rule in South Africa. In 1970, the General Assembly of the WCC held in Nairobi confirmed that the church must recognise racism for the idolatry it is and that the church that by doctrine and/or practice affirms segregation of peoples (e.g. racial segregation) as a law for its life cannot be regarded as an authentic member of the body of Christ. The DRC, as well as the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, did not heed to the WCC declarations.

During the 1980s, the DRMC became a member of the REC, the WCC programme, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) as well as the South African Council of Churches (SACC) (*Agenda en Handeling* NGSK 1982:21). The WCC's Programme to Combat Racism was tabled at the DRMC Synod in 1982 and had a bearing on decisions made regarding racism and apartheid at the synod (*Agenda en Handeling* NGSK 1982:210-250). According to Russel Botman, the systematic theology class at the University of the Western Cape during 1978 struggled to make theological sense of the resistance to apartheid. Their professor of systematic theology, Jaap Durand, challenged the class to find the theological essence of the judgement on apartheid. The class arrived at the following conclusion: 'Apartheid has as its point of departure the irreconcilability of people of different race groups. It was thus against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which takes its point of departure in the doctrine of reconciliation' (Botman 1997:1). In October 1978, the DRMC Synod considered the

theological conclusion that apartheid was 'anti-evangelical' against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The synod clearly stated that apartheid, being a system of oppression and injustice, is sinful and incompatible with the Bible (meaning it is against the gospel) because it is based on a fundamental irreconcilability of human beings, thus rendering ineffective the reconciling and uniting power of Lord Jesus Christ (*Agenda en Handelinge* NGSK 1978:200). The racism of apartheid was, therefore, a structural and institutional sin.

The DRMC sent a full delegation, spearheaded by Allan Boesak, to the WARC General Council, which met in August 1982 in Ottawa, Canada. Allan Boesak presented the position of the synod on matters pertaining to racism to the General Council (Botman 1997:1). In his paper 'He made us all, but...', prepared for the assembly, Allan Boesak pointed out that the WARC had a responsibility towards its member churches in South Africa who suffered under the apartheid theology and policy (Boesak 1984:11). Furthermore, Boesak introduced a motion at the assembly requesting that the WARC declare apartheid a heresy. Subsequently, the WARC General Council declared that the situation in South Africa constituted a *status confessionis*. The latter is a Latin term meaning that which is foundational for belief and behaviour and must be affirmed by professing members of the church. The declaration of *status confessionis* becomes necessary when the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake. The white Afrikaans Reformed churches of South Africa through the years have worked out in considerable detail both the policy itself and the theological and moral justification for the system. Apartheid ('separate development') is therefore a pseudo-religious ideology as well as a political policy (Addendum 1, WARC Resolution on Racism and South Africa). It depends to a large extent on this moral and theological justification. The division of Reformed churches in South Africa on the basis of race and colour was defended by the DRC as a faithful interpretation of the will of God and of the Reformed understanding of the church in the world. This leads to the division of Christians at the Table of the Lord as a matter of practice and policy.

The DRC theologically and morally justified the system of apartheid. Apartheid was institutionalised in the laws, policies and structures in South Africa. This situation brought challenges to the WARC and the WCC. The WARC General Council in Ottawa declared that the apartheid situation in South Africa and the position of both white South African WARC member churches regarding it constitutes a *status confessionis*. The WARC General Council declared as follows:

The promises of God for his world and for his church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices ... We feel duty bound by the gospel to raise our voice and stand by the oppressed ... The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, in not only accepting, but

actively justifying the apartheid system by misusing the gospel and the Reformed confession, contradict in doctrine and in action the promise which they profess to believe. Therefore, the general council declares that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches. We declare with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that Apartheid (separate development) is a sin and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a theological heresy. (WARC 1983:177ff., 1990:173-175, 279-281)

The WARC consequently suspended the membership of the DRC as well as that of the Nederduitsche Hervormde Kerk (NHK) in South Africa (i.e. sending delegates to general council and holding membership in departmental committees and commissions). The WARC General Council reiterated its firm conviction that apartheid ('separate development') is sinful and incompatible with the gospel on the grounds that: (a) it is based on a fundamental irreconcilability of human beings, thus rendering ineffective the reconciling and uniting power of our Lord Jesus Christ; (b) in its application through racist structures it has led to exclusive privileges for the white section of the population at the expense of the blacks; and (c) it has created a situation of injustice and oppression, large-scale deportation causing havoc to family life, and suffering to millions. The WARC stated in the Resolution on Racism and South Africa (Addendum 1). That these two churches would be warmly restored to the full privileges of membership when the following changes have taken place:

1. Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from Holy Communion.
2. Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid ('separate development').
3. Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the church to dismantling this system in both church and politics (WARC 1983:176-180).

The decisions of REC, WARC and WCC on racism and apartheid paved the way for the declaration of a *status confessionis* by the DRMC during September 1982. The heart of the gospel was at stake. The WARC General Council in Ottawa, 1982 subsequently declared that apartheid represents a *status confessionis*, that it is essentially sinful and its theological justification a heresy. According to Smit, one of the co-drafters of the Belhar Confession, the expression '*status confessionis*' means that

a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in

which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat. (Cloete & Smit 1984:16)

Apartheid constituted a *status confessionis* in which the truth of the Gospel and the Reformed faith was at stake. This implies that it was impossible to disagree on the issue of apartheid without the integrity of the common confession as Reformed church being seriously endangered. The declaration of the WARC on apartheid was reaffirmed by the WARC General Council held in Seoul in 1989 (see Addendum 2). The WARC indicated the following guidelines for the declaration of a *status confessionis*:

1. Jesus Christ sets us free to confess our faith, to confess our sins and hear God's word of forgiveness, to witness to him and to live in love towards God and our neighbour. This is the primary meaning of Christian confession.
2. Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical.
3. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The church's practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of *status confessionis*.
4. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless, the danger inherent in that error also calls in question the integrity of proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing.
5. When church bodies declare a *status confessionis*, they declare first of all that they themselves are in a situation in which a clear decision for the truth of the gospel must be made. The declaration of *status confessionis* therefore has the character of self-obligation.
6. A declaration of a *status confessionis* must, therefore, be treated as a matter of high seriousness. The fragmented history of Reformed churches is a sober warning against declaring a *status confessionis* on issues that are less than central to the gospel.
7. It is not appropriate to declare a *status confessionis* in order to emphasise commitments which are primarily based on current ethical, social or political concerns ... It is quite unjustifiable to declare a *status confessionis* in order to exert moral pressure upon Christian sisters and brothers who take the call to Christian discipleship as seriously as we do, but give different answers to

such ethical, social or political challenges. Christian confession is always and inevitably particular and historical. It reverberates beyond the particular historical context when it authentically echoes the claim and promises of God, our Creator, redeemer and sanctifier. In this sense, every act of punctual confession and witness has universal import and contributes to the life of the church as a community of witnesses (WARC 1990:279-281).

According to Karel Blei, a 'neutral' position regarding apartheid is not different from, a pro-apartheid position. She maintains that a *status confessionis* is not just a matter of free discussion or of personal moral conviction, but indeed a matter of faith (Blei 1994:1-3). Heresy is not just mistake or error. It is indeed betrayal of the gospel doctrine in contradiction with it. It is false doctrine, which can only be rejected by the church, and for which, by definition, there is no place within the church. In the Christian tradition, confession always goes together with rejection. It is in this rejection that the confession of Jesus Christ, in that given situation, gets its special, concrete focus. The Ottawa resolution put the theological justification of apartheid on the same level as such heretical doctrines as second-century Gnosticism or Marcionism or fourth-century Docetism. Ottawa considered the ideology of apartheid, especially because it was presented as a Christian, biblical position and a threat to the very heart of the gospel. The Ottawa resolution was not just a denunciation of a certain form of apartheid, of a special way of practising apartheid, of a certain outcome of apartheid. No, it is apartheid itself – apartheid as such, that has been denounced unconditionally. According to the Ottawa declaration, these churches, because of their outspoken pro-apartheid position, had become heretical churches, witnessing not to the gospel, but in opposition to it. That Ottawa did not shrink from suspending these two churches indicates how seriously its denunciation of the 'Christian' apartheid ideology and its statement on *status confessionis* were meant.

The drafting of the Confession

The socio-political realities in apartheid South Africa had a bearing on the decisions of the DRMC Synod of 1982, which convened in Belhar. The name 'Belhar' in the confession refers to a township in Cape Town, constituted by the apartheid government for the so-called coloured people in which to live. The apartheid government had set up semi-urban townships for black, Indian and 'coloured' population groups, of which Belhar is merely one. The adoption of the Belhar Confession, therefore, did not take place in a political vacuum. It was adopted in a so-called coloured township, in a racially segregated Reformed church, especially constituted by the DRC in 1881 for people of mixed descent.

The 'Broederkring van NG Kerke' (later called the 'Confessing Circle') was established in 1974 in Bloemfontein by about 60 clergy, evangelists, church council members and lay members of the DRMCA and the DRCA. At the DRMC Synod of 1982, the members of the Confessing Circle played a pivotal role in the deliberations. The Confessing Circle had set itself the goal of guiding and pressuring the church in the struggle against apartheid and attaining church unity, especially affecting debates on a synodical level with regard to social justice issues. Because of its opposition to apartheid, the members of the DRMC and the DRCA became victims of security legislation and the Confessing Circle was viewed as the authentic voice of the oppressed within the two churches. The Confessing Circle period represents the struggle within the church. The Circle swayed the theological thinking of the DRMC and the DRCA and ultimately influenced the drafting and acceptance of the Belhar Confession (Submission of the URCSA to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1997:1-5).

The mid-1970s, with the Soweto uprisings as a turning point, overturned just about everything within the DRMC and the DRCA. During the 1970s, the communities served by the DRMC and the DRCA became increasingly involved in protesting against and opposing apartheid legislation in all spheres of life. Youth and student revolts resulted in expulsions and detentions, and ultimately some members of the DRMC and the DRCA even went into exile (Submission of the URCSA to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1997:5). These churches did not remain untouched by the realities of the day, and from 1974 onwards, both the DRMC and the DRCA expressed their disapproval of the system of apartheid. During the 1980s, the DRMC and the DRCA strongly opposed the way in which the South African government used banning, detention without trial and solitary confinement to silence those who criticised the unjust system of apartheid. For example, Dr A.A. Boesak, the Reverend R.J. Stevens, A. Beukes, H.R. Botman, J.D. Buys, J. de Waal, E. Leeuw, B. Leuvenink, J. Thyse, A.J. Visagie, P. Moatse, K. E. Leputu, L. Mabusela, L.M. Matsaung, E.M. Tema, elder N.J. Matlakane, and others were convicted and imprisoned (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982:25).

During the 1978 and 1982 synods of the DRMC, numerous social justice issues were tabled and extensively deliberated upon. For example, the 1978 DRMC Synod took cognisance of the RVN and stated that apartheid rested to a significant extent on the theological and moral justification of the system. The synod declared that apartheid and the moral and theological justification of it ridiculed the gospel and was a theological heresy (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1978:2, 21).

A report on black power and black theology was tabled at the DRMC synods of 1978 and 1982 (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1978:269-298, 1982:377-380.). At the DRMC Synod in September 1982, the role of the church and society in apartheid

South Africa again came under scrutiny and reports on apartheid and racism were tabled (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982:32-34, 443-469). Consequently, the DRMC called for the repeal of the Group Areas Act, which made the residential separation compulsory. At the same synod, the Immorality Amendment Act and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act, which invalidated any marriage entered into outside of South Africa between a male citizen and a woman of another racial group, were critiqued for the first time in the history of the DRMC. The synod urged the government to recall all laws against racially mixed marriages (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982:15). The synod also affirmed that the migrant labour system was one of the factors that disrupted the stability of marriage and family life among black people (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982:438). The synod of 1982 noted the infringement of human dignity which the congregants had to endure due to the apartheid laws, namely, separate entrances in business places, poor public services, racially divided beaches, poor sport facilities,⁷ unequal education,⁸ unequal salaries, inadequate housing, job reservation (to protect particular racial and ethnic groups), and so forth. (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982, 378-379, 431-443). The synod also noted the strong resentment among blacks against the racially segregated education system. The synod, therefore, affirmed that equal educational facilities and opportunities should be provided for all (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1982:439). These deliberations, affirmations and decisions set the scene for the decision regarding the *status confessionis* and the acceptance of the draft of the Belhar Confession at the same synod.

The DRMC Synod of 1982 took place shortly after the WARC General Council of 1982. The synod deliberated at length on the WARC's declaration of a *status confessionis* regarding apartheid. There were emotional protestations from clergy and church council members regarding the hardships people had to endure due to the policy and practice of apartheid. The synod declared a *status confessionis* regarding apartheid and reasserted that it was a heresy and a misrepresentation of the gospel. The DRMC affirmed that apartheid contradicted the very nature of the church and saw apartheid as a structural and an institutional synod. The DRMC followed the WARC in rejecting the defence of apartheid on moral and theological grounds. It was a '*kairos* moment' for the DRMC.

7 The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (No. 49 of 1953) forced segregation in all public amenities, public buildings, and public transport with the aim of eliminating contact between whites and other races. 'Europeans Only' and 'Non-Europeans Only' signs were put up. The act stated that facilities provided for different races need not be equal.

8 The Bantu Education Act (No. 47 of 1953) and the Extension of University Education Act (No. 45 of 1959) made provision for the establishment of separate tertiary institutions for blacks, Indians, coloureds and whites. Blacks were not allowed to attend 'white' universities unless with special permission by the government. The separation of these institutions was not only along racial lines but also along ethnic lines.

Prof. Gustav Bam, lecturer in Pastoral Theology at the Faculty of Theology at the UWC, showed the synod that the acceptance of the *status confessionis* necessarily should lead to the formulation of a confession (*Agenda en Handelinge NGKA* 1983:22). Bam said, quoting Karl Barth, that confession has certain claims that must be met. First, a confession must always bear the character of an action without an ulterior goal – it will take place only to God’s honour. One does not confess with an aim in view nor to effect and to carry out this or that with a confession; the confessor aims not at results and expects none. Second, a merely human statement is wholly inadequate as a protest of faith. Third, a confession is distinguished from lyrical effusion in that it occurs as a definite opposition and therefore as an act of defiance and conflict. Finally, Bam conveyed that confession is a free action. It is a response to a summons and rests on free choice. It proceeds from the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills (Barth 1969/1951:82, 80). According to Bam, if a church has stumbled upon a heresy it has no option but to confess its faith in the face of such a false doctrine.

Consequently, the DRMC Synod of 1982 following in the footsteps of the WARC declared a *status confessionis*. With this position, it was said that the DRC, in its commitment to apartheid, could not have served the God of the Bible nor the reconciliation that the Bible speaks of. The justification of apartheid was not only a disservice to the kingdom of God; it constituted a heresy, an evil act, which is irreconcilable with the kingdom of God. The DRMC realised that in a situation like this you must confess anew to the truths of the Bible in the light of the pseudo-gospel. The DRMC decided to draw up a confession in order to do that.

The synod appointed a committee consisting of Rev. Isak Mentor, Moderator of the DRMC, Dr Allan Boesak, Vice-Moderator of the DRMC, and three lecturers from the UWC (at the time a racially segregated tertiary institution), namely, Dr Dirkie Smit, Prof. Jaap Durand and Prof. Gustav Bam, to draw up a draft confession of faith, known today as the ‘Belhar Confession’. The drafters of the Belhar Confession were all held in high regard in the DRMC. According to an article by Murray la Vita, ‘*Die belydenis Van dominee Dirkie*’ published in *Die Burger*, 26 May 2011, the commission entrusted the young Dirkie Smit to draft a document because most of the others were engaged in commission work during the synod. He played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Belhar Confession. Within days, the committee presented the synod the draft. The Belhar Confession was born in a moment of truth. The draft confession dealt with three issues: (1) unity of the church, (2) reconciliation in Christ, and (3) the justice of God. The synod adopted the draft as well as an official accompanying letter to explain the decision to draft the confession. The letter explains among others the

attitudes and expectations behind this deed. The beginning of the accompanying letter states:

We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgement, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church Family calls for such a decision. (Belhar Confession 1986:1)

The synod accepted the draft confession of Belhar. The word 'accepted' used for the reception of the report of the commission does not imply adoption. A long process of discernment by the local congregations, which took four years, followed. The Belhar Confession was a response of the church in faith at a time of tremendous challenge and adversity.

The publishing of Murray la Vita's article in *Die Burger* made it public knowledge that Dirkie Smit played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Belhar Confession. Kritzinger, however, highlights the role that the theological declaration of the Confessing Circle in August 1979 was one of the significant documents used by the authors while formulating the Belhar Confession (Kritzinger 2010:209-231). According to Kritzinger, it did not matter who wrote the confession. I concur with Kritzinger in that confessions are formally approved in the Reformed tradition by a specific church, based on a well-established procedure involving local (church council), regional (presbytery) and national (synod) bodies. The stance of the URCSA is that once a confession has been formally approved by a Reformed church, that church 'speaks' or 'confesses' that particular confession, not the individual authors who formulated it or the committee that proposed it to the church. One should always remember that any text, once written, has little to do with the author. Communal authorship and ownership, therefore, applies to the Belhar Confession. The delegates at the DRMC and DRCA synods were painfully aware of the hardships of apartheid and can rightfully be seen as co-authors of the Belhar Confession. The confession put into words their observation about the situation in South Africa.

The Belhar Confession is indeed the culmination of a variety of factors, processes and efforts in the DRMC, DRCA, Confessing Circle and Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA). The movement and philosophy of the Confessing Circle found extension in the formation of the ABRECSA in 1981. ABRECSA was a broad Reformed forum constituted by members of the black DRC, Presbyterians and the Congregational Church. ABRECSA reflected on Reformed faith and its implications for opposing apartheid within and outside the church. The members of ABRECSA also influenced the decisions of the DRMC and the DRCA on social justice issues during the 1980s. According to Kritzinger (2010), the first and clearest

influence of the Confessing Circle's declaration in relation to the Belhar Confession is the one found in Article 4 of the confession: 'As God's property the church must be busy standing where God stands, viz. against injustice and with those who are denied justice' (Confessing Circle's Declaration of 1979), versus 'We believe: that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged' (Belhar Confession, Art. 4). Chris Loff, as coordinator of the drafting team of the Confessing Circle, presented the draft Declaration of the Circle to the plenary of the Confessing Circle conference held in 1979 in Hammanskraal, for approval. Allan Boesak, one of the co-drafters of the Belhar Confession, was the chairperson of the Confessing Circle at the time. The formulation by Chris Loff was approved at the Confessing Circle's meeting. Kritzinger maintains that although the influence of the Confessing Circle's Declaration on the Belhar Confession is in most cases not verbatim, there are indeed discernible influences to be seen in the Belhar Confession.

With only a few small formal changes to the original formulation, the Belhar Confession and the accompanying letter were officially adopted by the DRMC Synod of 1982. The draft of the Belhar Confession was distributed in a booklet to all the congregations of the DRMC, in order for the church councils of the DRMC to comment. It was a confession in concept form, which was to be finalised at the next synod in 1986. The members of the DRMC were aware that they contributed in one way or another also to the situation, and together they accepted responsibility for that which they confessed. The DRMC rejected the claims of an unjust or oppressive government and denounced Christians who claimed theological justification of the system of apartheid. The DRMC committed themselves to a common witness to injustice and equality in society and to unity at the Table of the Lord. It was a moment of *kairos* for the church to obedience.

The Belhar Confession was adopted during a particularly trying time in South Africa's history. Section 17 (the ninety-day detention law) of the General Law Amendment Act (No. 37 of 1963) authorised any commissioned officer to detain – without a warrant – any person suspected of a political crime and to hold them for 90 days without access to a lawyer. The Act also allowed for further declaration of unlawful organisations. The state president could declare any organisation or group of persons that had come into existence since 7 April 1960 to be unlawful. The Internal Security Act (No. 32 of 1979) empowered the government to declare an organisation unlawful and to control the distribution of publications. Meetings of more than twenty persons were declared unlawful unless authorised by the magistrate. Even some of the presbyteries of the DRMC and DRCA could not meet, due to the unrest in South Africa (Submission of the URCSA to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1997:2). The apartheid government had the right to declare areas of 'unrest' and

to allow extraordinary measures to suppress protests in these areas. On 12 June 1986, three months before the DRMC Synod where the Belhar Confession would be approved, the government extended the existing state of emergency to cover the whole country. Under these circumstances, the DRMC Synod was constituted.

