

# THE UNIFICATION PROCESS IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH (DRC) FAMILY AND UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (URCSA):<sup>1</sup> THE CONFSSIONAL BASIS OF THE BELHAR CONFSSION

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## ABSTRACT

This article consists of five main parts. Firstly the author gives a brief overview of the history and origin of the Belhar Confession as a corner stone for URCSA's arguments for church unity. Secondly, the discussion focuses on church unity in general in relation to the Trinity, Eucharist and the Word of God. Church unity is a given, as a fruit of the cross of Christ. Thirdly, the article discusses the unification process within the DRC and URCSA. Fourthly, the author explores the Belhar Confession as the corner stone of church unity from URCSA's perspective, and the challenges around accepting this confession by the DRC. Fifthly, the author deliberates URCSA's position on the Belhar Confession as fundamental to URCSA's identity and life.

**Keywords:** Unity; unification; Dutch Reformed Church (DRC); Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); Belhar Confession

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- 1 The DRC family, namely Dutch Reformed Church (whites), Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (blacks) and Reformed Church in Africa (Indians). They are the family because they share the same identity in terms of racial division and confessions of faith. URCSA is an independent family member which is identified by the Belhar Confession that rejects divisions among people based on race, colour, gender or class. Hence we speak of the unification of the DRC family and URCSA in the title of the article.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article will focus on the unification process of the DRC family and URCSA. According to the Belhar Confession, unity of the Church of Jesus Christ is both a gift and a command. This discussion will regard Church *unification* as the attempt of the Christian community to *unite* churches that are divided in term of doctrines, race or tradition.

In the context of the DRC and URCSA, this division is based on race rather than doctrine. Furthermore, the historical background of the Belhar Confession will be discussed in relation to church unity of the two denominations. Whenever URCSA is engaged in church unity talks, its argument for church unity is based on the Belhar Confession as the guideline for church unity. The author will highlight challenges towards the acceptance of this confession by the DRC, as against the successful acceptance of this confession by other reformed churches abroad. Finally, the author will discuss URCSA's stance on the Belhar Confession as fundamental to URCSA's identity.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) Conference of 1968 held at Heilbron, came up with a declaration that the unity of the body of Christ should be the illustration of common fellowship and worship, without excluding the administration and partaking of the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) among Christians on a non-racial basis. The RES also held a series of consultations with South Africans. Modise (2013), quoting Luke and Van Houten (1997), states that the RES declaration and consultation in South Africa sparked a debate within the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). The consequences of such a debate was a motion from the General Synod of Tshilidzini 1971, that the Doctrinal and Current Issues Commission should come up with a draft of an Africa 'Confession of Faith', which will reflect the position of an African Church in southern Africa. The decision was taken by the Synod of Tshilidzini that the matter be referred to the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches family for advice, and reported on at the next General Synod (Modise 2013).

According to Modise (2013) the General Synod of DRCA Worcester 1979, discussed church unity in the context of the DRC family, as a crucial matter. Furthermore, this discussion was sparked by the debate that emanated from the previous synod (Tshilidzini 1971) about the drafting of a Confession of Faith that would reflect the African ecclesiology. In relation to decision 14.4.1.3 of the Synod of Worcester, the Synod decided that some issues remained unresolved within the DRCA, and neither did the General Synod resolve this matter at that Synod meeting. The Synod urged its Commission on Bible Study and Confessions to draft the fourth Confession of Faith, which would reflect the African context and ecclesiology of the

DRCA during the apartheid era and a racially divided South Africa. This Synod was acting on the basis of the decision of Ottawa 1978 on racism (and thus apartheid), where the Reformed churches called for a *status confessionis*<sup>2</sup> on the South African racial situation in church and society (Modise 2013).

It has been a struggle of the DRCA and Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) throughout their church history to understand the correlation between their faith and the South African situation in relation to racism, apartheid and its brutality to disadvantaged South Africans. In Tshilidzini, Venda, the DRCA General Synod of 1971 decided to draft the fourth Confession of Faith which would reflect the African ecclesiological background (Modise 2013). This aspiration to have the fourth Confession of Faith that would address the eco-socio-political situation in South Africa, was generated from that Synod.

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. In its response the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) said that:

The white Afrikaans Reformed Churches through the years have worked out in considerable detail both the policy itself and the theological and moral justification for the system. Apartheid is therefore, a pseudo-religious ideology as well as a political policy. It depends to a large extent on this moral and theological justification. The division of the Reformed Churches in South Africa on the basis of race and colour is being defended as a faithful interpretation of the will of God and of Reformed understanding of the Church in the world. (www.vgksa.org.za)

It was this declaration of the WARC that, within the context of the South African situation, warranted the church to declare a *status confessionis* in South Africa. This means that the WARC regarded this issue (on which it is impossible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of the church's common confession) as relevant to the Reformed Churches in the world in general and South Africa in particular. On the basis of the South African situation, the WARC made the following declaration:

We declare with the 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. (www.vgksa.org.za)

The DRMC at its Synod later that year followed in the footsteps of the WARC and declared a *status confessionis*. The DRMC realised that it was time for the church to

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2 Literally, *status confessionis* means a situation of confessing – a situation in which the confession of Jesus Christ is at stake. As stated in the Ottawa Resolution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches with regard to white Reformed Afrikaner Churches in South Africa, declaring that a situation constitutes a *status confessionis* means ‘that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession’ (Ottawa Resolution, 1978, quoted in Modise 2013.)

confess anew to the truths of the Word of God in the light of the falsity of the gospel. Adonis (2009) indicates:

However, 51 members of the synod pointed out that they had voted against the declaration of a *status confessionis*. After this, two ministers, Revs Jaco Coetzee and AB van Wyk, proposed that the synod names an ad hoc commission to prepare a confession following the *status confessionis* against apartheid and to present it to this same synod. (Adonis 2009)

The proposal from the two movers was accepted by the Synod without any opposition and the moderator appointed the ad hoc commission, which consisted of Rev. IJ Mentor (moderator), Dr AA Boesak (assessor), Prof. Dr DJ Smit, Prof. Dr JJF Durand and Prof. Dr G Bam (chairperson) (Adonis 2009). Later it was discovered that the main drafter of the text, which was later accepted by the Synod as the Belhar Confession, was Prof, Dr DJ Smit.

It was a confession in draft form, which was distributed to the whole DRMC for comment and was to be finalised at the next Synod in 1986. At the 1986 Synod of the DRMC the Confession was accepted and called the Belhar Confession 1986, in which the rejection of apartheid was made an article of faith (De Cruichy 1994, 166). The name Belhar in the Confession refers to the suburb of Belhar (in the Western Cape) where the Synod met. This Confession was also adopted by the DRCA when the DRMC and the DRCA unified on 14 April 1994, forming a new united church, namely the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This confession became part of the confessional basis of URCSA.

According to the Church Order 2012 Article 2.2, the Belhar Confession is one of the standards of unity of URCSA. Setri Nyomi, in his address to URCSA General Synod of 2005, said that the Belhar Confession can be described as a modern day standard of Christian unity. It sees unity as a gift of God and an obligation; both a binding force and a reality to be earnestly pursued. Originating from a people who were oppressed, who were living expressions of the evils of apartheid, it is remarkable that this confession was set in a call for unity and reconciliation. It described as sinful any enmity between people and people groups and called for unity to be visible. Such unity must be active in sharing and can only be established under freedom (URCSA General Synod Acts 2005, 225).

In the process of church unity and unity talks of URCSA and other DRC family members, the Belhar Confession has been a burning issue – an issue that drives these members away from achieving organic unity. It has been an issue because some members perceive this confession as a political/ideological document and not a spiritual confession of faith from the heart. It was surprising to hear that, even on 13 October 2011, some members of the DRC still objected against the Belhar Confession on the basis of a political, liberational or black theology perspective. People were warned that acceptance of the Belhar Confession would cause a schism

among congregations of the DRC across church borders (URCSA Pastoral letter of 14 October 2011).