The delegates at the 1986 Synod knew that under a state of emergency the minister of law and order, the commissioner of the South African Police or a magistrate or a commissioned officer could detain without trial any person for reasons of public safety. For example, DRCA ministers of the Word Peter Moatse and K.E. Leputu were detained the same evening after a debate on apartheid in the Regional Synod of Northern Transvaal in 1986. Notwithstanding this, the delegates at the DRMC Synod of 1986 approved the Belhar Confession. The acceptance of the Belhar Confession as an authority of faith in September of that year can, therefore, be seen as an act of defiance. The state of emergency continued until 1990 when it was finally lifted by then state president F.W. de Klerk.

The adoption of the Belhar Confession during the state of emergency can be seen as a church defying state theology at its best, like the Israelites, who refused to 'sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.' In Psalm 137, the Israelites were sitting on the banks of the rivers of Babylon. They had been in exile. The Babylonians requested the Israelites to sing. Instead of obeying their slave masters the Israelites left their harps hanging on trees. This was indeed an act of defiance. They refused to obey the empire. The delegates at the DRMC Synod did more or less the same. They accepted the Belhar Confession knowing that hardships will follow them immediately after the synod. They refused to listen to their masters' voice and meekly accept the *status quo*. The Belhar Confession is a reformed response to the theological justification of apartheid, namely that the gospel and the integrity of the church had been at stake.

Belhar is a profound confession of faith in the face of the 'heresy' of apartheid (see Cloete & Smit 1984). It includes five articles, with the first and last being short statements of faith in the triune God and a commitment to the confession itself. The other three articles each focus on a key issue at the heart of the heresy of apartheid: unity, reconciliation and justice. Article 2 on unity affirms the oneness in Christ that is at the heart of the church and rejects the way that apartheid has entrenched division in the church. Article 3 affirms that the church is entrusted with the gospel of reconciliation and includes the claim 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.

Boesak rightly said that the Confession of Belhar became the bedrock of theological reference and reflection as well as a salient point of theological identity within the URCSA Africa (Boesak 2008:143-172).

On the 26 September 1986, after four years of discernment of the local congregation on the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the standard of faith, the DRMC formally adopted the Belhar Confession as the fourth confession of the church. Prof. Gustav Bam recited the proposals of the ad hoc commission on the Belhar Confession at the synod. He said retention of the confession would not hinder or accelerate the unification process between the DRC and the DRMC.

A confession lives in the heart of a church. We cannot for the sake of unity hold it back. If we do, these words are like fire that burn in our hearts. What is at stake is the reality of different religious understanding between us and the DRC. These differences will not disappear if we redeem the confession. (*Die Burger*, 29 September 1986)

On Friday 26 September 1986, 399 of the 470 delegates of the DRMC rose to express their endorsement of the Belhar Confession and thereby adopted the confession (*Agenda en Handeling*e NGSK 1986:718-747). Altogether 71 delegates voted against the adoption of the Belhar Confession, including Rev. Isak Mentor, ironically one of the co-drafters of the confession. Mentor's proposal at the synod that the Belhar Confession should not be accepted, but should rather be referred, for the greatest possible unity, to all other Dutch Reformed churches to reach consensus with the other Reformed churches, was rejected by an overwhelming majority. The acceptance of the Belhar Confession held profound judicial implications for all clergy of the DRMC. Eventually, it was expected of all ministers to sign the Belhar Confession. The synod, however, decided to accompany, with pastoral sensitivity, those who were not ready to accept the confession. The writing, as well as the ultimate adoption of the Belhar Confession, was a risky business. For example, many clergy feared that their financial subsidies by the DRC could be revoked or declined (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014:315-316). The acceptance of the Belhar Confession also held repercussions for relations with the DRC. The implications of the acceptance of the Belhar Confession were discussed at the Synod. Many pastors wanted to know what the implications were for ministers of the DRC who worked as missionaries in the DRMC, especially regarding their licence, which had been issued by the DRC. Fears were expressed over the DRC's financial aid to congregations, especially in the countryside. The possibility that the DRC could withdraw its financial support to the DRMC was mentioned (*Agenda en Handeling*e NGSK 1986:718-747).

The Belhar Confession was a response of the church in faith at a time of tremendous challenge and adversity. The DRMC found that the only proper response to the

challenge for people of faith was a renewed confession in Jesus Christ our Lord, a renewed understanding of the promises of God's Word, and a new commitment to our covenant with God. The DRMC, therefore, requested the REC Assembly of 1988 in Harare to include the Belhar Confession in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the Constitution of the Reformed Ecumenical Council to which all member churches must subscribe (Botha 1991:1). The REC Assembly asked the member churches to consider accepting the Belhar Confession and to report their decisions to the 1992 Assembly. The REC member churches were requested to reflect upon the history of the Belhar Confession; the purpose of the Belhar Confession; the question whether the Belhar Confession can stand alongside the classical confessions; the question whether the Belhar Confession is specifically South African in orientation, and whether that would be a hindrance; and the question whether the Belhar Confession should be approved. The REC constituted a theological forum to promote discussion of the Belhar Confession so that an enlightened decision could be made at the REC Assembly in Athens (Schrotenboer 1991:1). There had been diverse opinions in the member churches of the REC over this issue.

Reception of the Belhar Confession

The Belhar Confession is a living document and is a guiding light in the discourse on race, ethnicity, apartheid and the unification of racially-segregated churches in both the global South and the global North. During the past three decades, the DRMC and later the URCSA engaged, on the basis of the Belhar Confession, on numerous issues, inter alia, church reunification between the DRC family, racism, domestic violence, gender, genetic modification of food, xenophobia and globalisation (Addendum 14). The Belhar Confession identifies unity, reconciliation and justice as problems in apartheid South Africa and attempts to provide a solution for the problems, mainly by trying to persuade the reader in affirmation and rejections. The Belhar Confession endeavours to convince, persuade and to motivate the reader to reject apartheid and to affirm fundamental biblical truths. The Belhar Confession, however, does not simply present information and arguments with regard to apartheid, discrimination, racism, etc. It rather employs rhetorical devices: affirmation and rejections. The Belhar Confession confesses its belief in justice as opposed to the practice of apartheid. The Belhar Confession is a call to action in order to change ideas, beliefs and behaviours on unity, justice and reconciliation.

The confession addresses three key biblical issues of concern to all churches, namely, the unity of the church and among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God's justice. The relevance of the Belhar Confession is, therefore, not confined to southern Africa, and the use or application of this confession in

the life of the church is far wider than its original context. The URCSA gave the Belhar Confession as a gift to the worldwide Reformed community. In 1997, the URCSA General Synod requested Reformed churches around the world to consider adopting the Belhar Confession so as to make it a part of the global Reformed confessional basis (*Acts of CRC Synod 2007:592; Agenda for CRC Synod 1999:197-200, 2003:235, 246*). During the past thirty years, churches on the continent as well as abroad embarked upon the process of reception and ultimately adoption of the Belhar Confession. The confession helps churches to approach issues of justice in their own context, and as such, has engendered vigorous debate about the nature of confessions in Reformed churches and the nature of the ministry of the church in the world and in the public sphere.

Various churches, based on their own historical moments, decided to adopt the Belhar Confession as part of their confessional basis. The Belhar Confession has been approved by the Calvin Protestant Church (1988), the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa in Namibia (ERCA) (1997), United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB) (1998), the Seattle First Christian Reformed Church (2007), Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana, the Dominican Reformed Church (2009), the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (2010), the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) (2011), the Lesotho Evangelical Church (2016) and the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) (2016). The Christian Reformed Church in North America accepted it as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration in 2012.

Other Reformed churches, such as the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Reformed Church in Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church, unsuccessfully tried to include the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. Although the Belhar Confession was also being studied during the '*Samen op Weg*' process⁹ for possible acceptance in the envisaged unified church in the Netherlands, it was not included with the formation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) in the confessional basis of the PCN (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2005:47*). However, the PCN, based on the principles of the Belhar Confession, through '*Kerk in Aktie*'¹⁰ is funding several projects in the URCSA, including theological training as well as several diaconal projects in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape and at the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University.

9 The 'Jointly on the way' process is the name of the attempts at closer co-operation of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands since 1961.

10 'Church in Action' is the programme for missionary and diaconal work of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and of ten smaller churches and ecumenical organisations.

Calvin Protestant Church

Shortly after the DRMC accepted the Belhar Confession as a fully-fledged confession, the Calvin Protestant Church embarked on a church judicial process to include the confession in their confessional basis. This process resulted in the adoption of the confession in 1988. The Calvin Protestant Church became the first denomination on the African continent to accept the Belhar Confession as part of their confessional basis and the Calvin Protestant Church became part of the unification process between the DRCA and the DRMC (*Agenda and Handelinge NGSK* 1986, 1990, 1994). However, the Calvin Protestant Church indicated that the DRC should be part of the united church. When the DRCA and the DRMC decided to continue church reunification in 1994 without the DRC, the Calvin Protestant Church left the church reunification process. Bilateral talks between the URCSA and the Calvin Protestant Church started on 6 February 2006 (Minutes of bilateral discussion with the Calvin Protestant Church held in Belhar 2006:1). The meeting appointed a small task team to oversee the unification process between the churches. The meeting also encouraged congregations and presbyteries the two churches to seek opportunities to work together, especially on a grassroots level. This included pulpit exchanges, congregations visiting each other, joint services, co-operation on various levels and other joint ventures.

Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa

The Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (ERCA) was established on 3 July 1975 due to the missionary action of the DRC in Namibia (then known as South West Africa) (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:23-24.). The DRC used the Theological School at Orumana in Kaokoland as a centre of the mission activities (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:21). The DRC had constituted autonomous congregations in Orumana, Takuasa in Kavango and in Onuno in Ovambo. Like all the other racial segregated churches constituted by the DRC, the ERCA formed with a white moderamen. According to Reverend Boas Tjingaete, the last moderator of the ERCA, the ERCA was nothing more than apartheid's guinea pig (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:22). Tjingaete, furthermore, stressed that the ERCA served as a basis (reservoir) for new members who fought as soldiers of the defence force of the South West Africa Army, homeland officials, Angolan refugees and other political aliens (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:24). This relationship did not work out as the DRC had initially anticipated, for soon the ERCA became critical of its white 'mother' and critically assessed its role within the Namibian society. The DRC tried in vain to suppress the critical voices in the ERCA through financial means. The DRC subsidised the ministers of ERCA and in so doing kept them dependent on foreign funding, however, when it was revealed that liberation theology was accepted by ministers of the ERCA, the mission secretary of the DRC was mandated by the DRC to stop payments of subsidies (*Beraad Van*

NGK in SWA 1986:88). Financial manipulation seemed to be a strong motivation for reaching the aspired aims of the DRC concerning the ERCA.

Critical voices emerged in the ERCA against the political misuse of the church, the non-compliance of Reformed church polity principles and the paternalism of the DRC (for example, the upgrading of evangelists as ministers of the Word without following the correct church-order procedures). The ERCA were also critical of the DRC's financial control over salaries, for example, all power to cease the payment of subsidies to ERCA resided with the Synodical Mission Commission of the DRC. Other areas of criticism concerned theological training (for example, the closing of the Theological School at Orumana and the opening of the Windhoek Theological Seminary, without any input of the ERCA), and the emotional manipulation of members and ministers of ERCA to abide by decisions of the DRC in Namibia. The ERCA were also critical of the DRC paternalism and the divide-and-rule strategy. An example of the latter was the division of the ERCA into four regional synods: Ovambo, Kavango, Central and East, without any input of the ERCA. This was done to enable the DRC to manipulate the four small ethnic-based synods more effectively (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:23-29).

The DRC in Namibia downgraded the Belhar Confession as liberation theology (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:27, 29, 34-35). The critical thinkers in the ERCA strongly objected against any form of church apartheid and urged in vain that church reunification and the Belhar Confession should be put on the agenda of the bi-annual consultations between the ERCA, the DRC and the URCSA. The last such consultation between the Dutch Reformed churches in Namibia took place on 10 August 1994 (*Beraad Van NGK in SWA 1986:88*). The August 1994 consultation symbolised a critical turning point in the history of ERCA. The ERCA realised that all the proposals of consultation regarding how to enhance unity on the local congregational level in the DRC family merely affirmed the status quo of division along racial lines (among other things, pulpit exchange) (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:38).

The General Synod of the ERCA held from 18 to 20 August 1996 decided to unify with the URCSA and with a two-thirds majority approved in principle that the Belhar Confession should be included in their confessional basis. According to the URCSA's Rules for Incorporation of Churches, any church that desires to join the URCSA should accept the Belhar Confession before joining (Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:32; URCSA Church Order Regional Synod Cape 2004:182). The ERCA, therefore, referred the decision to their various regional synods for ratification (*Agenda en Handelinge VGKSA1997:57*; Lombard & Tjingaete 1995:32;). All four regional synods of the ERCA, namely, Ovambo, Kavango, Central and East, approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of ERCA.

In 1997, the General Synod of the ERCA approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. The decision of ERCA was an act of defiance. At the 1997 General Synod, the application of ERCA to unite with the URCSA was approved with a two-thirds majority as they complied with all requirements of the URCSA's Rules for Incorporation of Churches (*Agenda en Handelinges VGKSA1997:57, 426*). Permission was also given at the same General Synod for the eleven URCSA congregations in Namibia to constitute with the congregations of the ERCA as a separate Regional Synod of URCSA. The ERCA ceased to exist on 16 April 1997 and amalgamated with the URCSA Presbytery of Namibia to constitute the Regional Synod of Namibia.

United Protestant Church in Belgium

The United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB) adopted the Belhar Confession in 1998 as well as the *Konkordie Van Leuvenberg*¹¹ with a majority vote to be taken up in the rules and regulations ('*Gewoonteregels*') of the UPCB and used it as a basis for further reflection and sharing between the URCSA and the UPCB (*Motivatie tot voorstel wijziging Constitutie Art. 1.2, 2015:1*). Since 1998, a partnership agreement has existed between the URCSA and the UPCB, based on the Belhar Confession, which had been taken up in the '*Gewoonteregels*' of the UPCB.

In order to reinforce the partnership of the URCSA and the UPCB and to come to a deeper knowledge of each other and a better co-operation, these churches exchange members of their ecclesiastic personnel. This is a great opportunity to develop relationships with brothers and sisters in another part of the world and strengthen relationships between the churches. It also offers the opportunity to be involved in the mutual mission of the two churches. The UPCB also contributes financially to several projects in the URCSA, notably home-based healthcare, the publication of a newsletter and the Council for World Mission (CWM) Congress (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2005:49*). The youth of the two churches attend CAP (comrades, artisans and partners) camps twice a year. The camp is a three-way partnership of the *Eglise presbytérienne au Rwanda* (EPR), the URCSA and the UPCB. The aim of the CAP camp is to help break down barriers between people, churches and cultures.

On Saturday 4 November 2015, the Synod of the UPCB unanimously approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in Article 1.2 their constitution. The motivation for the new article was as follows: 'The church recognises the significance of the

11 Officially called the 'Concordia of Reformed churches in Europe' is a statement on 16 March 1973 in the Leuvenberg Conference Centre. This statement formed the basis for the Church Community of Leuvenberg. Since 2003, called the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

Barmen Theological Declaration,¹² the *Konkordie of Leuenberg* and the Belhar Confession as confession of the church at present' (Motivatie tot voorstel wijziging Constitutie Art. 1.2, 2015:1).

Reformed churches in Germany

The Evangelisch-reformierte Kirsches (Evangelical Reformed Church), Lippische Landeskirche (Church of Lippe) of Germany, the Reformierter Bund in Deutschland (Reformed Federation in Germany) and the URCSA share a common theological history and legacy in the Barmen Declaration and the Confession of Belhar, to covenant against the theological immorality of the situations from which they emerged (Boesak 2010:1).

Already in 1998, the Church of Lippe and the URCSA approved a partnership agreement based on the Belhar Confession. This includes among others an agreement between the Church of Lippe in Germany and the URCSA with regard to vicariate, partnerships between local congregations and support for various diaconal projects, inter alia, the Light of the Children Foundation, a faith-based organisation – locally owned and organically growing, with the aim of helping orphans and vulnerable children to reach their full potential (Report of the Executive of URCSA to the General Synodical Commission 2015:24).

In 2006, the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany and the URCSA embarked on a joint project regarding globalisation and justice for humanity and the earth. The aim was to interrogate the issues emanating from the Accra Confession adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' General Council in Accra, Ghana, 2004; share experiences from within the two churches different historical, social, economic, political and theological contexts; and seek common understanding of the complexities of the challenges confronting the church. The URCSA and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany hoped to build, with this project among others, consensus based on their shared faith, presenting shared convictions and common testimony to the ecumenical church and the world (Boesak 2010:1). Dr Allan Boesak was appointed to coordinate the Globalisation Project (*Agenda GSC URCSA* 2009:65-66).

In 2015, the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany, Church of Lippe in Germany, and the Reformed Federation in Germany embarked on a project to make the Belhar Confession better known to their denominations. For this purpose, a working group

12 The 'Barmen Declaration' of 1934 or 'The Theological Declaration of Barmen' (*Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung*) was a document adopted by Christians in Nazi Germany who opposed the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christian) movement.

collected all kinds of material relating to the confession for the use in congregations on different levels and in different settings. For example, the group collected material for catechism classes, worship and liturgy, for synods, church gatherings and group discussions. The material was aimed at helping to address various issues of justice, reconciliation and unity. The outcome was the publishing of a brochure, *‘Für das Recht straiten: 30 Jahre Bekenntnis von Belhar (1986–2016)’* (Arguing for the Law: 30 years of the Confession of Belhar) during 2016. The richly illustrated brochure includes contributions regarding the practice in church, community and school, as well as theological texts and information on the historical background of the confession. Themes in this booklet include among others *‘Das bekenntnis von Belhar’* (the meaning of Belhar), *‘Stimmen aus den Kirchen’* (Voices from the churches), *‘Belhar in der Gemeindepraxis’* (Belhar in community practice), *‘Belhar im Gottesdienst’* (Belhar in worship), *‘Belhar in der Theologie’* (Belhar in theology) and *‘Belhar in der Geschichte’* (Belhar in history). This brochure also includes the URCSA’s press statement on xenophobia: *‘Wie wir auf Fremde in unserer Mitte reagieren, das berührt das Herz der kirchlichen Lehre’* (How we react to strangers in our midst, touches the heart of ecclesiastical doctrine) (see Addendum 14). On 11 September 2016, the Evangelical Reformed Church held a ‘Day of Belhar’ in all their congregations focusing on Belhar in worship services and other activities. The Reformed Federation in Germany and the Church of Lippe of Germany are considering adopting the Belhar Confession (Van der Borcht 2012:77).

Reformed Church in America

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) had been considering the Belhar Confession since 1985, three years after it was written in South Africa. This in response to divisions in the church during apartheid. The Commission on Christian Unity of the RCA studied the Belhar Confession during 1998–1999 and supported ongoing reflection of the confession. In 2001, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity recommended to General Synod to endorse and use the theological foundation of the Belhar Confession to inform the RCA’s commitment to being a church freed from racism. The commission also recommended that the church invites members of congregations and classes to carefully study the Belhar Confession and the implications of its endorsement for life and ministry in the RCA, using materials made available by the Commission on Christian Unity.

Throughout the past decade, the commission has made the Belhar Confession and the church-wide study its highest priority and focussed on the creation of study and worship materials that would allow the RCA, its congregations and members, to engage the Belhar Confession deeply and in multiple ways (*Acts and Proceedings RCA 2010:206*). At the 2009 General Synod, essays on the Belhar Confession were tabled including ‘Observations on the Belhar Confession and Scripture’, ‘Observe All

Things: The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship'; 'The Belhar and Race: The Dream Fulfilled'; 'The Belhar and Reconciliation: The confession's Application to the Church's Work in Sudan'; 'The Belhar and Women: Overcoming Sexism to Embrace Unity'; and 'Belhar Confession: Where Are We Now? Why Confess?' (*Acts and Proceedings RCA* 2009:100-101, 240-257, 263-276, 315-319, 327).

In 2000, the General Synod of the RCA instructed the Commission on Christian Unity to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the URCSA and other Reformed bodies.

In 2007, the General Synod of the RCA voted to provisionally adopt the Belhar Confession for two years of testing in worship, teaching, discernment and confession. This meant that it should be considered for final adoption by the RCA Synod in 2009. Since then, the confession has been referred to RCA congregations and classes for study (*Acts General Synod RCA, Report of Global Mission* 2007:166).

During 2009, the General Synod of the RCA voted to recommend adoption of the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. This recommendation placed this change in the *Book of Church Order* before the classes for approval. The polity of the RCA required that for the final adoption to take effect synod decision must be ratified by a two-thirds (or more) majority vote of the 46 classes of the RCA. This was to be followed by a declarative vote from the 2010 General Synod in order for the change in the *Book of Church Order* to be ratified. Thirty-two classes voted in favour of the recommendation (over two-thirds), with fourteen classes not in favour (*Acts and Proceedings RCA* 2010:309). During June 2010, the General Synod of the RCA officially declared the Belhar Confession the fourth standard of the RCA. The reasons for the support of the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the RCA confessional basis include the following:

- 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.
- The Belhar Confession will help the RCA to add unity, justice and reconciliation to the denominational DNA of the RCA.
- The Belhar Confession heightens awareness of injustices and brings focus to specific areas of injustice, such as poverty and racism.

- The Belhar Confession strengthens the vision of the RCA (*Acts and Proceedings* RCA2010:206).

The RCA decision to include the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis proves their commitment to be faithful to the Triune God and to live out that faithfulness through addressing lingering issues of racism and the injustice of exclusion.

Christian Reformed Church of North America

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) includes just over one thousand congregations across the United States and Canada. About 75 percent of the churches are in the United States with 25 percent in Canada. Already in 1984, the CRC considered the request of the DRMC to the member churches of REC regarding the adoption of the Belhar Confession (*Acts of Synod CRC* 1984:172:220). In view of the ecumenical relationship of the CRC with the Reformed churches of South Africa in the REC, it was seen as incumbent on the CRC, out of integrity towards these relationships, to judge the decision of the DRMC concerning apartheid (that it is a sin) and the 'moral and theological justification of it' (that it is a theological heresy) (*Acts of Synod CRC* 1984:602-3). During 1985, further informal discussions were held with the DRC regarding their reactions to the Belhar Confession (*Acts of Synod CRC* 1985:211). In 1989, in response to the request to the REC, the CRC Synod instructed the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) to study the Belhar Confession and present recommendations to the 1990 Synod (*Acts of Synod CRC* 1989:497).

In 1990, the CRC took official action on the request of the REC interim committee. The CRC Synod of 1990 declared that the Belhar Confession was in harmony with the Reformed faith as a body of truth as articulated in the historic Reformed confessions, and that it was in basic agreement with the REC and CRC decisions on race made over the last decades. The CRC had, therefore, had no objection to its inclusion in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the REC Constitution. (*Acts of Synod CRC* 1990:625). At a later meeting of the REC, the recommendation to add the Belhar Confession to Article II of the REC Constitution was vigorously debated, however, not adopted.

In December 2002, the CRC and RCA delegations met and discussed a unified approach to dealing with the Belhar Confession, as asked for by the URCSA. (*Agenda for Synod URCSA* 2005:240). The RCA produced their study materials in a form that allowed for its use as a discussion guide in the CRC context (*Agenda for Synod CRC* 2005:241). The CRC offered the study guide, *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession*, to every congregation in the CRC. In 2007, the CRC Synod mandated the IRC to study and assess the Belhar Confession and to present

recommendations concerning it to the 2009 Synod (*Acts of Synod CRC 2007:592*). The IRC initiated a series of focus group discussions about the Belhar Confession.

The Classis Pacific Northwest requested the CRC Synod of 2009 to endorse the recommendation of the IRC to accept the Belhar Confession as a doctrinal standard of the CRC on par with the historic three forms of unity. The Classis urged the synod to recommend to the 2012 Synod that Belhar be adopted as a fourth confession of the CRC. The following arguments were tabled as grounds for the acceptance of the confession:

- There is little mention in the classical confessions of the central biblical principle of God's justice and care for the poor and suffering. The Belhar fills this gap in the standard confessions.
- The unity of the church, reconciliation of people in Christ, and God's justice and care of the suffering and poor are fundamental biblical principles that lie at the core of the Reformed faith.
- The issues addressed by the Belhar Confession, Christian unity, reconciliation, injustice and racism are as relevant for the Reformed Church in North America and the world today as they were for the Reformed churches in South Africa under apartheid. Church splits continue, proliferating new denominations, often pitting brother against brother. The evils of racism following centuries of slavery, discrimination and abuse of minorities linger in most facets of North American society. Growing poverty and injustice are major worldwide issues affecting billions of people in nations around the globe (*Overture to the Synod of the CRC March 2009:1-2*).

The CRC Synod of 2009 proposed that the 2012 Synod adopt the Belhar Confession as part of the standards of unity (what the church believes) of the church as a fourth confession, and authorise the revision of the Church Order Supplement and the Public Declaration of Agreement to reflect that adoption (IRC 2009:13). The General Synod of the CRC finally voted for the amendment of the confessional basis of the CRC in June 2012. The churches used the time between the synods of 2009 and 2012 to 'adequately study and reflect on the proposal. This decision invigorated a discussion on confessional theology and the Belhar Confession. For example, John W. Cooper, professor of Philosophical Theology at the Calvin Theological Seminary stated seven reasons why the CRC should not make the confession one of the denomination's doctrinal standards, namely:

- Insufficient content – the Belhar Confession is much too brief and narrow to be a confession.

- Social gospel/liberation theology – it seems that the Belhar Confession equates the gospel with social well-being and to conflate human reconciliation with reconciliation to God.
- Theological ambiguity – the wording of the Belhar Confession is not sufficient to rule out progressive theologies or to make its intended meaning clear.
- Confessional integrity – adopting the Belhar as a confession will undermine the confessional integrity of the CRC.
- Redundancy – the Belhar adds little to what the CRC already affirms. The contemporary testimony of the CRC addresses ethnic diversity, unity in Christ, and social justice.
- Setting of precedents – if it is necessary for the church to make biblical mandates into confessions in order to take them seriously, then churches should also add confessions about worship, evangelism, lifestyle, and more.
- Potential divisiveness – the Belhar is supposed to promote unity but has the potential to divide the church among those who subscribe to it and those who cannot conscientiously do so (Cooper 2010:11-12, 2011a, 2011b:1-34).

After spending more than three hours debating the Belhar Confession, the CRC Synod of 2012 finally adopted it as an 'Ecumenical Faith Declaration' rather than a confession. The Belhar Confession has engendered vigorous debate about the nature of confessions in the CRC. The CRC affirmed that the three central themes of the Belhar Confession, namely unity, justice and reconciliation, have deep biblical resonance for Reformed Christians. They also offer the church a historic opportunity to stand in solidarity with the voices of the global South. Yet the 2012 Synod, due to a lack of clarity over the definition and nature of a confession, decided to adopt the Belhar Confession and place it in a new category called 'Ecumenical Faith Declarations'. This category for the adoption of the Belhar Confession would set it apart from the 'standards of unity'. The full text of the decision reads as follows:

- i. That synod expresses its gratitude to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa for the gift of the Belhar Confession to the CRCNA and the worldwide Reformed community as an excellent call to unity, justice, and reconciliation.
- ii. That synod authorise a formal category called Ecumenical Faith Declarations
- iii. This category identifies declarations and statements of faith that speak to global realities and uniquely enable the CRCNA to formally state its commitment to and live out key biblical principles.
- iv. Documents in this category, while important and contributing to the CRCNA's worldwide witness and ministry, are not considered part of the confessional

basis of the CRCNA, and, therefore, will not be listed in the Form of Subscription (CRC Synod 2012 Advisory Committee 7 2012:1-2).

That CRC adopted the Belhar Confession, the accompanying letter from the United Reformed Church of Southern Africa, and the joint statement of the RCA and CRC as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration and recommended it to the churches for study and for incorporation of its themes into their discipline and liturgical ministries.

The grounds for the decisions were as follows:

- The central themes of unity, justice, and reconciliation in the Belhar Confession reflect biblical teaching and are consistent with the historic Reformed confessions.
- The Belhar Confession addresses important issues that are also pertinent to the CRCNA's own history and context in North America.
- The three-year discussion of the Belhar Confession revealed a lack of consensus in support of adopting the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession on par with the historic confessions adopted by the CRCNA.
- The three-year discussion of the Belhar Confession revealed substantial support for the Belhar Confession to have an official status. (*Acts of CRC Synod 2012*, 766-767, Art. 56 D. 3-5)

Such a category could function like Presbyterian confessions, but they would not have the same weight as the CRC's three main confessions. A delegation of approximately 50 representatives from various denominations associated with the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) met in Grand Rapids, Michigan from 2 to 4 February 2014 in an Ecumenical Faith Declaration Consultation. This consultation arose in the aftermath of the CRC's decision to adopt the Belhar Confession and designate it as a document in a new category entitled 'Ecumenical Faith Declaration'. The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the CRC in conjunction with the WCRC extended invitations to consider in an open and transparent environment whether this new category could serve a broader purpose among Reformed churches. It became clear at the consultation that creeds and confessions function in a variety of ways in the life of Reformed churches across the globe. The Ecumenical Faith Declaration category did not convey a clearly understood meaning to those gathered. Some even wondered whether this category could implicitly discriminate among varied expressions of faith in ways that might contribute to an unhealthy hierarchical classification of the church's varied forms of witness. Most of the participants in the consultation did not embrace the concept of the new category (*Consultation Issues, Report on Ecumenical Faith Declaration 2014:1-4*). The WCRC representatives did not endorse the Ecumenical

Faith Declaration, but they also said they appreciated the opportunity to review and discuss creeds, confessions, declarations and statements of faith are having and can have in the life of the contemporary church.

The CRC Synod of 2016 approved a proposal that the Belhar Confession be recognised as a contemporary testimony of the Christian Reformed Church. This would give it the same status as one of the CRC's own contemporary testimonies namely 'Our World Belongs to God'. Changing the status of the Belhar would make a difference in the Covenant of Office-bearers that all office-bearers in the CRC must sign. This covenant now required office-bearers to affirm the contemporary testimony, Our World Belongs to God, as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides the CRC. If the CRC gave the Belhar the same status as the contemporary testimony, Our World Belongs to God, then each year the office-bearers of the CRC would be confronted with the contents of the Belhar.¹³ The proposal to re-categorise the Belhar Confession was referred to the 2017 Synod, which will make the final decision in the matter.

First Christian Reformed Church of Seattle

The First Christian Reformed Church in Seattle was founded in 1857 and forms part of the CRC in North America. The church was introduced to the Belhar Confession in 2005 during a visit to South Africa. Already in 1984, the CRC had concluded that the Belhar was in accord with the decisions of several synods (1984:602-3). In 2006, the First CRC Seattle prepared an overture to their synod in order start to outline a strategy and a process for congregations, classes and synods to study and consider the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth standard of unity.

The premise of the First CRC Seattle echoed that put forward by the The Classis Pacific Northwest, namely, that issues of Christian unity, reconciliation, injustice and racism, highlighted by the Belhar Confession were as relevant for the Reformed churches in North America and the world today as they were for the Reformed churches in South Africa under apartheid. In 2007, the Christian Reformed Church Synod encouraged the ongoing work of the IRC to inform and engage the churches concerning the Belhar Confession and the issues raised by it through a greater dissemination of the Belhar Confession to the congregations. The synod also proposed that the IRC initiate regional-level dialogues to discuss the confession. In mid-2007, the church council of the First CRC Seattle decided there were no denominational prohibitions against an individual congregation adopting a confession that the synod had declared to be biblical and consistent with the existing confessions. The church

13 'Synod proposes re-categorising the Belhar Confession as a contemporary testimony'. In *The Banner*, 16 June 2016.

order of the CRC does not forbid congregations from receiving a confession as binding on their members as long as it is in accordance with Scripture and the Standards of Faith. Therefore, on 21 October 2007, by a 94 percent majority, the First Christian Reformed Church Seattle voted to adopt the Belhar Confession as its own and added it as a fourth 'Standard of Unity'.¹⁴

Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana in the Dominican Republic

The story of the Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana (IRD) (Dominican Reformed Church) is the amazing story of advocacy of the Belhar Confession. The RCA Global Mission supported the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a provisional confession of the church and became one of the advocates of the Belhar Confession. The Global Mission has been engaged in cross-cultural mission for more than 150 years and has a record of excellence that is well known both within our church and the ecumenical mission world (*Acts General Synod RCA Report of Global Mission* 2008:179). The Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana is one of the global churches born out of the Global Mission endeavours. The RCA began its work in the Dominican Republic several years ago through a co-operative partnership of the General Synod Council's Hispanic Ministries Council, former Global Mission director Bruce Menning, Andres Serrano and the Radio Impacto broadcast ministry, begun through the church he serves (Iglesia Reformatada La Senda in Corona, California) and the regional synods of Mid-Atlantic and New York (where the largest concentrations of Dominicans outside of the Dominican Republic reside). During 2004, Rev. Andres Serrano of the IRD from Corona, spoke about reformed theology, history and confessions, including the Belhar Confession over Radio *Impacto*. Christians from across the Dominican Republic were inspired by his teachings. Rev. Victor Castro, the current president of the IRD, began discussions with Rev. Serrano of the RCA, Rev. Brigidio Cabrera, the RCA's Hispanic Council and Rev. Bruce Menning of partnering with the RCA. They laid a solid foundation of teaching, inspiration, and relational networks among pastors and leaders of independent churches in the Dominican Republic who intended to become the Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana. The mission was to organise to unite independent churches across all 31 provinces (*Acts General Synod Council Reports RCA* June 2007:172). The Council for Hispanic Ministries fully supported the Reformed Church in America's vision of forming a church in the Dominican Republic.

Rev. Andres Serrano trained a group of 250 pastors and workers in the Dominican Republic on Reformed standards, the Belhar Confession and Reformed church polity. On 9 February 2008, the vision and mission of the Iglesia Reformatada Dominicana was presented to over one hundred pastors (*Acts General Synod Council Reports*

14 'Adopting the Belhar'. In *The Banner*, 18 January 2011, p. 1.

RCA 2008:187). The RCA Council for Hispanic Ministries approved that the Heidelberg Catechism, Articles of the Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort as well as the Belhar Confession should form part of the confessional basis of the envisaged Reformed church. Preparation to make it official began in January 2009 with a visit by an RCA delegation headed by General Secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson and the RCA leadership team. On 23 May 2009, the formation of the IRD General Synod and the first ordinations of pastors and elders took place. On that date, 21 pastors were ordained, 14 church planters commissioned, and 24 children, ages 5 to 14, were baptised. Andres Serrano, Brigido Cabrera, and Kenneth Bradsell (General Synod Assistant Secretary and Director of Operations of the RCA), representing the RCA, were made temporary members of the IRD, and participated in the ordinations of the new ministers and church planters. The IRD then approved the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis.

Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) was formed through the union of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in South Africa (RPC). Both former denominations owe their origin to the church of Scotland. The PCSA came into being in 1897 at its first general assembly held in Durban through the amalgamation of a number of different congregations established by Scottish settlers in Cape Town, the Eastern Cape and Natal. The general assembly brought together the presbyteries of Cape Town, Natal and the Transvaal, the white congregations of the Synod of Kaffraria (Free Church of Scotland), the white congregations of the Presbytery of Adelaide (United Presbyterian Church of Scotland) and the two independent congregations at Port Elizabeth and Kimberley. The Free Church Synod of Kaffraria and United Presbyteries, which was preponderantly black in membership, declined to enter into union and chose to stay out of the newly formed PCSA. The PCSA thus became a preponderantly white settler church. A separate denomination called the Bantu Presbyterian Church (BPC) was formed for black members. In 1982, the BPC was renamed the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. Union between the PCSA and the RPC was finally achieved in 1999 with the formation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (Vellem 2013:146–162).

At the UPCSA General Assembly of 2010, Dr Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the UPCSA moved that as many Reformed churches across the world have adopted, or are in the process of adopting, the Belhar Confession of Faith, the General Assembly instruct the Ad Hoc Committee on Confessions to help the UPCSA to understand, reflect on and study the Belhar Confession with a view to possibly including the Belhar Confession among the Statements of Faith of the UPCSA (*Papers, Proceedings and Decisions of the 9th General Assembly* 2010:415, no. 14). During 2011, the

committee responded to this proposal in its report with a comprehensive study of Belhar (*Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the 9th General Assembly* 2010:355). Jerry Pillay motived his proposal on the Belhar Confession at the UPCSA Assembly in 2010 as follows:

- i. Reformed Churches in Belgium, Norway, Germany and the USA have adopted the Belhar Confession or are in the process of doing so. They often raise the question why Reformed churches in South Africa are not doing the same;
- ii. The confession is considered to have significance for the church and Christians all over the world, because of its attempt to address human dignity and rights and people's responsibilities to one another and to all creation.
- iii. The Dutch Reformed Church cannot seem to get the 2/3 majority it needs to accept it as a confession. Perhaps its acceptance by other Reformed churches in South Africa can challenge and enlighten its approach to, and thinking about, this (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission of the UPCSA* 2011:50).

The motion was agreed by consensus (*Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the 9th General Assembly of the UPCSA* 2010:383).

The ad hoc Committee on Confessions of the UPCSA tabled a fully-fledged report on the Belhar Confession at the Executive Commission 2011 (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission of the UPCSA* 2011:49-53). The committee found everything in the Belhar Confession acceptable and praiseworthy. The committee also welcomed the high regard that churches and Christians in other parts of the world showed the Belhar Confession. The committee also appreciated that some of these churches were adopting, or considering adopting and the confession and also recognising the historic significance of the Belhar Confession in South Africa in its role of addressing human dignity and people's rights and responsibilities to one another and to all creation (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission* 2011:50). The premise of the committee was that the UPCSA-owned confessions (the Declaration of Faith and the Confession of the UPCSA) take the same stand as the Belhar Confession does regarding the gospel truths of unity, reconciliation and justice. For example, the Declaration of Faith of the UPCSA, like the Belhar Confession, was specifically formulated, adopted and eventually enacted against the ideology and justification of apartheid (Addendum 3). The Confession of Faith of the UPCSA likewise contains many statements that take a stand for the gospel truths of unity, reconciliation and justice against racism, discrimination and oppression, *inter alia*,

- that Jesus 'proclaimed God's coming victorious rule especially to the poor';
- that Christ 'identified with the poor and oppressed';

- that 'God wants to save sinners – and stands on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited against all social, economic and political structures that oppress them';
- that 'God calls us to a life in which everyone's poverty is our own and our wealth is everyone's. We are to live simply and be faithful stewards of our abilities, time and money and other material resources, using them to be a community of mutual sharing, to support the church in its mission, and to do all we can for the poor as well as our own families';
- that the church 'is Catholic in that it is sent to reach out with the gospel to all the world, to embrace people of every race, culture and class, and be a church also for the poor and those on the margins of society';
- the 'unity and fellowship of the body of Christ is manifested above all at the Holy Table: no believer may be barred from it or separated at it on grounds of race, nationality, culture or class'; and
- that 'peace within a nation is endangered where there is injustice or extreme inequality and little is done to alleviate the suffering of the poor' (*Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the 9th General Assembly UPCSA 2010:78; Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission UPCSA 2011:51*).

According to the committee, the Belhar Confession did not say anything that was not already in the confessions of the UPCSA. The church had already formulated their own declaration against apartheid and their own subordinate standards already said the same as the Belhar Confession. (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission UPCSA 2011:52*).

Despite this, the Ad-Hoc Committee on Confessions premise was that the URCSA should give their full and unqualified approval to the Belhar Confession. According to the committee it was imperative that DRC adopt the Belhar Confession for the following reasons:

- Because the DRC lacks any subordinate standard that addresses the critical issues that Belhar does.
- Because whatever admission or confession of guilt the DRC may have made for the decision of 1857 and its support for the ideology and practice of apartheid, the sincerity of its repentance will remain in doubt so long as it refuses to adopt the Belhar Confession as a necessary corrective and so show that it recognises how far it strayed from the gospel.
- Because its declared openness to unite with the URCSA will remain so many empty words until it removes the fundamental obstacle to such union that its

refusal to accept the Belhar Confession as a subordinate standard of the United Church constitutes (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission of the UPCSA* 2011:53).