According to the Synod, the Belhar Confession is based on Scripture as the Word of God and it is a witness to the liberating acts of God in history and in 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 (URCSA General Synods Acts 2005, 151). In the DRC General Synod meeting on 13 October 2011, members in favour of the Belhar Confession also presented their cases with aspiration and passion; strongly arguing that this confession addresses crucial issues like unity, reconciliation and justice, which are uniquely biblical and Reformed, to address the South African context (URCSA Pastoral letter of 14 October 2011). The Belhar Confession has its historical and theological roots in the Reformed tradition and has 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 relevance of the Belhar Confession of faith is broader than the South African or religious context. It addresses three key issues of concern in all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people; reconciliation within the church and society; and God's justice. URCSA is the carrier of the Belhar Confession of faith, as the Reformed confession on behalf of all Reformed churches throughout the world. This notion is justified by Karl Barth:

A reformed creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders, and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ by the holy Scripture alone (Barth 1962, 112).

In line with Barth (1962) the URCSA General Synod of 2005 confirmed that the Belhar Confession, although written and accepted by the church at a specific time and place in history, is a living confession inspiring the church world-wide, not aimed against certain groups and not confined by political or geographical boundaries. It makes of the members of URCSA not a church with a confession whose value lies in the mindless repetitions of words, but a confessing church, on whom rests the obligation to allow the confession to become a way of life, utterly convincing in its love, utterly compelling in its call. The way in which the Belhar Confession has reached far beyond URCSA and South Africa to constantly inspire the churches of our Reformed family and the broader ecumenical movement, is a source of humble rejoice and deep gratitude for which URCSA praises God (URCSA General Synod Acts 2005, 152).

The historical moments of acceptance of the Belhar Confession have become more ecumenical in nature, since a number of Reformed churches in Africa, America and Europe are in the process of accepting or have accepted this confession. Furthermore, the Belhar Confession carries the same weight in authority as the

Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Heidelberg Catechism. In June 2009, in North America, the Synods of both the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) considered recommendations to move toward the adoption of the Belhar Confession.<sup>3</sup>

In the history of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the Belhar Confession is now the most recent confession of faith of the RCA. It was adopted by the General Synod in late 2009 and ratified by the RCA's classes, or regional governance bodies, in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The historical moment of acceptance of the Belhar Confession has moved into the Dutch Reformed Church when in May 2011 the DRC Regional Synod of the Southern and Western Cape accepted the Belhar Confession as a confession of faith that is based on Scripture and Reformed traditions. The decision of the Southern and Western Cape Synod reads as:

Synod is convinced that the Biblical claim of justice to all people, reconciliation among people and the unity of the church belong to the essence of the Gospel. The Confession of Belhar expresses the Gospel claim for justice, reconciliation and unity in a different way than other Confessions of the church. The Synod, as a church meeting, adopts the Confession of Belhar and therefore requests the General Synod to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional base of the DRC in a Church Orderly way.<sup>5</sup>

This was a huge step taken by this regional Synod towards the acceptance, and it started the process to accept the Belhar Confession by the General Synod of DRC in October 2011. The decision of the regional Southern and Western Cape Synods on acceptance of the Belhar Confession has also impacted on the General Synod of the DRC to accept the Belhar Confession on 13 October 2011. Dr Braam Hanekom and Rev. Nelis van Rensburg came to the session and pleaded that the General Synod should take a decision on the Belhar Confession as was done at the Cape Synod, and then requested that the formal route be followed.<sup>6</sup> They explained the process that they had followed at the Cape Synod where the Belhar Confession was accepted by the regional Synod. Dr Braam Hanekom and Rev. Nelis van Rensburg at the table closed the debate with arguments why the Belhar Confession should be accepted. Rev. Nelis van Rensburg showed how the Belhar Confession fits all the general requirements of a confession.<sup>7</sup> This argument illustrated how the decision of the Cape Synod had an impact on the decision of the General Synod to accept the Belhar Confession (URCSA Pastoral letter of 14 October 2011).