The Committee recorded that the UPCSA can and should:

1. Declare its solidarity with the URCSA in the pain and suffering that called forth the Belhar Confession.
2. Declare our esteem for the Belhar Confession and our gratitude for the important historic role it played in the witness of the church in southern Africa.
3. Approve all its contents and embrace all its values and sentiments; and commend it to its ministers and members for study and as a resource document.
4. The Committee would also all favour adopting the confession if that ever becomes a condition for union with the URCSA or to form a wider united Reformed church in southern Africa.
5. A study of the confession and of all the possible motives for our adopting it as one of our own subordinate standards has in the end, however, led the Committee to think that for the time being we should hesitate to do that (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions for the Executive Commission UPCSA* 2011:54).

The UPCSA expressed its solidarity with the URCSA in all the pain and suffering that its members had endured under the system of oppression that made the Belhar Confession necessary. The UPCSA also expressed its gratitude to God for the Belhar Confession and the historic role it has played in the history and witness of the church in southern Africa. The UPCSA, furthermore, approved all the contents of the Belhar Confession and embraced all its sentiments and values and commended the Belhar Confession to all the ministers, sessions and presbyteries of the UPCSA in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe for study and discussion and as a resource for preaching and teaching (*Supplementary Papers, Proceedings and Decisions UPCSA* 2011:40-41).

The General Assembly UPCSA 2013 instructed the Ad Hoc Committee on Confessions to help the UPCSA to understand, reflect on and study the Belhar Confession with a view to possibly including the Belhar Confession among the statements of faith of the UPCSA. The UPCSA mandated the General Secretary, Dr Jerry Pillay, as convener of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, to approach the DRC and the URCSA through their respective general secretaries, Dr Kobus Gerber and Dr Dawid Kuyler, to ask the two churches to consider whether they deemed it appropriate to invite the UPCSA to be represented, even if only by way of observer status, on the combined commission discussing union between them. This representation on the commission would enable the UPCSA to offer any relevant insights they may have

from their own experience of unification in their process of moving towards unity. It would also open the way for discussions about unity between the churches; any such unity being subject to all the parties endorsing the Belhar Confession but leaving open the question of whether unity between the DRC, the URCSA and the UPCSA should, 'to begin with, take a simple, federal or confederal form' (*Decisions of General Assembly of the UPCSA 2013:2*).

Presbyterian Church in the USA

The Presbyterian Church in the USA, or PCUSA was established by the 1983 merger of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (whose churches were located in the southern and border states) with the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (whose congregations could be found in every state). The PCUSA is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States. The process of preparing the PCUSA for the possibility of adopting the Belhar Confession began with a task force reporting to the General Assembly of the PCUSA in 2004.

Because of the enduring problem of racism in the USA, the 216th General Assembly 2004 asked PCUSA members to consider how the Belhar Confession can address the problem of racism in the USA and in their denomination (PCUSA 2010:6). They built their premise on Durand's notion that racism is not a sin exclusive to Afrikaners, or to white people for that matter. 'It lurks in the hearts of all of us. We have to do battle constantly against it in the power of the Spirit.' (Durand 1994:1).

The General Assembly approved the Belhar Confession to the church as a 'resource for reflection, study and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the PCUSA to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity' (PCUSA 2010:1). The General Assembly also urged each presbytery and all congregations to undertake a study of the Belhar Confession before the 218th General Assembly (2008) and directed the Office of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council, Office of Theology and Worship, to receive response, prepare a summary and report results with possible recommendations for further engagement with the Belhar Confession. The Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) and the Advocacy Committee on Women's Concerns both recommended the approval of the Confession of Belhar. In 2008, the General Assembly called for the institution of a special committee on the Confession of Belhar to study whether the Belhar Confession should be adopted into the *Book of Confessions* (PCUSA 2008:62-70).

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly of the PCUSA took the first step in adopting the Belhar Confession. Approval by two consecutive General Assemblies and ratification by two-thirds of the 173 presbyteries between those assemblies was required. The special committee unanimously recommended that the 219th General Assembly

(2010) approve the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*, and that the amendment be sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2011. The 219th General Assembly (2010) approved these amendments to the motion and agreed also to send the Belhar Confession to the presbyteries for their votes. The 219th General Assembly in 2010 approved inclusion of Belhar by a vote 525 to 150 with three abstentions. However, the presbyteries could not reach a two-thirds affirmative vote on the adoption of the Belhar Confession by July 2011, falling eight votes short (108 to 63) of the required majority.

The 220th PCUSA General Assembly 2012 approved to test the PCUSA a second time on the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. Moderator Neal Presa appointed Teaching Elder Clifton Kirkpatrick (Mid-Kentucky Presbytery) and Ruling Elder Matilde Moros (Hudson River Presbytery) to serve as co-moderators of the special committee. The sub-themes of Justice, Unity, and Reconciliation framed their approach to the Confession of Belhar and the development of interpretative materials. The special committee created material to study Belhar both in print and online. In 2014, the special committee unanimously recommended that the 221st General Assembly approve the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*, and that this amendment be sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2015. The 221st General Assembly called upon all congregations, councils, seminaries, and denominational conferences to engage in serious and prayerful study of the Confession of Belhar and its accompanying letter as well the accompanying letter to the Confession of Belhar from the General Assembly and to make use of the variety of resources produced by the special committee (PCUSA 2014).

By an overwhelming vote, the 221st General Assembly sent a proposed amendment to the *Book of Confessions of the PCUSA* that would add the Belhar Confession to their confessional basis. Before it could be added to the denomination's confessions, the Belhar would have to be ratified by 115, or two-thirds, of the denomination's 171 presbyteries – each by a two-thirds vote. The committee felt that the accompanying letter to the Confession of Belhar from the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PCUSA, which highlighted racism in the USA, might give presbyteries reason to not be in favour of the confession. They, therefore, recommended that the Belhar Confession and the accompany letter of the confession should rather be added to the confessional basis of the PCUSA. The 221st General Assembly of the PCUSA approved recommendations from the special committee with 551 to 87, or an 86 percent affirmative vote (PCUSA 2014).

By the end of April 114 of the presbyteries had voted in favour of the amendment of the *Book of Confessions* of the PCUSA, surpassing the two-third majority it required. In doing so, the crucial hurdle with 75% of the presbyteries voting to approve the

addition was cleared. Rev. Gradye Parsons, the Stated Clerk of the PCUSA stated that the PCUSA acknowledged the confession to be relevant for such a time as this in the life of the PCUSA and that the PCUSA diligently desired to live into it as part of the body of Christ:

We recognise our need to confess the ways this denomination has contributed to racism historically and even still today, and mourn all the ways we have fallen short. We believe this Confession, appropriated for this time and place, can bring about reconciliation and justice, and allow us to more fully follow Jesus in ministry and mission. (Parsons 2015:1)

On 22 June 2016, the 222nd PCUSA General Assembly finally approved, by an overwhelming (540 to 33) vote to include the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. The Belhar Confession joined the 11 Eurocentric creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* of the PCUSA). It was the first addition to the *Book of Confessions* in nearly 30 years. The adoption of the Belhar Confession by the PCUSA clearly demonstrates their commitment to embody the principles of the confession. The Belhar Confession is indeed a guiding light in the discourse on racism and a vast array of social justice issues, among other things, restorative justice, hate speech, incitement, statelessness, atrocity crimes, human rights violations, state capture, land grabbing, gender justice, the neoliberal economic globalisation and eco-justice.

Protestations against the reception of the Belhar Confession

The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, Reformed Church in Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church tried in vain to include the Belhar Confession in their confessional basis. Numerous reasons had been offered since 1986 why the confession should not be added to the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. The reservations of affording the Belhar Confession full confessional status in the envisaged unified church included the arguments that the Belhar was not biblical; the Belhar was not Christological; the three Forms of Unity were enough as it was; they were not involved in the drafting of the confession; and that the Belhar Confession was a champion of social gospel/liberation theology. The DRC attempted to admit it to the confessional basis of the DRC following the 2013 General Assembly but it fell short of the two-thirds majority for ratification in the ten regional synods. More than three decades after the drafting, acceptance and inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRMC there is still little consensus about its confessional status within the DRC family.

Dutch Reformed Church in Africa

Missionary work under the jurisdiction of the Mission Commission of the DRC among Africans in the Cape Colony only started in 1859. Racial segregated churches for African people had been established in the different provinces, *inter alia*, the NG Sendingkerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat (1910), the NG Sendingkerk Van Transvaal (1931), the NG Bantoeckerk in Kaapland (1951) and the NG Sendingkerk Van Natal (1952). These four churches unified in order to constitute the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in 1963. The General Synod of the DRCA of 1974 expressed the desire to unite with the RCA, the DRMC and the DRC and instructed the General Synodical Committee to contact them (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1974:253*).

The first unity conference of the DRC family took place on 10 to 12 February 1976 at Turfloop. Approximately 200 ministers, evangelists of the DRCA and DRMC and a few reverends of the DRC attend the conference. The following resolutions were made at the conference:

- Church unity is a biblical demand as well as a gift from God.
- Unity in the DRC family should be more visible (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK 1978:53-54*).

The DRCA General Synod of 1978 and the DRMC Synod of 1978 strongly objected to an overarching synod. The DRC General Synod, 1978 also found it unacceptable that an overarching synod structure could be able to make bounding decisions (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK 1978:51-59*).

At the sixth General Synod of the DRCA in Barkly West in 1983 a study document of the DRMC on the 'Church and Apartheid' was tabled in which the DRMC petitioned the DRCA to assist the DRMC in the declaration of the *status confessionis* and to subscribe to the draft the Belhar Confession (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1983:19-28*).

In 1983, a year after the acceptance of the draft Belhar Confession, the DRCA declared migrant labour to be in conflict with the norms of Scripture and formulated a principled decision against it (*Acta NGKA 1983:116-121, 360-361*). Apartheid legislation restricted African people to acquire property in white South Africa. In the case of the DRCA, the ownership and actual possession of ecclesiastical property was determined by the following colonial and apartheid laws: Natives Land Act (No. 27 of 1913), Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923), Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950), Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (No. 52 of 1951), Bantu Authorities Act (No. 68 of 1951), Native Laws Amendment Act (1952), Promotion of Bantu Self-government Act (No. 46 of 1959), Natives Resettlement Act (No. 19 of 1954), Group Areas Development Act (No. 69 of 1955), Urban Bantu Councils Act (No. 79 of 1961), Preservation of Coloured

Areas Act (No. 31 of 1961), Bantu Homelands Citizens Act (1970),¹⁵ amongst others. These laws made it illegal for blacks to purchase or lease land from whites except in the so-called reserves and restricted black occupancy to less than eight percent of South Africa's land. The Natives Resettlement Act granted powers to the government to remove Africans from any area reserved for whites or 'coloureds.' In so doing Africans became migrants in their own land. This laid the foundations for residential segregation in urban areas and the establishment of black homelands. In these homelands, the DRCA could acquire land for church purposes. The only ownership or occupational rights a black African possessed were restricted to the Bantustans or the black townships. The laws restricted the DRCA from purchasing land for church purposes. The actual control of the ecclesiastical property of the DRCA belonged essentially to the DRC, the local government in the Bantustans or the so-called urban Bantu councils. Ecclesiastical property of the DRCA was held under a lease for ninety-nine years and was renewable forever. Land was also conveyed to the trustees of the Missionary Commission of the DRC and their successors with the proviso that the land was to be used for church purposes by the DRCA.

Notwithstanding the above, the DRCA Synod of 1983 was not willing to adopt the Belhar Confession. The DRCA rather referred the draft confession with the existing decisions of the DRCA about church unity to a commission for further study (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1983:379*). This decision was reaffirmed at the DRCA General Synod of 1987. The synod regretted that the decision of the DRCA on church reunification unity did not produce concrete results and tasked the moderamen to proceed with great urgency to bring the decisions to implementation 'because any sign that the DRC in Africa would be an "apartheid" church, is dangerous to the lives of our youth, physically and mentally' (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1987:379, 388*). The 1987 DRCA Synod referred the Belhar Confession and it to the Commission for Scripture and Confession. This was to test the desirability of the acceptance of the confession and to determine to what extent its acceptance by the DRCA may promote or delay the unification of the DRC family (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1987:413-414*). The new commission was tasked to table their findings during the recess to the Federal Council of the Reformed churches in South Africa, and to serve the next DRCA Synod of the DRCA with proposals regarding the inclusion of the confession in their confessional basis.

15 The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act required all Africans to become citizens of a self-governing territorial authority. And in so doing they were not deemed only longer as South Africa citizens. Africans was only able to occupy the houses bequeathed to them in the urban areas, by special permission of the Minister.

In October 1989, the task teams of the DRMC and the DRCA commenced with a series of meetings regarding the reunification of the two churches (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1990:221, 233; Skema Van Werksaamhede VGKSA Algemene Sinode 1994:8*).

On 1 October 1990, an extraordinary session of the General Synod of the DRCA convened in Cape Town, with representatives from the six regional synods, namely, those of the Orange Free State, Phororo, Southern Transvaal, Northern Transvaal, Cape Province and Natal. The synod, without any dissenting votes approved the inclusion of that the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRCA. Any objections from members, presbyteries or regional synods against the amendment could through gravamina (of complaint) and/or memoranda be brought to the next meeting of the General Synod for consideration (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1991:392*).

The phrase ‘and after each regional synod separately with a two-third majority decided in favour thereof: and after all the churches of the Reformed Church [were] consulted’ was deleted at the General Synod of the DRCA in Article 36.2. The new Article 36.2, par. 2.2.4 read as follows: ‘The General Synod may amend or supplement the church order with a two-third majority’ (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1991:5.1*). Article 1 was also amended at the 1991 Synod to include the Confession of Belhar as part of the confessional of the DRCA. The wording of the amended article reads as follows:

The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, based on the Bible, the holy and infallible Word of God. The doctrine of the church in accordance with God’s Word is expressed as The Forms of Unity as set by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618–1919, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort and the ecumenical confessions, the Apostles’ Creed the Confession of Nicaea and the Confession of Athanasius and the Belhar Confession. (*Agenda en Handeling NGKA 1991:389*)

In 1998, these decisions were ruled *ultra vires* by the Supreme Court. The Dutch Reformed Church was regarded as a voluntary or mutual association (collegium) whose members are contractually bound by the church order (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (Phororo) vs Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika*, case number 536/96:13). According to Appeal Judge Harmse, the confession of faith of the DRCA could only be amended in compliance with the three formal requirements in Article 36.1 of the church order of the DRCA, namely (i) consultation of all churches of the DRC family; (ii) a two-thirds majority vote in favour of the change by each Regional Synod separately and only then; and (iii) a two-thirds majority vote of the General Synod (*Supra* case number 536/96). According Judge Vivier, the General Synod is a temporary and not a permanent

governing body (*Supra* case number 536/96:24). The authority of the General Synod ends with dispersal of the meeting. The General Synod of the DRCA was, therefore, not empowered to make decisions that are in conflict with their church order (*Supra* case number 536/96:325). When the DRCA decided to unite, the synodical decision does not *ipso facto* affect the decision by a Church Council. The General Synod does not represent in all respects the will of the 'church' (*Supra* case number 536/96:3). The General Synod has therefore, according to Harmse, limited powers. The General Synod, according to Judge Vivier (*Supra* case number 536/96:23) was not entitled to a provision to change the church order to reach a goal beyond its powers. Judge Vivier's assumption was that with the insertion of section 61 in the church order of the DRCA the General Synod acted outside its jurisdiction (*Supra* case number 536/96:28):

The entire decision of the General Synod of the NGKA at its meeting of July 1991 with the uniting NGSK (decision 1.1.33) as well as the decisions related thereto (decisions 1.1.34 to 1.1.38) was therefore *ultra vires* and void. In addition, the amendment of section 36, as I have found, also invalid. (*Supra* case number 536/96:43)

Judge Vivier highlighted in his ruling that one of the key features of the Reformed system is that every local church and the visible manifestation of the church organisation, and thus in itself fully, 'church' (*Supra* case number 536/96:17). The Supreme Court of Appeal reversed the ruling of the Supreme Court and rendered a verdict on 27 November 1998 in favour of the Oranje Free State Synod and Phororo Synod of the DRCA (*Skema Van Werksaamhede en Handelingte VGKSA 1997:134*). Since 1998, the DRCA and the URCSA had been engaged in numerous court cases about property. This placed a huge strain on the bilateral and multilateral talks.

During the past decade, the DRCA has emphatically claimed that they never made a formal evaluation of the Belhar Confession or decided to accept the confession to be part of the united church. (*Agenda en Handelingte NGKA 2007:45, 184-185, 223*). History, as indicated above, shows a different picture. The 1991 DRCA Synod indeed unanimously adopted the Belhar Confession (*Agenda en Handelingte NGKA 1991:392*).

During the past two decades, the verdict of the Supreme Court of Appeal in 1998 has caused a lot of hostility, stress, mistrust, unease between members of the DRCA and the URCSA on the bi- and multilateral talks regarding church reunification and the place of the Belhar Confession in the envisaged unified church. The DRCA has repeatedly claimed, especially after 1998, that they cannot accept Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis of the united church. They, however, affirmed that they accept the Belhar Confession as part of URCSA's confessional basis but are against it as a pre-requisite for church unification. The DRCA strongly

objected to the procedure followed at the General Synod of the DRCA 1991 with regard to the changing of the confessional basis of the DRCA in order to include the Belhar Confession.

On 27 February 2009, in a letter to the DRC, URCSA and the WCRC, the DRCA indicated that it, with great concern, took note of the bilateral talks between the DRC and the URCSA. The DRC objected to, among other things, the unification talks at Esselenpark on 22 June 2006 where the DRC and URCSA had made a solemn agreement (called a 'covenant'), which touched on the confessional basis and model for the envisaged unified church (Addendum 4, Covenanting for the Reunification of the Family of DRC – Esselenpark Declaration). The DRCA stated that it was adamant that any consultations on unification, model and confessional basis should involve all four churches, namely the DRC, DRCA, RCA and URCSA. The DRCA premise was that Belhar was not their confession. They did, however, respect Belhar as a confession of the URCSA and recognised the importance of reconciliation between the URCSA and the DRCA on the way to reunification. The premise of the DRCA was that there is still a lot of healing to be done between the DRCA and the URCSA. The Belhar Confession should, however, not be seen a stumbling block for the reunification of the church. The DRCA wanted to retain their regional synods and presbyteries in the envisaged unified church (Minutes of the meeting of the four moderamen of the DRC family 6–7 August 2014:1-4). The DRCA, furthermore, tabled that they respected any agreements between the DRC and the URCSA concerning the Belhar Confession, however, the Belhar Confession was not a confession of the DRCA. The DRC and URCSA needed to indicate how the DRCA would be accommodated in one church without accepting the Belhar Confession. The DRCA felt that they were not part of the drafting of Belhar Confession and that it was, therefore, not fair to expect them to accept it (Minutes of the meeting of the four moderamen of the DRC family 6–7 August 2014:1-4).

Reformed Church in Africa

Mission work among the Indians was carried out from 1946 in Natal (Pietermaritzburg, Durban, Harding, Colenso, Greytown and Glencoe); in the Southern Transvaal from 1955 (Krugersdorp, Lenasia, Johannesburg, Germiston, Benoni, Springs and Society); in the Cape Province from 1960 (Cape Town, Kimberley, Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth); and in Northern Transvaal from 1964 (Pretoria) (*Agenda en Handelinge NGK 1966:195*). The first Indian congregation was constituted in 1957. Already at the first General Synod of the DRC in 1962, the mission among the Indians throughout the Republic had been accepted as part of the mission strategy of the DRC (*Agenda en Handelinge NGK Algemene Sinode 1962:137-138, 193*). Following the decision, a sub-committee for Indian Mission was appointed and assigned to prepare a draft constitution or church order for Indian Mission for the next synod. At the General

Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1966 it was decided to proceed with church planting among the Indian churches of Transvaal, the Cape and Natal and unite them into one denomination (*Acta NGK Algemene Sinode* 1966:215, 521). The DRC General Synod of 1966 approved the draft church order for the Indian Reformed Church as the official document for the Convention of the new church (*Acta NGK Algemene Sinode* 1966:215, 466, 521, 562;193).

On 28 August 1968, the first Synod of the Reformed Church in Africa consisting of the four congregations, namely Pietermaritzburg/Durban West, Transvaal, Durban and Cape constituted. Already in 1970, the RCA had indicated their desire to unite the DRC family (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1978:51). At the RCA Synod of 1976, mandate was given to their Synodical Commission to initiate unity talks with other churches in the DRC family. On 21 April 1978, under the leadership of the RCA a consultation for church unity in Durban took place (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1978:24). The RCA and the DRMC were represented at the consultations by their executive committees, while the DRC was represented as observers. The DRCA did not attend the consultations and their absence of the DRCA was viewed with grave concern. At a consultation between the DRMC and the RCA held between 30 and 31 May 1978 in Cape Town a Memorandum of Agreement between the URCSA and the DRC was drafted (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1978:57-59, 1986:62). The DRC was absent from a consultation between the DRCA, DRMC and the RCA held in Pretoria on 10 March 1980.

On 26 October of that year, the DRC Synod decided to enter into a fully-pledged union with the DRMC leaving the door open to other members of the DRC family. Based on the Memorandum of Agreement reached in 1978, and in order to unify appropriately, the DRMC and the RCA attended to the church judicial requirements and related issues, such as, property, finances, administration, theological training, ecumenical relations, church polity, church order and confessional basis. The bilateral consultation between the RCA and the DRMC ceased during 1984 due to the change of RCA leadership (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1986:63-65). Following the WARC decision in 1982 in Ottawa to denouncing apartheid as a heresy, the RCA rejected the theological justification of apartheid as unscriptural and any attempt to support it as being unchristian. The synod refrained from labelling it as heresy (*Agenda en Handeling NGSK* 1986:31).

The sixth Synod of the RCA in October 1990 declared that it could identify with the content of Belhar, but could not accept it as a confession on the same level as the other three Reformed faith confessions as the social issues referred to by the Belhar Confession were continuously subjected to change. According to the RCA, the Belhar Confession is more than doctrinal in nature (*Agenda RCA* 1990:31). Because the Belhar Confession was proposed as confession for the planned new church,

the RCA withdraw from the unification process between the DRCA and the DRMC (*Agenda RCA* 1990:40, 41). The synod committed itself, however, to strive for a united, non-racial Reformed Church in Southern and Central Africa (*Acts RCA* 1990:34).

The same synod adopted the Declaration of Laudium (Addendum 5). The Declaration marks the resolve of the RCA to maintain its evangelical character. The denomination worked in predominantly non-Christian settings to, among other things, reach people of Asian descent, especially people from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. Most of the congregations were predominately Indian and this affected the questions of denominational identity. In this context, Belhar helped to address the sufferings of the past.

A joint discussion group comprising of the URCSA, DRC and RCA was established in 1994. The objective of the discussion group was to facilitate the process of church unity based on a joint church order. The discussion group was mandated to negotiate the confessional basis, a model for a united church and a new name for the united church. No agreement could be reached on the issue of the Confession of Belhar and the URCSA rejected the concept of maintaining separate presbyteries based on ministerial needs as a form of new apartheid.

The RCA Synod of 1998 reaffirmed its belief that church unity is of paramount importance and urgency and requested that the Declaration of Laudium be an integral part of the life and ministry in envisaged united church (*Acts RCA* 1998:73). Furthermore, they supported the reunification of the DRC family and recommended that the Confession of Belhar should form part of the confessional of the envisaged unified church.

[We] recommend the acceptance in principle or as a Belhar Confession in the new Uniting Church, with the practical implementation to be deliberated in the process of unification. [We] request our Synods to invite representatives of the URCSA to attend the Synod meeting of the Reformed Church in Africa and the DRC in order to help us to understand and accept Belhar, as well as to listen to and understand our deliberations on Belhar. (*Acts RCA* 1998:59)

The RCA changed their viewpoint at the consecutive synods. The RCA did not have a problem with the content of the Belhar Confession. Their problem was that they would never be able to embrace it as a confession of the envisaged unified church as it was accepted in a time when there were very hostile relationships between the two churches, when they lost congregations to the URCSA, when people walked out of their synod, when their theological students and ministers of the Word were ordained by the URCSA without securing permission of the RCA beforehand, and so forth. The RCA's assumption was that the unity of a church rested in a common confessional basis. They saw the Confession of Belhar as a point of difference

between the RCA and the URCSA. The RCA believed that the place of the Confession of Belhar in the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church should be clarified before church reunification between the two churches could become a reality. (Achterbergh Declaration I 2006:1).

The RCA's main critique was that there had been no prior consultation with them regarding the drafting of Belhar, which occurred during the DRMC Synod of 1982. At that time, the DRMC and the RCA had already embarked on the road to church reunification. They, therefore, rejected the notion of the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as a precondition for church reunification. The RCA, however, embraced the consensus reached at Achterbergh II regarding the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. The five points of consensus were as follows:

- Belhar should not be a precondition for church unity.
- That discussions between all four churches continue with the purpose of agreeing to the biblical content of Belhar and writing a joint commentary on it. That would make it possible to preach, teach and use the biblical content of Belhar in a new denomination.
- The doctrinal basis of a new denomination must accommodate all four churches, synods and congregations without forcing anybody to accept or to abandon Belhar (Achterbergh Declaration II 2007:1).

The RCA respected the value that Belhar as a confession has for URCSA, but emphasised that in the envisaged unified church it would not expect members and ministers who were not ready or willing to accept it as a confession. The RCA affirmed that the Belhar Confession was not in conflict with Bible and they saw it as a declaration and not as a confession. They expressed a wish that the DRC family should jointly publish a commentary on the confession (Achterbergh Declaration II 2007:1).

The RCA endured much humiliation, suffering and splits during the church reunification process. As a denomination, they supported the suspension of the DRC by the WARC. However, the RCA never fully recovered from the consequences of this decision and is still dealing with some of the pain, suffering and trauma that came from that experience, including a loss of financial support from the DRC. Due to the strong evangelical focus of the church, the synodical decision of the RCA on the Belhar Confession was generally supported, however, some church members queried Article 4 of the confession, which states that God is especially on the side of the poor and oppressed.

Dutch Reformed Church 1982–2015

The DRC consists of ten regional synods, namely, Western and Southern Cape, Eastern, Eastern Cape, Namibia, Highveld, Kwazulu-Natal, Northern, West Transvaal, Northern Cape and Free State. The discourse on the acceptance of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church led to robust discussions in the synods during the past three decades. In 1982, the DRMC forwarded the concept Belhar Confession to the DRC for their consideration. According to Piet Meiring, when the DRC Synod convened in Pretoria in October 1982, most delegates clearly did not know what to do with the *status confessionis* and the concept Belhar Confession. Eventually a resolution was passed stating the 'sadness and distress' the synod felt at the 'unfair accusations of theological heresy and idolatry levelled at the DRC,' without analysing the theological merits of the accusations contained in the Belhar Confession. The synod, however, declared itself willing to conduct future discussions with the DRMC on these and related issues (Meiring 1991:18).

In October 1986, the DRC formally approved a new policy statement regarding the socio-political issues in South Africa, entitled 'Kerk en Samelewing, 'n Getuienis van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk' (Church and Society, a Testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church). In Church and Society, the DRC rejected racism as a serious sin which no person or church may justify or practice (NGK *Algemene Sinode* 1986:22). With regards to the church and human relationships, in particular race and people, the DRC admitted that racial and colour differences play no role in the Bible's judgement of people. The Bible treats concepts like 'people' and 'nation' and the variety of people as part of the existing reality (NGK *Algemene Sinode* 1986:20). The DRC admitted that the Bible does not condemn mixed marriages. (NGK *Algemene Sinode* 1986:35) and DRC General Synod of 1986 withdrew its objections to these marriages. The synod also renounced racism but was still not ready to accept the Belhar Confession. The 1986 Synod took note of the contents of the Belhar Confession and expressed its concern regarding Article 4 of the confession in which God is declared to be the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.

The WARC Executive Committee held in Belfast in October 1988 maintained that although the DRC's *Church and Society* on the surface might reveal a significant repentance from and revision of its earlier position, the document, at its best, may indicate that the church was ready to consider so-called reforms of the apartheid system. This, however, did not alter the present situation. The church had recently refused to declare apartheid a sin and its theological justification a heresy. The WARC took note that the Vereeniging Declaration (Addendum 6) issued by the representatives of the various member churches of the DRC family after a consultation held in Vereeniging in March 1989 under the auspices of REC unequivocally rejected apartheid in all its forms as sin. The Declaration had also committed the DRC family

of churches to the dismantling of apartheid in both church and state by accepting unification of the various churches into one non-racial Reformed church in southern and central Africa, and by calling on the state to repeal all racist laws and repressive security legislation. All the representatives present, with exception of the white DRC, adopted this declaration (WARC 1990:279-281). The WARC concluded by its own admission that the white DRC has not moved further forward than the position adopted at its synod on the basis of its church and society document. Furthermore, the 1998 WARC Executive Committee clearly stated that this position failed to meet the conditions laid down at Ottawa in 1982, particularly those in clause (b) and (c), and recommended that suspension be maintained. The committee confirmed that the General Council meeting in Seoul had reviewed the situation and affirmed that the decision on *status confessionis* taken in 1982 was and still is appropriate. WARC General Council in Ottawa in 1982 declared that the DRC would be restored to the full privileges of membership of WARC if 'black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from Holy Communion'. In 1989, the DRC assured the WARC that the DRC was an open church that it gave support in word and deed to those who suffer under the system of apartheid (WARC 1990:279-281). Furthermore, the DRC acknowledged that apartheid, as it was theologically justified and supported by the DRC, had largely contributed to a situation of an unequal and unjust distribution of economic resources, which had led to serious discrepancies between white and black in income, standard of living, and education and training. The DRC also acknowledged that there was a notable willingness within the family of Reformed churches to work together in addressing problems of the enormous poverty and unemployment in South Africa.

Regarding the request of the WARC General Council in 1982 that the DRC should issue unequivocal synodical resolutions to reject apartheid and commit to dismantling the system in both church and politics, the DRC General Synod in Bloemfontein, 1990 declared that racism is a grievous sin, that apartheid is an oppressive system and must be rejected as sinful, and that all forms of discrimination and suppression of peoples were to be condemned. The DRC also indicated that whether the situation of apartheid constituted a *status confessionis* in the sense that 'in this issue the confession of Jesus Christ is at stake', it must be acknowledged that there exists a difference of opinion between the interpretation of the DRC (and the Reformed Ecumenical Council) and WARC regarding this matter (WARC 1990:279-281). The DRC also indicated that their commitment to the unity of the DRC family. The DRC Synod of 1990 declared that the Belhar Confession not juxtapose with the three 'Formulas of Unity' (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK* 1990:29, 707). The DRC affirmed that some members of the DRC saw the background context of the Belhar Confession as a stumbling block. At the 1990 Synod, the revised edition of *Church and Society* was adopted, with its call for confessing the DRC's role in establishing and practising

apartheid. The synod decided to work towards the ideal of structural unity with the DRCA, DRMC and the RCA.

On the matters of the *status confessionis* and the Belhar Confession, the DRC Synod recognised the right of the DRMC to adopt the Belhar Confession, and concurred that the issues involved were extremely important to the DRMC (Meiring 1991:18-23). On the one hand, the synod regarded the Belhar Confession not to be in conflict with the contents of the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism or the Canons of Dort. On the other hand, the synod ascertained that *Church and Society* contained the DRC answer to the paragraphs containing 'rejections' in the Belhar Confession. Furthermore, the synod pointed out that after the DRC's adoption of the revised *Church and Society*, some of the accusations levelled against the DRC in the Belhar Confession were no longer applicable (*Agenda en Acta van die Algemene Sinode van die NGK te Bloemfontein* 1990; *Agenda van die Algemene Sinode NGK* 1986).

The 1990 Synod believed that some phrases in the Belhar Confession, such as parts of Article 4, could have been formulated differently. The synod preferred the wording of *Church and Society* concerning the affirmation of the Lord being the God of the poor and the wronged. The synod also emphasised that in future deliberations between the two churches, both documents, the Belhar Confession and *Church and Society*, should be used as a basis for discussion. The 1990 Synod decided as follows:

[S]ynod took note of the official adoption of the Belhar Confession by the DRMC, and recognised the right of the DRMC to do that. Synod agrees that the issues involved are of extreme importance to the DRMC. The synod considered the Belhar Confession not to be in conflict with the contents of the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism or the Canons of Dort. Synod emphasizes the fact that in future deliberations between the two churches both documents, the Belhar Confession as well as the document *Church and Society* should be used as basis for discussions. The DRC declares that Belhar is not in conflict with the other confessions of the family of Reformed churches. (*Acta Algemene Sinode NGK* 1990)

In March 1993, the WARC held a consultation in Johannesburg to review church relations in South Africa and to obtain first-hand information about the process of unification that had started in the family of Dutch Reformed churches (between the DRCA and the DRMC). The WARC was represented by Rev. Hugh Davidson, Prof. Pieter Holtrop, Dr Ed Mulder, Dr Jane Dempsey Douglass, Dr Karel Blei and Prof. Pieter Holtrop. Three South Africans presented papers at the consultation, namely Prof. Jaap Durand, Dr Beyers Naudé and Rev. Russel Botman. Before the meeting, they sent, as requested, a written reply to the questions formulated by the Ottawa

General Council. On the third day of the meeting, they read out a statement, which tried to respond to the questions raised during the discussions. These were open questions that needed to be answered in the ensuing unification process: Does the DRC reject apartheid unequivocally? Is theological justification of apartheid a theological error or is it heresy? Is the DRC ready to work for structural changes in the society of South Africa? Is the DRC prepared to confess publicly its guilt and to ask the victims of apartheid for forgiveness? The most important part of this statement was the willingness to participate in the unification process that had started between the DRCA and the DRMC.

The WARC profoundly regretted that in the past some Reformed churches in South Africa had defended racism and developed a theology of apartheid and that these churches had become accomplices in the system that inflicted immense suffering on millions of people. This situation called for a declaration of guilt, acts of repentance and asking for forgiveness. The WARC appealed to all Reformed Christians to reject apartheid unequivocally as a sin and its theological justification as heresy. According to Prof. Jane Dempsey Douglass, President of the WARC, and Prof. Milan Opocensky, General Secretary of the WARC, it was a matter of life and death. They said:

If you defend the system of apartheid your salvation is in jeopardy. The Christian approval of racist policies created a situation in which the proclamation of the gospel and its integrity were at stake. This is why the WARC general council in Ottawa declared *status confessionis*. It must be clear that the first and ultimate loyalty of a Christian community goes to Jesus Christ and to the gospel, and not to a cultural or national identity, to the relics of apartheid and its ideology. (Douglass & Opocensky 1994:1)

In 1994, the DRC reported to WARC that they complied with all three requirements of WARC. In that same year, the General Synod of the DRC affirmed a church judicial process regarding the *envisaged unified church* (*Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode 1994:144*; *Besluiteregister NGK Algemene Sinode 1994:16-17*).

The 23rd WARC General Council meeting in Debrecen, Hungary in August 1997 wrote a pastoral letter to the DRC (Addendum 7). The WARC communicated that of the three requirements laid down by the 21st General Council at Ottawa, 1982 for the lifting of the DRC's membership suspension, the DRC had only complied with the first two, namely, the opening of worship to Christians of all races and giving aid to victims of apartheid. It had been difficult to find unequivocal synod and moderamen resolutions of the DRC rejecting apartheid and committing the church to dismantling this system in both church and state. The WARC premise was that even *The Story of the Dutch Reformed Church's Journey with Apartheid 1960–1994*, which had been produced by order of the General Synodical Commission of

the DRC's submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, suggested that the errors and sinful actions of apartheid resided more in the implementation of apartheid than in its fundamental nature:

Clearly, however, the suffering, hardship and poverty endured by people in South Africa over the past few decades or more cannot be ascribed to apartheid alone. A variety of social and economic realities contributed to their plight. During this time South Africa, in fact, enjoyed relative prosperity in which everyone could share to a greater or lesser degree. The fact that at the end of the apartheid years South Africa was, economically speaking, a ray of hope in Africa – in spite of sanctions and boycotts – cannot be left unsaid in an evaluation of the period that lies behind us. (*The Story of the Dutch Reformed Church's Journey with Apartheid 1997:72-76*)

According to the WARC, an official resolution from the DRC stating unequivocal rejection of apartheid was still outstanding. The WARC, therefore, proposed that the DRC should approve the joint resolution drafted by the executive committee of WARC as follows:

Of the three requirements laid down by the 21st General Council in Ottawa in 1982 for lifting of your membership suspension, we can recognise your compliance with the first two: you have opened your worship to Christians of all races and given aid to victims of apartheid. It has been more difficult to find unequivocal synod and moderamen resolutions rejecting *apartheid* and committing the church to dismantling this system in both church and state. Even recent statements, including *Journey with Apartheid* of May 1997, suggest that the errors and sinful actions of apartheid reside more in the implementation of apartheid than in its fundamental nature. Because the very nature of forced separation of people of differing races denies fundamental biblical teaching that all humanity is equally created in the image of God, teaching so central to the Christian faith that it cannot be denied by Christians without denying their Christian commitment, we still seek an official resolution from the DRC stating unequivocal rejection of apartheid. The proposed joint resolution, if approved by the DRC, would meet that last requirement. (Opocenský, Debrecen 1997:186-188)

The WARC Executive Committee believed that passage of the joint resolution of the General Council of WARC in Debrecen and then by the General Synod of the DRC in 1998 would satisfy the remaining requirement laid down by the WARC General Council in Ottawa, 1982 for the lifting of the suspension of the DRC's membership in WARC in 1998. The executive committee, therefore, moved the adoption of the resolution by the General Council of WARC and called upon the DRC Synod to also

adopt it. The DRC General Synod of 1998 approved the joint resolution of the WARC and in doing so the General Synod rejected apartheid:

As part of this action, the Dutch Reformed Church through its General Synod meeting in 1998, within the framework of the decision of WARC, assures the churches of the Alliance that it rejects apartheid as wrong and sinful not simply in its effects and operations but also in its fundamental nature. (Addendum 8)

The approval of the joint resolution at the DRC General Synod of 1998 restored the right to full participation by the DRC in the WARC. The synod, furthermore, stated that the substantive content of Belhar Confession ('our commitment to the biblical witness about the Triune God, the unity of the church, on justice and reconciliation') was widely accepted in the DRC (*Acta Algemene Sinode NGK 1998:422-425*). The synod, therefore, adopted the essential content of the Confession of Belhar. The DRC premise was that this did not imply that all churches, pastors, elders and members of the envisaged unified church would be obliged to endorse the Belhar Confession as a confession. The 1998 General Synod declared that the Belhar Confession was not in conflict with the other confessions of the family of Reformed churches. The 1998 General Synod also noted that all the regional synods of the DRC rejected the adoption of the Confession of Belhar as part of the doctrinal standards of a reunited church (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK 1998:422-425; Besluiteregister Algemene Sinode NGK 1998:16*).

The DRC General Synod of 2004 proposed that the Confession of Belhar be included in the doctrinal standards of the united church in view of having adopted the essence of this confession already in 1998. It stated that this did not mean that every congregant, church council or the ministers would have to subscribe to this confession. The synod ruled that each congregation could make its own decision regarding the confession. Furthermore, it ascribed resistance to this confession to historical, emotional and symbolic factors (*Besluiteregister Algemene Sinode NGK 2004:1-4*). The synod approved a consultative process and referred the decision on the Belhar Confession to the synods, church councils and congregations for comment and further recommendations. The 2004 Synod affirmed that there were many ministers and church members who were ready for unity and would endorse the Confession of Belhar, but there were many ministers and church members who for various reasons did not want to underwrite the Confession of Belhar as a confession. The DRC stance was that the church had a responsibility to all these groups and would instigate a process of church reunification that will embrace the

'ruim huis' ('spacious house') notion that provides space for all¹⁶ (*Besluiteregister Algemene Sinode NGK 2004:1*).

From 2001 to 2007, conventicles between the regional synods of the DRC and the URCSA in the Cape and Southern /Northern Transvaal created a positive momentum to the church reunification and the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. In 2003, the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape regional synods of the DRC proposed that the confessional basis of the reunited church be dealt with within the framework of concentric circles with the Confession of Belhar being located as a confession in the fourth circle. It, furthermore, proposed that in line with earlier decisions of the DRC, the Confession of Belhar should have an optional status in the envisaged unified church (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*). The URCSA strongly objected to the proposal.

The Cape Convention of the DRC in June 2004 rejected the decisions of these synods and replaced these with a resolution stating that the Confession of Belhar be included in the doctrinal standards equal to the formulae of unity, that all ministers sign it and that provision should be made to pastorally accompany those who were not ready or able to sign it (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*).

In 2004, a second Cape Convention for Unity met in Brackenfell and reaffirmed that the inclusion of Belhar in an envisioned united church was not negotiable. The Convention requested that the resolution be addressed to the General Synod of the DRC and the URCSA for approval and implementation. In July of that year, the moderamen of the URCSA considered the resolution. The moderamen believed that the decision represented a significant step forward in the process of church unity and stated its support for the broad principles of the resolution while raising its concern for the lack of clarity regarding the process of the accompaniment of ministers who are not able or willing to sign the Confession (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*).

The DRC General Synod of 2004 proposed that Belhar should be accepted as a fourth confession in a united Reformed church. The synod worked with the assumption that the content of the Belhar was widely accepted. Over time, numerous joint ventures based on the principles of the Belhar Confession developed in the regional synods

16 Original wording: 'Wat ons eie kerk betref, het ons 'n verantwoordelikheid teenoor baie predikante en lidmate wat gereed is vir 'n hegte eenheid en graag Belhar sou wou onderskryf, maar ook baie predikante en lidmate wat om verskillende redes nie kans sien om Belhar as belydenisskrif te onderskryf nie. Ons glo dat ons 'n verantwoordelikheid teenoor al hierdie groepe het en sou onself wou gee vir 'n proses waarin ons so gou as moontlik een word in 'n "ruim huis" wat plek maak vir almal van ons – met die baie waaroor ons saamstem, maar ook dit waaroor ons verskil.'

and commissions, for example, diaconal services, the Curatorium of the DRC and the URCSA. A few DRC and the URCSA presbyteries amalgamated. These included the Stellenbosch United Presbytery and the Wesland United Presbytery (*Minutes of General Synodical Commission Meeting 2004:48*).

On 10 May 2011, the Regional Synod of the Western and Southern Cape discussed the following motion put forward by the moderamen:

The synod is convinced that the biblical call for justice for all people, reconciliation between people, and the unity of the church are at the heart of the gospel. The Belhar Confession gives expression to the call of the gospel in a different way than the other confessions of the church. The synod, as a church meeting, accepts the Belhar Confession and calls on the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to make the Belhar Confession in a church-orderly way part of the confessional base of the Dutch Reformed Church. (*Acta NGK Wes-Kaapland Sinode 2011:77*)¹⁷

The DRC Regional Synod consequently approved the motion the Belhar Confession. The synod decided the matter with close ballot papers – 544 for and 124 against, with papers spoilt. This meant that 80 percent of the counted vote was in favour of the Belhar Confession. The decision of the Regional Synod of the Western and Southern Cape was a small but significance step in the broader process of the acceptance of the Belhar Confession in the DRC.

Article 44 of the church order of the DRC General Synod stipulated the church-orderly process to be followed for amendments of the confessional basis of the DRC. According to Article 44.1, the confession could only be changed ‘after each synod separately decides with a two-thirds majority in favour thereof.’ This meant that a 100% affirmative vote of all ten regional synods of the DRC would have to be achieved before any amendments to the confessional basis could be tabled for adoption on General Synod level. In addition, two-thirds of all DRC church councils had to approve these amendments with a two-thirds majority (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK 1998:424*). The General Synod then had to approve the amendment (inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRC) with a two-

17 This proposal to the synod resulted from an in-depth discussion of the Belhar Confession at a meeting of the moderamen of the Western Cape Synod on 24 March 2009. See Hanekom (2014:10). Original wording: ‘Die sinode is oortuig dat die Bybelse eis vir geregtigheid vir alle mense, versoening tussen alle mense en die eenheid van die kerk tot die kern van die evangelie behoort. Die Belydenis van Belhar verwoord hierdie evangeliese eis om geregtigheid, versoening en eenheid op ’n ander wyse as die ander belydenisskrifte van die kerk. Die sinode aanvaar as kerkvergadering die Belydenis van Belhar en daarom versoek hierdie vergadering die Algemene Sinode om die Belydenis van Belhar op ’n kerkordelike wyse deel van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk se belydenisgrondslag te maak.’

thirds majority. This amendment, approved in 2004, made it nearly impossible to change the confessional basis of the DRC. Most Reformed churches would change their confessional basis upon a two-third majority affirmative vote.

The DRC General Synod of 2011 expressed their commitment to the URCSA who professed that the Confession of Belhar was very important to them and that they wanted to make it part of the new denomination. The synod also acknowledged the DRCA and the RCA, who did not see their way clear to completely underwrite Belhar as a confession. The General Synod decided to make the Confession of Belhar a part of the confessional basis of the Dutch Reformed Church in a church-orderly way and tasked the moderamen to implement the necessary processes in this regard. The synod, furthermore, tasked the moderamen to conduct a thorough study of the historical, theological and contextual relevance of the Confession of Belhar so as to be in a position to advise the next General Synod and all church bodies. (*Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode 2011:232-246; Besluiteregister NGK Algemene Sinode 2011:13*). The synod acknowledged that there were many congregations, ministers and members in the church who were ready for a close unity and readily wanted to underwrite Belhar. However, there were many congregations, ministers and members who were ready for a close unity but for different reasons did not see their way open to underwrite Belhar as confession. The 2011 Synod was convinced that these different standpoints could be accommodated for in a 'spacious house', which would provide space for all (*Besluiteregister NGK Algemene Sinode 2011:13*).

The 2013 DRC Synod approved, with a huge majority, amendments to Article 1 of the church order to change the confessional basis of the DRC. The synod thereby proposed the inclusion of the Belhar as an optional confession within the confessional basis of the DRC. This was done in order to compromise the objective voices in the DRC. In doing so the DRC wanted to make room for those members of the church who would not subscribe to the confession. The following proposal regarding the inclusion of the Belhar Confession was sent to the ten regional synods of the DRC for their perusal, discussion and vote.

1. The Dutch Reformed Church is based on the Bible as the holy and infallible Word of God.
- 2.1 The doctrine which the Church confesses in agreement with the Word of God, is expressed in the ecumenical creeds, namely the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of Athanasius; and the Three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.
- 2.2 The Belhar Confession is part of the confessional basis of the church, in a way that allow members, office-bearers and assemblies of the church to confess it

as in agreement with the Word of God, as well as members, office-bearers and assemblies of the church that do not subscribe to it as a confession.

3. The Church accepts her calling to always confess her faith and that the expansion of her confessional basis should occur without force (*Besluiteregister NGK Algemene Sinode 2013:173*).¹⁸

The different regional synods voted as follows:¹⁹

Table 1.1: Regional Synod Reading the Belhar Confession as a historical text. voting on the amendment to the DRC confessional basis, 2013

No.	Synod	Yes-votes	No-Votes
1	Western and Southern Cape	73.3%	26.7%
2	Eastern	73.2%	26.8%
3	Eastern Cape	70%	30%
4	Namibia	58%	42%
5	Highveld	51.9%	49.1%
6	Kwazulu-Natal	52%	48%
7	Northern Synod	49%	51%
8	West Transvaal	42%	58%
9	Northern Cape	33%	67%
10	Free State	32%	68%

Only three of the ten synods of the DRC secured a two-thirds majority. The DRC Western and South Cape Synod of 2015 acknowledged that notwithstanding their 73.3% affirmative vote on the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRC, the General Synod of the DRC would not be able to change the confessional basis due to restrictions in the church order. They therefore requested

18 Kerkorde Artikel 1

1. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk is gegrond op die Bybel as die heilige en onfeilbare Woord van God.
- 2.1 Die leer wat die Kerk in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God bely, word verwoord in
 - 2.1.1 die ekumeniese belydenisse, naamlik die Apostoliese Geloofsbellydenis, die Geloofsbellydenis van Nicea en die Geloofsbellydenis van Athanasius; en
 - 2.1.2 die Drie Formuliere van Eenheid, naamlik die Nederlandse Geloofsbellydenis, die Heidelbergse Kategismus en die Dordtse Leerreëls.
- 2.2 Die Belydenis van Belhar is deel van die belydenisgrondslag van die Kerk, op so 'n wyse dat daar ruimte is vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit as in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God bely, sowel as vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit nie as 'n belydenisskrif onderskryf nie.
3. Die Kerk aanvaar dat haar roeping om haar geloof te bely, altyd geld en dat 'n uitbreiding van haar belydenisgrondslag sonder dwang geskied.

19 Statistics of voting had been published in *Die Kerkbode*, 18 September 2015, p. 5.

the General Synod to amend Regulation 24 as well as Article 44.1 and 44.2 of the Order. They proposed the following:

- The General Synod amends the church order, Article 44.1 as follows [the formulation before the 2004 General Synod of the DRC]: Article 44.1 The amendment of the confession is possible only after each synod, with a two-thirds majority vote in favour of resolution. [The words 'as well as two-thirds of all church councils each with a two-thirds majority' is thus deleted.]
- The General Synod deletes Regulation 24 in its entirety (*Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode* 2015:435).

The Western and Southern Cape Synod also requested the DRC General Synod to amend Regulation 4 point 3.1 in such a way that made it possible for ministers of the Word, congregation members and church council meetings who wanted to accept the Belhar Confession to be able to do so. They proposed that the General Synod make it possible for synods to make other confessions that are not, part of their confessions, which is not contrary to Scripture, the three Formulas of Unity and the existing ecumenical creeds.

In addition, they proposed:

- The General Synod adds a new church order article at the end of Article 44 of the church order. The new article to read that synods may make other confessions part of their confessional basis, provided that the General Synod found that such confession is not contrary to Scripture, the three Creeds and existing ecumenical creeds. Such a decision is not being considered an amendment of the General Synod's confessions.

The General Synod grant permission to the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Western and Southern Cape) and other synods who requested under [the new] Article 44.6 to make the Belhar Confession part of their confessional basis (*Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode* 2015:435).

The synod requested that the DRC and the URCSA develop a protocol to make provision for joint presbyteries to give greater expression of their unity. Lastly, the synod requested the General Synod to develop jointly with the URCSA a provisional church order which would enhance church reunification at large. The provisional order should allow that unity structures between congregations, presbyteries, synods and the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed family of churches come into existence without jeopardising the legal entity of the participating churches (*Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode* 2015:442).

The DRC Western and South Cape Synod, 2015 initiative gave new impetus to the church reunification talks. The four moderamen of the DRC family of churches met in Pretoria in May 2015 and decided to convene a special meeting on the prospects of a provisional church order or common set of rules. They also decided to invite representatives of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) to this meeting in order that these representatives share with the DRC their vast knowledge of interim church orders, which they had gained during the 'Samen op Weg' process. A mandate was given to the DRC Southern and Western Cape to organise this meeting.

Delegates of the four churches met from the 11 to 13 July 2015 at the Volmoed Retreat and Conference Centre near Hermanus. The churches were represented by Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, Godfrey Betha and Leepo Modise from the URCSA, Tladi Pheko and Andries Hoffman from the DRCA, Victor Pillay of the RCA and Johann Ernst, Kobus Gerber and Gustav Claassen of the DRC. The DRC Western and Southern Cape, as hosts, was represented by Nelis Janse Van Rensburg, Quintus Heine and Charl Stander. Representatives of the URCSA Cape Regional Synod, namely Pieter Grove, Barnabas Ngqozela and David Carelse were also invited. Prof. Nelus Niemandt, the chairperson of the DRC, had to withdraw from the DRC General Synod delegation due to health issues. Dr Gustav Claassen substituted for him. Prof. Jerry Pillay, designated by the World Communion of Reformed Churches to facilitate the unification process, also had to withdraw due to other commitments. He was substituted by Rev. Peter Langerman, a minister of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. Prof. Leo Koffeman and Evert Overeem of the PCN were invited. Nico Simpson from Bible-Media was also present and acted as summariser of the discussions. At the meeting between delegates of the four churches of the DRC family in Volmoed during 2015, the RCA was willing to accept the confession as a confession of a reunited church because it belonged to one of the churches, but provisions should be made to allow people the option of subscribing or not subscribing to the Belhar Confession. The delegates conveyed the commitment of the leadership of the Reformed Church in Africa to church reunification.

The meeting at Volmoed took cognisance that in 2012, the General Synod of the URCSA and the DRC Synod of 2013 had agreed on a Memorandum of Agreement and a Roadmap to Church Reunification (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK 2015:240; Report of a meeting between delegates of the four churches of the DRC family in South Africa 2015:1-2*).

The meeting at Volmoed decided that the provisional order would include a preamble that addressed the main items of history, justice and the confessional base (including the Belhar Confession and the Declaration of Laudium) and that highlighted the three or so main issues that should be addressed in the interim order. The moderamen of the four churches of the DRC family at their meeting of

25–26 May 2015 at Hatfield, Pretoria together envisaged the prospect of a provisional order that would afford them an opportunity to proceed towards church unity and establish a final church order. This provisional order was to be based on the confessional basis of the four churches (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK* 2015:208, 240; Report of a meeting between delegates of the four churches of the DRC family in South Africa 2015:16–17).

The 2015 General Synod of the DRC approved the provisional order and in doing so kindled the hope that church reunification could be attained based on the principles of the Belhar Confession (*Agenda Algemene Sinode NGK* 2015:208, 240). The following resolution was approved at the URCSA General Synod of October 2016:

1. The GS takes with appreciation note of the [indefatigable] efforts by the regional synods of the DRC to take up the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis of the DRC
2. The GS regretfully takes note of the [unsuccessful] efforts of the DRC General Synod regarding securing a [two-thirds] majority vote in every Regional Synod in order to include the Belhar Confession as a fully-fledged confession.
3. The GS affirms that we will still avail ourselves to accompany the DRC regarding the acceptance of the Belhar Confession.
4. The GS affirms that the acceptance of the Belhar Confession is being seen by URCSA as the acid test of the DRC's response to the challenge of becoming one, united and non-racial church with the other Dutch Reformed churches.
5. The GS states categorically that the Belhar Confession should be included as a [fully-fledged] confession in the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. Optionality of the Belhar Confession is not an option for URCSA.
6. The GS approves the provisional church order as a way forward.
7. The GS requests the regional synods of the DRC who are willing to journey on [the] basis of the provisional church order to also indicate that they subscribe to the Memorandum of Agreement and the Roadmap to Church Reunification.
8. The GS assures the ministries, congregations, presbyteries and regional synods of the DRC who on [the] basis of the provincial church order want to unify with URCSA that the URCSA will embrace them with compassion and accompany them in their journey.
9. The GS requests the General Synod of the DRC to amend Regulation 24 as well as Article 44.1 and 44.2 of the church order of the General Synod of the DRC in totality in order to make church reunification possible.

10. The GS urges the DRC to confront recalcitrant members and congregations and regional synods of the DRC with the inescapable demand of the gospel that they should strive and indefatigably work towards the goal to become members of one non-racial reunited church.
11. The GS declares emphatically that restorative justice should shift hence on from the periphery to the axis of bilateral and multilateral talks of the DRC family. Justice does not pass over wrongs. Wrongs in church and society should be faced and addressed in a comprehensive manner. In doing so the DRC family will be able to overcome past divisions and find a new and richer unity. Without attending to the issue of restorative justice church reunification is not possible to ascertain.
12. The GS approves that the MOA is still the basis for our relationship with the DRC.
13. The GS approves that the joint projects of our churches: Season of Human Dignity and Churches Addressing Racism continue to assist in making unity a reality. (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2016:111-112*)

The URCSA and the Belhar Confession

On the 14 April 1994, the DRMC and the DRCA unified in order to constitute the URCSA. At the Founding Synod, the URCSA approved the Belhar Confession as one of its four confessions (standards of unity), namely the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619), the Canons of Dort (1618–1619) and the Confession of Belhar (*Skema Van Werksaamhede en Handeling*VGKSA 1997:26, 504). In 1997, the URCSA requested Reformed churches around the world – by way of the WARC and the REC – to consider adopting the Belhar Confession so as to make it a part of the global Reformed confessional basis (*Skema Van Werksaamhede en Handeling*VGKSA 1997:26, 504).

The consistent endeavours towards church reunification and the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the envisaged unified church are reflected in the efforts of the moderamen of the URCSA regarding multi- and bilateral talks with the DRC family since 2001. Noteworthy are the Esselenpark Declaration (2006), the Bloemfontein Declaration (2006) and the Achterberg I and II declarations (2006 and 2007). The efforts at regional, presbytery and ministry levels are also recognised.

The URCSA General Synodical Commission (GSC) of 2004 regarded the DRC General Synod decision in 2004 concerning the notion of a ‘spacious house’ that would provide space for all as reprehensible. ‘Such treatment of the confessional basis for a united church’ is described as ‘not helpful in the process of reuniting our divided family.’ (Late report, *Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:4*). It was the contention of

the moderamen spearheaded by Rev. James Buys as moderator of URCSA (who had tirelessly drafted most of the proposals on church reunification and the Belhar Confession during his tenure) that the decision of the DRC General Synod, 2004 did not represent a significant move in the process of church unity (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*). The contention of the URCSA was that the decision of the DRC Synod was fatally flawed in determining that the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar did not imply that congregants, church councils and ministers have to subscribe to this confession (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*). The implication of the decision of the DRC General Synod 2004 decision was that the Belhar Confession would have an optional status in the envisaged unified church. The moderamen of the URCSA considered the decision totally unacceptable as it

- denigrated the Confession of Belhar in relation to the other confessions;
- created a situation for doctrinal liberty;
- was unprecedented in the reformed tradition that certain confessions can merely be optional;
- undermined the legal requirements of common confessional basis as foundation for the formation of one denomination; and
- made a mockery of testing the church on a confession where the optional nature of such a confession makes testing a moot point (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*).

Regarding the decision of the DRC General Synod 2004, the General Synodical Commission of the URCSA in 2004 declared the following:

1. The GSC declares unambiguously its rejection of the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar as an optional confession. It rejects any notion of dealing with this confession in a context of doctrinal liberty.
2. We prayerfully request the DRC to urgently reconsider this part of her decision with the motivation given, because such treatment of the confessional basis for a united church is not helpful in the process of reuniting our divided family.
3. We request that the Confession of Belhar be treated no less and no more than the three formulas for unity which guide and guard our faith, life and work as members of the body of Christ.
4. The GSC recognises the principle of freedom of conscience and proposes that those parties unwilling to underwrite the confession be pastorally accompanied and encouraged to accept it and not be excluded from the new church.
5. The GSC rejects the notion of an 'urgent' unity based on unity structures that compromise any clear resolution of the confessional basis of a united church.

6. The GSC requests all church structures to evaluate the structures of co-operation and ensure that they express the message of the Confession of Belhar regarding the true unity, reconciliation with integrity and compassionate justice that empowers the poor.
7. The GSC decides that in all negotiations with the DRC on church unity, the agenda of negotiations should be based on the Confession of Belhar, its practical content, emotions and fears that exist, i.e. the historical baggage, the economic aspects, i.e. restitution and other factors that go with it.
8. The GSC appoints a task team to provide guidelines to the URCSA structures on the faith and conviction of the URCSA, as expressed in the Confession of Belhar as it impacts on the processes mentioned above. The task team provides these guidelines to the Executive Committee who will provide them to the church. The Executive Committee monitors and guides the reunification process with report to the General Synodical Commission or General Synod (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2004:1*).

The URCSA General Synod, 2005 affirmed that the Belhar Confession was non-negotiable in the church reunification process and that it was the ommissible basis of a new, united church and hence not optional or unworthy of inclusion in the most intimate and sacral acts of worship. In their response to their criticism of the Belhar Confession and their convictions concerning the confession, the URCSA repeatedly stated that they had no desire to 'force' any church to accept the Belhar Confession (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2005:534*). The URCSA General Synod, 2005 emphatically stated that the URCSA could never impose on other churches or require them to confess the same way, but that its deliberations with other churches were based on its confession with a view of reaching an eventual common understanding of the gospel. The 2005 General Synod, furthermore, approved the necessary church-orderly regulations, namely, the Reglement vir die Kombinasie Van Werkzaamhede Van Gemeentes, Ringe en Sinodes uit Verskillende Kerkverbande to enable regional synods, presbyteries and local congregations who desired to do so on the basis of the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar, to unite with the DRC family to the fullest extent possible in ministry – even if structural unity, because of church-orderly impediments, was not yet possible (*Acts URCSA General Synod 2005:137*). The General Synod instructed the Permanent Judicial Commission to give urgent attention to the enabling legislation to make structural union possible. The URCSA premise was that this regulation would enable authentic unity structures, which would give expression to the URCSA's commitment to church reunification. The General Synod therefore, did not only condone such unions, it encouraged and supported them wholeheartedly (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2005:531-533*).

During 2005, commissions, ministries as well as presbyteries of the DRC and the URCSA combined. The question concerning the confessional basis of such joint ventures surfaced. The URCSA asked for the 'unconditional acceptance of the Confession of Belhar as a requirement for the continuation of discussions on church unity' (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2008:533-534*). URCSA's premise was that the Belhar Confession would be a full confession of the united church and that everyone would work together to help the church to grow to a full acceptance of the confession.

The URCSA General Synod of 2005 affirmed that the Belhar Confession was based upon, and was true to the Word of God and witnesses to the liberating acts of God in history and our own time; the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of life and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of those who believe. The synod affirmed that the confession has its historical roots in the Reformed tradition and had proved itself to be a worthy bearer of the historical continuation of the Reformed endeavour to be forever reforming in response to God's call in a changing world. The synod also affirmed that the historical context of Belhar represented the church with a moment of *kairos* in which the integrity of the gospel and the Reformed faith, the witness and very survival of the church was at stake. The Belhar Confession was a response of the church in faith at a time of tremendous challenge and adversity. This moment of *kairos* was a call to obedience in which the church rediscovered the faithfulness of God, the strength given by God's Holy Spirit in times of challenge and weakness, and the power of faithful witness to the powers of evil. The historical context, one of political and economic oppression, deep enmity and immeasurable suffering, however compelling, nonetheless, did not dictate the reaction of the church. Instead, the Holy Spirit enabled us to rise above political realities, economic hardship, social injustices and the denial of our very humanity, to rise above ourselves and affirm first and foremost, God as God of justice and reconciliation. In the Confession of Belhar, the first word is not to the desires of our own hearts, or the urgent voices of revenge and retribution, but to the reconciling Christ, who calls us to be agents of reconciliation and out of that reconciliation calls us to unity and justice. Hence the unity we seek is both demand and gift, which because of the Giver, though fraught with danger and pitfalls, becomes a burden that is light and a yoke that is easy. That in itself is a miracle of God's love, too precious to lose or give up or to subject to the casual carelessness of irreverent debate. Compromising on the Belhar Confession for the sake of the continuing weakness of some in the DRC is a betrayal not only of the URCSA, itself, but of the ecumenical Reformed family who have turned to the confession of Belhar for continued inspiration. The URCSA regard the Belhar Confession indispensable for the life of the new, united church, as non-negotiable in its power to reconcile, seek

justice and address the wrongs done to the least of the family of Jesus (*Agenda General Synod URCSA 2005:496*).

At a meeting held at St RaphaelsRetreat House (Place of Worship) in Cape Town on 13 February 2006 the moderamen of the URCSA General Synod discussed the implications and interpretation of decisions of General Synod of 2005 regarding church unity and the acceptance of the Belhar Confession. After being requested by the Cape Regional moderamen to interpret the meaning of the words 'full acceptance of the Belhar Confession' in the decision that the synod had taken, the moderamen decided to clarify the decision as follows: That the expression 'full acceptance of Belhar Confession' does not mean that a DRC congregation is required to adopt Belhar as a formal fourth confession, which can only be done by the General Synod of the DRC after a prescribed legal procedure. What is meant here is that the Belhar Confession is an urgent and compelling message on unity, reconciliation and justice, which formulates not only what God gives us but also what God demands of us in serving the coming of God's reign in Southern Africa. The resolution of General Synod 2005 regarding joint ventures between the DRC and the URCSA is interpreted to require that a joint ministry between DRC and the URCSA bodies:

- should draw up a written agreement containing the terms of the collaboration, in which the Belhar Confession is mentioned by name as supplying the guiding principles and ethos for the joint ministry; and
- should require the participating body (church council, presbytery, Regional Synod) from the side of the DRC, to take one of the following steps: the DRC Church Council or relevant church body officially adopt the message of Belhar Confession; the DRC members or commission taking part in the joint committees or activities sign a document that they endorse the message of Belhar Confession (*General Synodical Commission 2006:1*).

On 20 June 2006, the DRC and the URCSA met at Esselenpark. They soon became aware of a new spirit of reconciliation and togetherness and a willingness to reach out to one another. They experienced that all were more willing to listen to one another and to assist one another on the road to reunification. In the opening session, the DRC leadership apologised once more for the pain and hurt that they had caused the URCSA and its members in the past. This confession was movingly accepted by the URCSA leadership, an act that set the tone for the whole meeting. On the final day, the URCSA leadership apologised in turn for the pain that the URCSA had caused the DRC. It was decided to enter into a covenant for unity. They choose the term 'covenant' because they want to bring themselves and the reunification process under the authority of the word of God and the will of Christ. The meeting envisaged a new organically united Reformed church,

organised according to synodical-Presbyterian principles, which lives missional and is committed to the biblical demands of love, reconciliation, justice and peace. At the same time, they committed to non-racialism, inclusiveness and the acceptance and celebration of our multicultural composition. They agreed that the different languages in the churches would be treasured. The URCSA GSC then reconvened and made the following decision, which was hoped would take away the most difficult stumbling block.

We accept the challenge to become one united church in three years' time. In this regard, the Confession of Belhar shall not function as a precondition for unity. Instead, the message of Belhar shall continue to be the inspiration and guide of both the process towards and the formation of the new church. In accordance with the decisions of both churches the Confession of Belhar shall function as a full confession in the new church and we shall work together to help the church as a whole grow towards its complete acceptance. We shall take this decision for full ratification to our next synod. (Covenanting for the Reunification of the Family of DRC family – Esselenpark Declaration 2006)

The URCSA and the DRC committed themselves at Esselenpark to church reunification within the next three years, where the Belhar was no longer a prerequisite for unity, but would function as a fully-fledged confession in the envisaged unified church.

The decision of the GSC of 2006 regarding the Belhar Confession caused a lot of confusion in the URCSA. Shortly after the GSC meeting, a memorandum was received from the presbytery of the SA Gestig, the oldest congregation of the URCSA, expressing their concern with the way in which the reunification process has been handled by the moderamen and the GSC. It alleged that the decision taken by the Esselenpark meeting of the GSC made the Belhar Confession into an 'optional' confession and therefore violated the decisions of the General Synod of 2005.

When discussing this memorandum by the SA Gestig presbytery, the GSC of 2007 expressed concern that the statement of the SA Gestig was first communicated to the press before the moderamen or the even the leadership in the Cape were notified. This led to the situation that the moderator, Prof. Thias Kgatla, was confronted by the press for a response before the moderamen even had knowledge of the statement. In response to the memorandum on the reunification process, the URCSA GSC decided as follows:

We regret that the memorandum was presented to the media and that this happened before it was presented to the executive for their response.

The negative language used in the memorandum was disturbing and did not communicate positively to the GSC.

The GSC finds the procedure to come to the conclusion that the GSC violated the decisions of the General Synod instead of first to inquire for clarification, unhelpful. (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2007:3*)

The GSC, furthermore, affirmed that the words in the Esselenpark Declaration 'the Confession of Belhar shall not function as a precondition for unity' do not compromise the Confession of Belhar, for the following reasons:

1. The phrase was interpreted by the URCSA GSC at Esselenpark in June 2006 to mean: that the signing of the Confession of Belhar by all members of the sister churches in the DRC family shall not function as a precondition for unity, with the understanding that Belhar will be accepted as one of the four confessions of the foreseen united church. This position was the consensus of Achterberg 2 for the URCSA and the DRC. The RCA and the DRCA undertook to consider it.
2. Genuine confession of faith (with your lips) cannot be separated from 'believing with your heart' (see Rom 10:10). It can therefore not be forced or legislated. To expect every minister of another church to personally accept and sign Belhar will not be a meaningful unification strategy. The existing ministers and members of the DRCA were also not expected to sign Belhar in the process of the formation of the URCSA, which has Belhar as a fourth confession. The acceptance of Belhar as a fourth confession by the synods of the DRCA at the time was regarded as adequate. However, this does mean that all new ministers ('*proponente*') of the united church should affirm it when being licenced as ministers of the Word.
3. It is a fact that the URCSA consists of a diversity of people with a variety of languages, spiritualities and historical background. The DRC, DRCA and the RCA perhaps contain less internal diversity, but as part of the unification process, they add to the cultural, spiritual and ideological diversity of the DRC family. The only basis on which meaningful organic unity can be achieved among people of such diversity is if it becomes a home with enough space, with freedom for people to be different from one another, provided everyone eats from the same pot in the kitchen. The core teachings, values, processes and structures, therefore, need to be firmly established, while for the rest there should be freedom for people to express themselves in different ways.
4. There are two ways in which we could 'compromise' the Confession of Belhar. On the one hand, we could treat Belhar too lightly, lowering its value to a mere statement of faith that has no authority in a united church. That is unacceptable, and it is not what the GSC endorsed at Esselenpark or Achterberg. On the other hand, we could make too much of Belhar, making it into an imposition on the

members of sister churches. That would be in conflict with the nature of a confession as a voluntary, Spirit-induced stand that a person takes in the midst of a community of faith.

5. A confession is a compelling and transformative statement of truth, intended to direct and guide the lives of church members in a fundamental way. It should, therefore, find its echoes in the preaching, teaching, pastoral care, public witness, ministerial formation, etc., of the whole congregation. In this regard, it is a serious question whether the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dordt are functioning as confessions in the URCSA or the rest of the DRC family. It is only the Heidelberg Catechism that functions to some extent in our family of DR churches. The 'acceptance' of Belhar should, therefore, mean living the vision expressed in it on a daily basis. And this means that there is still a huge amount that needs to be done in the URCSA, which has formally and officially accepted Belhar as a confession.
6. The URCSA premise is that the DRC should accept the Belhar Confession unconditionally as part of a reunited church's confessional basis. The church unification process between the DRC and the URCSA, therefore, came to a stalemate during 2005 after the DRC's General Synod 2004 had decided it will not be required of all members of a reunited church to endorse the confession. DRC believes that the differences over Belhar Confession are mainly about historical, emotional and symbolic factors rather than the material content itself (*Minutes URCSA GSC 2007:4*).

The Executive Committees of the DRCA, the URCSA, the RCA and the DRC met on 16 August 2006 in Bloemfontein to discuss church reunification and the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. This was a breakthrough. The discussions were frank and open about the court cases between the URCSA and the DRCA, the synodical decisions of the four churches regarding church reunification and the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church as well as the way ahead. In the end, all four churches committed themselves to covenanting for unity. That paved the way for what was later to be known as the 'Achterbergh Declarations'.

From 6 to 8 November 2006, approximately 127 representatives of the DRC, DRCA, RCA and the URCSA met at Achterbergh near Krugersdorp to discuss the reunification of the family of DRC churches and how this can be realised. The meeting appointed ten task teams to work on the different aspects of reunification (Achterbergh Declaration I).

A second round of talks was held on 23 to 25 April 2007 between the churches at Achterbergh. The church model of the envisaged unified church, the confessional basis, reconciliation and joint ventures were thoroughly discussed at this

consultation. Regarding the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church, the following were accepted as the first points of consensus between the four churches:

1. The Confession of Belhar should not be a precondition for church unity.
2. That we continue discussions between all four churches with the purpose of agreeing to the biblical content of the Confession of Belhar and writing a joint commentary on it. That will make it possible that in a new denominational tie (*kerkverband*) the biblical content of the Confession of Belhar can be preached, taught and used in ministry.
3. In the forming of a new denominational tie (*kerkverband*), the doctrinal basis must accommodate all four churches, synods and congregations without forcing anybody to accept or to abandon Belhar.
4. We respect the value that the Confession of Belhar as a confession has for the URCSA.

The following points reflect consensus between the URCSA and the DRC. The RCA and the DRCA were willing to consider it after taking part in the process agreed to in point 2.

- In a new denominational tie (*kerkverband*) the Confession of Belhar will be included in the confessional basis as a fourth confession, but it will not be expected of members and ministers who are not ready or willing to underwrite [accept] it as a confession.
- The growing towards full acceptance of the Confession of Belhar is an integral part of the processes of the new church union (Achterbergh Declaration II 2007:1).

Consensus could not be reached on the issue of reconciliation and this was referred to the interim committee for further refinement. The meeting also agreed that all the churches consult with their congregations on the consensus reached at this stage with the view of incorporating the views of congregations in the follow-up processes. The delegates left the Achterbergh II consultation with great optimism. They hoped that church reunification would be realised soon.

The DRC Synod of 2007, after testing their congregations on the Achterbergh Declaration II, realised that most DRC congregations were not ready to accept the proposals regarding the Belhar Confession. The synod stated:

1. In a new denominational relation (*'kerkverband'*) the Confession of Belhar will be included in the confessional basis as a fourth confession, but it will not be expected of members and ministers who are not ready or willing to underwrite [accept] it as a confession.

2. The growing towards full acceptance of the Confession of Belhar is an integral part of the processes of the new church formation (*Achterbergh Declaration II 2007:1; Agenda NGK Algemene Sinode 2007:393-396*).

The 2007 Synod did not approve the proposals of Achterbergh II but rather decided to embark on a lengthy consultation process regarding them (*Besluiteregister NGK Algemene Sinode 2007:12-14; Notule NGK Algemene Sinode 2007:1-3*). The indecisiveness of the DRC on the Belhar Confession ultimately led to a declaration of a moratorium on unity talks by the URCSA General Synod 2008. After receiving feedback from their congregations, the DRC leadership retreated – even from the decisions of the General Synod in 2004. The Belhar Confession was once again drawn in as a bone of contention. Furthermore, on the issue of the model it, seems that there was a stronger movement towards a federal structure, moving away from the consensus met at Achterbergh II.

At a meeting in Hammanskraal (29 September to 5 October 2008), the General Synod of the URCSA affirmed:

1. The call for the unity of the church of Jesus Christ and especially at this time of the Dutch Reformed Church family as a call to obedience and a response to the prayer of Jesus Christ (Jn. 17) which the church desires to fulfil with all our heart.
2. This call to unity, reconciliation and justice as an inescapable gift and obligation laid upon us by the Confession of Belhar.
3. Our continuing commitment to this unity as expressed in the decisions and actions of successive synods of this church at both general and regional synodical level and as expressed also by the constant efforts towards unity at the level of presbyteries and commissions of the church and congregations on the basis of our common acceptance of the Confession of Belhar wherever possible.
4. Our desire that the unity of our churches of the Reformed family in South Africa should be expressed in organic unity reflective of the Presbyterian model and be structurally recognisable and spiritually strong.
5. Our firm conviction that the Confession of Belhar should be part of the confessional basis and identity of the newly formed denomination (*Acts General SynodURCSA 2008:194-195*).

The General Synod of the URCSA took cognisance of the reports emanating from the DRC General Synod of 2007 and of the resolutions of the moderamen (expanded) on Church Reunification (11–12 June 2008) where the view was expressed that while the Confession of Belhar ‘has significant value and sentiment for the URCSA and some members of the DR Church’, for the ‘majority member and congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church the Confession of Belhar is not acceptable as fourth

confession'. (see Addendum 9) The General Synod of the URCSA, 2008 expressed their disappointment at the DRC deviation from the consensus reached at the Achterbergh consultation and issued the following statement:

1. With deep distress that these latest decisions of the DRC represent a disturbing departure from our understanding reached at Esselenpark and the 'Points of Consensus' reached at the Achterberg consultations. These decisions renew the rejection of the Confession of Belhar as part of the confessional basis of the new united church to which we aspire.
2. With sadness that this remains the case even after the substantial concession on the manner in which the Confession of Belhar should be approached made by the URCSA General Synodical Commission at the Esselenpark meeting in 2006.
3. With deep disappointment that neither in the decisions of the DRC General Synod, nor in the most recent resolutions of the Expanded Moderamen has the 'Covenant Toward Church Unity' as formulated and accepted at Esselenpark, and put before, and accepted by the regional synods of the URCSA as a new, common theological basis for church union, featured in any recognisable way.
4. That by reintroducing the Confession of Belhar as a matter of political contention and the most visible and most objectionable barrier to church unification, the DRC is at significant variance with its own decision regarding the Confession of Belhar and the confessional basis of the new united church;
5. And that by this action the DRC has in effect turned away from the 'Covenant toward Church Unity' agreed upon at Esselenpark and has invalidated the grounds upon which the URCSA has taken its decision on Belhar as a gesture of reconciliation and obedience.
6. That the proposed model of unification, the so-called 'Joint General Synod' has nothing in common with the model of organic unity according to Presbyterian principles proposed by the URCSA and until now the model under discussion accepted by the DRC is, in fact, a revamped 'federal model' URCSA has consistently rejected over the years. It is a model that accepts, and reinforces the racially divided nature of our Dutch Reformed churches and represents a fundamental denial of what the URCSA stands for and is expressed in the Confession of Belhar and our understanding of Reformed Ecclesiology (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:24-25*).

Furthermore, the URCSA General Synod, 2007 decided to put a moratorium on the reunification talks between the URCSA and DRC until the DRC was seriously committed and ready for unity talks. The General Synod affirmed that the faith, courage and work of regional synods, presbyteries, commissions of the church and

local congregations be respected and honoured by encouraging them. The synod further affirmed that

- where all efforts towards unification are done in faith and with integrity, in obedience to the call of Christ and on the basis of the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar, to continue with these efforts; and
- to thereby remain signs of hope, reconciliation and love to the fulfilment of justice, the edification and witness of the church and the glory of God (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:24-25*).

The General Synod, 2007 mandated the executive to invite the WARC to facilitate the process of reunification of the DRC family.

The General Synod 2007 then asked the moderamen to call for a public occasion where members and ministers of the DRC and the rest of the DRC family could publicly support, identify with and undersign the Confession of Belhar. The URCSA saw it as a meaningful way to make progress with regard to church unification and the commitment to the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the envisaged unified church (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:24-25*). Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, Klippies Kritzinger, Nico Smith, Nico Botha and Daniël Kuys were appointed as a task team to execute the decision of the General Synod in this regard. The task team was unsuccessful in executing this decision.

In March 2009, at the invitation of the URCSA Africa and the DRC, the WARC undertook a mediation process to try to deal with the issues which had led to the breakdown of the reunification talks between the two. The WARC delegation consisted of Clifton Kirkpatrick, President of WARC, Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of WARC, Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, Stephen Farris (Canada), Alexander Horsburgh (Scotland), Rommie Nauta (Netherlands), Egbert Rooze (Belgium) and Rev. Peggy Kabonde (Zambia).

In their report, the delegation expressed their support of the Belhar Confession as a common confession of the envisaged reunited church.²⁰ The WARC delegation urged the URCSA and the DRC to together engage in a serious study of the Belhar Confession, which should be accompanied by a study guide (Statement by the Delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2009. See Addendum 10).

20 The URCSA delegation consisted of Prof. Thias Kgatla (moderator). Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel, Rev. Godfrey Betha, Rev. Philemon Moloï, Rev. Reggie Nel, Dr Dawid Kuyler, Rev. Daniël Kuys, Rev. Jacob Nthakhe, Prof. Nico Smith. Dr Nico Botha (observer), Prof. Willem Saayman (observer), Rev. Awie Louw (observer). The DRC was represented by Prof. Piet Strauss, Mrs Rinel Hugo, Rev. Johan Pienaar, Dr Braam Hanekom, Rev. Pieter Raath, Dr Pieter van Jaarsveld, Prof. Piet Meiring, Dr Nelus Niemandt, Dr Kobus Gerber, Dr Nelis Janse van Rensberg, Dr Johan Ernst and Dr Elschè Buchner.

The study guide should clearly be supported by the leadership of both churches and designed jointly by leaders and adult education experts of both churches. The delegation found that the historical context of the confession needed to be unpacked, understood and researched together and suggested that the study guide should address questions directly. The delegation renewed the WARC's commitment to the process of pastoral accompaniment of the DRC Family. They committed themselves to a process of monitoring, facilitated by Dr Jerry Pillay. The WARC delegation was pleased to learn that the URCSA was more than willing to assist in this process but stressed the need for commitment to, and engagement in, the process. As a possible way forward in beginning this process the WARC task team recommended the appointment of a joint task team of five members from each denomination. This task team was to undertake the process of producing Bible study materials, finding internet information on the subject, observing and studying the responses of other churches and fostering dialogue and discussion within the DRC and the URCSA (Statement by the Delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2009:1-3, see Addendum 10).

The General Synod of the URCSA 2012 expressed their appreciation for the breakthrough developments within the DRC General Synod of 2011 to start a process to accept the Belhar Confession in a church-orderly way (Minutes of the Sixth General Synod of URCSA 2012:14-15). The URCSA, therefore, revoked the 2008 decision on a moratorium on all three levels within the DRC Family of churches as the other two churches also showed their willingness to take part in the ongoing process of unity. The URCSA General Synod instructed all regional synods, presbyteries and congregations to engage their counterparts within the DRC, DRCA and RCA with sincerity but firmness as guided by the spirit of the Belhar Confession on all matters applying to the decision of the lifting of the moratorium. The URCSA reaffirmed that the Confession of Belhar should be taken up in the confessional basis of the reunited church and expressed understanding that the 2011 General Synod of the DRC decided to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional basis of the DRC in a church-orderly way (*Minutes of the Sixth General Synod of URCSA 2012:14-15*).

During bilateral talks on 25 and 26 July 2012, the executives of the URCSA and the DRC drafted a memorandum of agreement as a basis for the way forward under the guidance of the WCRC. The 2012 General Synod of the URCSA accepted the memorandum. The General Synod acknowledged with thanks the role played by the WCRC and especially the role of Dr Jerry Pillay in the journey of the churches (*Minutes of the Sixth General Synod of URCSA 2012:11-13*; Report of the Executive on Ecumenical Affairs to the General Synod 2012:37-41).

In 2013, the DRC General Synod also approved the Memorandum of Agreement. The URCSA and the DRC agreed to covenant together for unity. Furthermore, they agreed that the Belhar Confession would be part of the confessional basis of the reunited church. For two days (9 and 10 April 2013) at the Le Chateau Guest House in Kempton Park, the URCSA and the DRC discussed how they would continue on the journey ahead to grow together. They were, however, cautious not to create unrealistic expectations or quick fixes for the complex journey that lay ahead. In the light of this, the meeting drafted a 'Roadmap to Church Reunification' with ten steps (Addendum 12). The 'Roadmap' made provision that a 'Common Set of Rules' ('*Tussenorde*') for the churches be drawn up. The principles already agreed on in the Memorandum of Agreement were to be contained in the concept church order of the envisaged unified church (organic synodical-Presbyterian structure; missional structure; diversity of language and culture; unification of congregations, presbyteries and synods; the autonomy of the local congregation combined with the authority of the presbytery, synod and General Synod; and the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the confessional basis) (Memorandum of Agreement 2012).

On the issue of restorative justice and reconciliation, the DRC and the URCSA acknowledged in the Memorandum of Agreement that church unity and the Belhar Confession urges the two churches to also speak about restorative justice and reconciliation. As churches they, therefore, decided to embrace the following:

1. Restorative justice should not be an end in itself but always lead to reconciliation. Reconciliation should be the restoration of communities at different levels of society: personal, social, political, denominational, economical, emotional and spiritual reconciliation between God and us.
2. We believe that restorative justice is a biblical imperative that restores life in its fullness. It restores imbalances of the past and imbalances in God's creation and glorifies God through our restored unity and reconciliation.
3. We accept that restorative justice is a complex process which will ask some sacrifices. We will, therefore, need good stewardship but also a clear vision on the possible outcomes of such a process.

Regarding reconciliation, the DRC and the URCSA agreed on the following statements:

1. We believe that true reconciliation is a deeply spiritual process. Christian principles like sacrifice and forgiveness should not be neglected. Without the necessary spiritual maturity, it could fail dismally.
2. We accept the reality that conflict, bitterness, hatred, racism, ethnicism, classism, sexism and a lot of emotional pain is still very much part of society. We must address some of the core reasons for conflict like misunderstandings and poor communication, bad and corrupt leadership, language, culture and religion,

ideologies and the greed for political power, injustices, personalities, scarce resources and imbalances in society (Memorandum of Agreement 2012:1-4).

The URCSA GSC of 2013, in session in Durban, took note of the decision of the DRC General Synod, 2013 regarding the Confession of Belhar: The GSC acknowledged the right of the DRC to formulate its own confessional basis, however, stated that the proposed wording of Article 1, clause 2.2 in the confessional basis of the DRC was not acceptable as it stood for a church order of a finally reunited church. The premise of the URCSA was that the DRC attempted to reconcile two contradictory confessional positions, and in the process created the danger of the authority of the confessions being challenged. The GSC understood the desire of the DRC to avoid division in the church; however, the Commission decided the following as a more adequate basis of dealing with the confession and church reunification:

1. The Confession of Belhar is recognised as the confession with the same authority as the formularies of unity.
2. The content of the Confession of Belhar, namely visible church unity, true reconciliation in Christ-overcoming racial divisions in Southern Africa and the world and God's preferential option for the poor is proposed for full subscription by every office in the new re-unified Church.
3. The content of the Confession of Belhar will be taught in catechism, preaching, theological education and embodied in a transforming Church.
4. Every minister/office in the Church is given time of one recess after reunification to consider and subscribe to the confession of Belhar formally.
5. Ministers that have an objection against the Confession on a particular point be allowed to submit a gravamen while they continue to be bound by their oath not to propagate their objections in any way.
6. Every new minister will be licenced only after subscribing to all four Confessions.
7. The GSC commits itself anew not to let go of the DRC, but to continue on the mutually critical and mutually affirmative journey on which we have embarked together, as spelled out in the Roadmap to church Re-Unification and the Memorandum of Agreement (*Minutes General Synodical Commission URCSA 2013:1-2*).

However, in the beginning of 2015, it seemed clear that the DRC would not be able to secure the approval from their regional in order to change their confessional basis. This created a huge strain on the bilateral talks between the DRC and the URCSA. On 24 April 2015, the moderamen commissioned the moderator of URCSA, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, to draft a response on behalf of the URCSA regarding

the failure of the different regional synods of the DRC to acceptance the Belhar Confession with a two-third majority vote. The statement reads as follows:

The URCSA, however, want to emphasise that we applaud the efforts by the DRC on General Synod level, Regional Synod level as well as congregational level to take up the Belhar Confession in your confessional basis. We cherish your efforts. We affirm that we will still avail ourselves to accompany the DRC in this regard. We know that it could not have been an easy task to embark on this very difficult process to change the confessional basis of the DRC. We took cognisance that the current wording of the DRC's church order makes the change of the confessional basis of the DRC almost impossible (see Article 44.1 and 44.2). According to Article 44.1 the amendment of the Confession is only possible only after each Regional Synod of the DRC approved with a two-thirds majority and two-thirds of all church councils, each with a two-thirds majority in favour of the resolution. Article 44.2 states that Article 44.1 and 44.2 of the church order of the DRC is amended after each synod with a two-thirds majority voted in favour of the resolution, the General Synod then afterwards by a two-thirds majority vote in favour of it. (URCSA Executive Statement 2015:1; Addendum 13)

In discussions about church reunification, the URCSA had repeatedly stated that the Belhar Confession was non-negotiable in the envisaged reunified church. It seemed clear that without changes in the church order regulations of the DRC, namely, Articles 44.1 and 44.2, there would be no reunification of the church. Ironically, during 2015, two-thirds of the presbyteries of the PCUSA voted that the Belhar Confession could become part of the confessional basis of the PCUSA, while during the same year, the DRC, after years of multilateral talks, could not reach a two-thirds majority in order to make the Belhar Confession part of their confessional basis. Maybe the time had come to painfully admit to each other that Belhar was indeed 'a bridge too far' (Van der Merwe 2014:137-155).

As Jaap Durand, one of the drafters of the Belhar Confession rightly said:

[T]he the division of the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa into four different churches is neither the result of a schism on doctrinal issues, nor a schism caused by so-called non-theological factors, but the result of a deliberate 'missionary policy'. (Durand 1994:1)

According to Durand, this 'missionary policy' was basically and theologically flawed due its hidden racist agenda. In an effort to rationalise this hidden agenda, cultural and ethnic diversity was emphasised to such a degree that the idea of diversity was elevated to the level of an absolute; a biblical principle of equal value to that of unity. Durand than deduced that the difficulty in making any progress with unity

talks between the DRC, the DRMC, the DRCA and the RCA lied in the implicit racism in the DRC's theological rationalisation of a divided DRC Church family. His notion was that the removal of a theological edifice meant that the foundation on which it was built still remained intact (Durand 1994:2). The question for Durand was that in its new theological appraisal and its evident willingness to change its stance on the question of diversity and the theological justification of separate churches, did the DRC address only the theological symptoms of a deep-seated racism, or was the cause itself eradicated? He writes:

I am fully aware of everything the DRC has said about racism. I recognise the laudable way in which *Church and Society* 1990 rejects racism as a grievous sin which no person or church may defend or practice. But can we take these protestations seriously, if the one point where racism now clearly manifests itself is left intact? Why do the leadership and the decision-making bodies not combat racism in the church openly by confronting recalcitrant members and congregations with the inescapable demand of the gospel that they become members of one non-racial Dutch Reformed Church? (Durand 1994:3)

The question for Durand was whether overt or covert racism was implicitly condoned, not only by what a church is doing but also, more importantly, by what it is not doing. He deduced that this was going to be the acid test of whether the DRC had distanced itself from the racism of apartheid. He, furthermore, said that it becomes obvious if one asks the simple questions: What are the real reasons for the reluctance of the various DRC bodies to enter into a unification process in a meaningful way? What are the impediments? What is it that bothers them? According to Durand there was an underlying fear among a large number of rank-and-file members and ministers of the Word of the DRC that once the present structures were gone, they could be overrun by black people or forced into associations they did not desire. Durand rightly concluded that racism is not a sin exclusive to Afrikaners, or to white people for that matter. It lurks in the hearts of all of us (Durand 1994:3). The URCSA saw the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as the acid test of the DRC's response to the challenge of becoming one, united and non-racial church with the other Dutch Reformed churches and of whether the DRC had finally distanced itself from the racism of apartheid.

Unfinished business regarding the Belhar Confession and the issue of homosexuality

The URCSA General Synod of 2005 held in Pietermaritzburg took a decision (decision 90), which would be the interim guideline until the synods come to a final decision. The Interim Policy on Homosexuality of 2005 states, inter alia:

- Synod confirms that homosexual people are members of the church through faith in Jesus Christ.
- Synod rejects homophobia and any form of discrimination against homosexual persons.
- Synod appeals to the URCSA members to reach out with love and empathy to our homosexual brothers and sisters and embrace them as members of the body of Christ in our midst.
- Synod acknowledges the appropriate civil rights of homosexual persons (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2005:209*).

At the URCSA General Synod of 2008, the task team on homosexuality tabled a report with recommendations, which, after a robust debate, was referred to the regional synods for discussion and ratification. According to the task team, the Confession of Belhar brought with it a burden of responsibility the URCSA could not deny nor avoid regarding issues of diversity, dignity and humanity. The task team stated the following in this regard:

Belhar disputes against an understanding of 'diversity' that is abused for reasons of negativity and rejection, instead of a diversity that celebrates the other and the richness of difference. The diversity that is absolutized is the diversity that seeks to find a negative 'otherness' that comes with enmity, distance, aversion, discrimination and degradation and in so doing eliminates dignity and the bond of humanity. The diversity that Belhar celebrates is the diversity that comes from celebrating both the richness of the creation of God and the dignity of the difference we see in the other. To 'absolutize' this diversity is to make it the foundation of the other's existence. The foundation of the other's existence is not the difference of skin colour, or gender, or culture, or sexual orientation. Rather it is their [humanness], their being created in the image of God, sharing humanity in all its fullness with us. We dignify both the difference and the togetherness with our respect and love and the embrace of our common creatureliness as image bearers of God. The dignity of difference is the dignity of personhood. This is what the church celebrates and embraces. Absolutizing this natural diversity which we should actually embrace and celebrate not only breaks the visible and active unity of the church, but accepts that the church must

live 'in despair of reconciliation'. This is an attitude Belhar utterly rejects. On the contrary, it is our calling, gift and obligation to live together as reconciled community. There is nothing that falls outside of this call and gift; nothing that makes us 'despair of reconciliation'. (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:121; Report on Homosexuality*)

The premise of the task team was that the rejection of the Belhar Confession regarding the exclusion of the other includes the protestation against the oppression, rejection and exploitation of gay persons as well as mentally and physically challenged people (whom we used to call 'disabled persons') and women. According to the synod:

Belhar rejects the sinful absolutisation with a view to inferioritise, separate and discriminate, but expressly celebrates the diversity that affirms humanity and welcomes it as a gift from God for the richer life of the church. Belhar embraces that diversity as enriching and building the visible and active unity of the church. (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:121*)

According to the task team the whole of Article 4 of the confession, which deals with God as 'the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth', speaks of justice and inclusivity and, therefore, also speaks of the situation of gay persons and women. Their search for recognition and protection is a search for justice. 'In their woundedness, their vulnerability to the denial of their rights, the enmity of many in society and the church, and the rejection of their true and full humanity, homosexual persons have an inalienable right to call upon the God 'who in a special way (is) the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged'. Their suffering is no less wrong than the suffering of the widows and the orphans and it is in regard to their right to justice that God 'wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right.' (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:123; Report on Homosexuality*). Therefore, the task team proposed that with regards to gay persons and women, in their struggle for the recognition of their rights to full humanity, the church also must learn 'to stand where God stands', to witness and strive against 'any form of injustice', so that also for those members of the body of Christ 'justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'. (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:123; Report on Homosexuality*)

The view of the task team had been that in light of the Confession of Belhar the URCSA should accept and embrace homosexual persons in the fullest sense of the word. That means the church accepts

- that homosexual persons, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord of their life and of the church, are therefore without any reservation full members of the church of Jesus Christ;

- that homosexual persons deserve therefore justice in the same way the church claims justice for the destitute and the wronged, both before and under the law, in civil society and in the church, and the church commits itself to actively seek that justice in all areas of life;
- that our commitment and calling to unity and reconciliation require that homosexual persons, as confessing members of the church, have access to all the offices of the church, including the office of minister of the Word; and
- that this access should, both in the interests of justice and pastoral concern, should not be prejudiced by demands for celibacy if the relationship is one of love, respect and real commitment (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:125; Report on Homosexuality*).

Among other issues, the task team acknowledged that the homosexual identity has very complex biological, psychological and sociological causes and that these are factors of which biblical writers in their times and circumstances had not been aware and saw no need to address. The synod affirmed:

- That Scripture's rejection is cantered upon gratuitous homosexual acts (homoeroticism) and was determined by conventions and norms current in the ancient contexts of the biblical authors, rather than the homosexual orientation and the desire of homosexual persons to enter into lasting, caring and loving relationships such as described above.
- That moreover the evidence of Scripture is overwhelmingly in favour of hospitality to those who are traditionally not welcomed, acceptance of those who are stigmatised, rejected and alienated, compassion towards those who endure anxiety, suffering and humiliation because of their identity, and solidarity with those who are marginalised and oppressed, justice to those who are wronged – in this case homosexual persons.
- That these principles constitute the heart of the ministry and Gospel of Jesus Christ as they are in equal measure found at the heart of the Confession of Belhar, and in this matter the church is once again called to 'stand where God stands'.
- That these considerations are essential to the unity of the church, the calling towards reconciliation placed upon the church by Jesus Christ, and the justice to which the church is obligated (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:150-151; Report on Homosexuality*).

The task team made the following recommendations to the General Synod:

- That our considerations entail that the same ethical directives that apply for heterosexual living in all its facets should also apply for homosexual living.

Synod shall not require of them what it does not require of its heterosexual members.

- This means that homosexual persons express their intimate sexual relations within the context of the relationships accepted above, which for us means the context Christian marriage blessed by the church.
- In line with the provision made by law and the Constitution of South Africa, those who have conscientious objections to these unions shall not be obliged to officiate in them.
- Since homosexual couples cannot bring children into the world they should have the opportunity to adopt children and to participate in the Christian practice of hospitality to children and provide a safe home for them. The church offers the same covenantal support as it does heterosexual couples.
- As confessing members of the church of Christ homosexual Christians shall, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ have access to all the offices of the church, and upon fulfilment of all the academic requirements for the ministry, to the office of minister of the Word.
- Ongoing study and discussion in congregations of this report and these decisions are highly recommended and encouraged.
- In the ongoing process, Synod pleads for an ethic of love and graciousness, embrace and togetherness in the midst of differences that might still exist. Those who disagree with it shall not in any way be forced to accept it, while we hope that all will remain open to discussion and to the persuasion of the Holy Spirit of God (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2008:151; Report on Homosexuality*).

The URCSA have thus far failed to approve the above-mentioned recommendations. The General Synod of 2012, based on the principles of the Belhar Confession, affirmed the URCSA's long tradition of social justice founded on the fundamental human dignity of every individual, as well as its bearing on the controversial and emotional issues of gay rights. The General Synod, furthermore, called on all its members to exhibit concern over the protection of homosexuals from discriminatory practices. The General Synod also affirmed that the denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals was inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology.

Decisions of the issues concerning the theological and moral status of homosexual marriages, covenantal unions, the status of homosexuals as members of the church regarding baptism and the offices as church council members as well as the ordination of practicing homosexual persons in ministry are still outstanding (*Acts General Synod URCSA 2005, 2008, 2012; Report on Homosexuality*).

No consensus regarding the abovementioned report of the task team on homosexuality could be reached at regional synod level. However, taking into account the URCSA's understanding of the authority of Scripture as the norm for Christian faith and life, doctrine and ethics, other relevant scientific material on the subject of homosexuality and in light of Reformed theological perspectives and the perspectives offered to the URCSA regarding justice, diversity and inclusivity by the Confession of Belhar, the General Synod of the URCSA is obliged to formulate, before long, the URCSA official position regarding homosexuality and the Belhar Confession.

Conclusion

The Belhar Confession has an immense influence on the way that theology is practiced by the URCSA. The confession is about the integrity of the church in the public arena. The URCSA's premise is that the congregation's worship of God on Sunday continues and flows over into the worship of God during the week in the community, particularly by working with compassion, justice and reconciliation among people. The congregation serves God, who in a special way is the God of the suffering, the poor and those who are wronged (victimised), by supporting people in whatever form of suffering and need they may experience, by witnessing and fighting against all forms of injustice, by calling upon the government and the authorities to serve all the inhabitants of the country by allowing justice to prevail and by fighting against injustice. Article 4 of the Belhar Confession makes the bold claim that 'God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged and that that God calls the church to follow in this'.²¹ In various ways over the years, the URCSA affirmed the importance and cardinal place of the Confession of Belhar for and in the life of the URCSA. There are new struggles the church has to address, such as restorative justice, hate speech, incitement, statelessness, atrocity crimes, human rights violations, state capture, land grabbing, gender justice, the neoliberal economic globalisation and eco-justice. The URCSA, as children of the Belhar and tomorrow's children,²² are being challenged to take a public stand against the ills

21 Article 4 reads: We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that 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 strangers, 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 people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; 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.

22 See Alves (1972). The metaphor of 'dream' is also applied by Russel Botman (1994) in his dissertation.

in church and society. The URCSA should, therefore, engage actively in restorative justice issues and in so doing confess uncompromisingly God's sovereignty and God's justice for humanity and the earth.

Over the past three decades, the URCSA has tirelessly been unambiguous its rejection of the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar as an optional confession in the confessional basis of the envisaged unified church. It rejected vigorously any notion of dealing with the confession in a context of doctrinal liberty. The URCSA still upholds Karl Barth's notions on confessions. The URCSA, therefore, do not confess with an aim in view nor to effect and to carry out this or that with our confession. We are not in the business of marketing the Belhar. In our deliberations we, as Barth rightly once said, aim not at results and expect none – not from the DRC or any other church across the globe. The URCSA as children of the Belhar confess because God is God and does all things well, and because we know this, we cannot keep silence. As confessors, we are not concerned with any end but only with the honour of God (Barth 1969/1951:77-78). Confessions are not a mere human statement or an opinion or conviction. Confessions are an act of defiance and conflict as Barth (1969/1951:82) rightly conveyed. We embrace Barth's notion that confession is decisive action and not incidental reaction. (Barth 1969/1951/:80-81). Confessions are about making deliberate choices. Confession is a free action and is a response to a summons and rests ultimately on free choice. God compels us to confess. It proceeds from the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills. Confessions are related to God's free grace. The URCSA, therefore, cannot demand confession from the DRC family or any other church, nor can one commission the DRC family or any other church to confess. We cannot persuade or force anyone to confess. We can and should only embody the Belhar Confession, namely, unity, justice and reconciliation, keeping in mind, however, that reconciliation without truth, justice and restoration is justice deferred.

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