The other wave of acceptance was seen as a miracle on 13 October 2011 when the DRC General Synod accepted the Belhar Confession with more than a two thirds

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3 [www.seattlecrc.org](http://www.seattlecrc.org), 2009.

4 [www.covenant.org](http://www.covenant.org), 2009.

5 [www.elizemorkel.co.za](http://www.elizemorkel.co.za), 2011

6 [www.durbanvillegemeente.co.za](http://www.durbanvillegemeente.co.za), 2011

7 [www.durbanvillegemeente.co.za](http://www.durbanvillegemeente.co.za), 2011

majority (90% votes) this was another step that led to the acceptance of the Belhar Confession by other regions, presbyteries and church councils. Kuyler (in URCSA Pastoral Letter 2011) states:

By this time all of you (URCSA members) have heard that the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church has accepted the Belhar Confession on 13 October 2011 with a majority of more than 90%. This event was attended by the Moderator Prof Thias Kgatla and the Scribe Dr Dawid Kuyler as fraternal delegates to the meeting. The Dutch Reformed Church took the first step in accepting Belhar by showing the way to regional synods, presbyteries and congregations. According to their Church Order, article 44, they will now start the process of taking Belhar back to the congregations and guiding them to come to the same position as what the General Synod took. Their leadership has committed themselves to assist and gave us (URCSA representatives) the assurance that they will ask URCSA to be part of this journey. (URCSA Pastoral letter of 14 October 2011)

The relevance of the Belhar Confession cuts across all churches today, for the reason that it addresses critical issues that are emphasised in the Word of God, which are unity among people of God; reconciliation in the church and society; injustices of all kinds; and God's bias on behalf of those who have been wronged. The Belhar Confession is the second point of departure after the Word of God for church unity in URCSA (Modise 2013).

## CHURCH UNITY IN RELATION TO THE COMMUNION OF TRIUNE GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS

One should distinguish between church unity and the unification of the church. Church unity is a gift and obligation, while the unification of the church, or rather of churches, is something the people of God should strive towards achieving. Furthermore, it is stated in the Belhar Confession<sup>8</sup> (1986) that:

Church unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16); that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted. (John 17:20-23)<sup>9</sup>

8 The Belhar Confession is the confession of faith of URCSA, which was born in 1982, as the result of the *status confessionis*, influenced by the situation in South Africa. It was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (Former Coloured denomination) in 1986, and was incorporated in the confessional basis of URCSA in 1994 during its establishment, after the process of unity between the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

9 [Images.rca.org](http://Images.rca.org)

Church unity is a given, as a fruit of the cross of Christ. A twofold unity has been effected: between God and human beings; and between Jews and Gentiles (these two groups representing believers from every nation). In a certain sense this unity is already unification, because God and humanity, and human beings among themselves and even humanity and nature, started out in close fellowship. Gaillardetz (2008, 85) postulates that this unity is based on the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity describes how God is one and illustrates to us that God's unity is a relational, differentiated and fecund unity (it is able to support the growth of other healthy forms of unity). By analogy it is the same with the church (body of Christ). If the oneness of the church emphasises the church's deep spiritual unity as one people of God and the body of Christ, the unity of the church highlights the relational, differentiated, and fecund character of the unity of the Church. The catholicity of the church reminds Christians that the unity of the church is, following the analogy of the triune life of God, a differentiated and relational unity (Gaillardetz 2008, 85). Hence, the Belhar Confession begins with the triune life of God, which is able to support the growth of healthy church unity.<sup>10</sup>

It is safe to say that most of the sixteenth century Reformers were no longer persuaded by the ability of any set of ecclesiastical structures, in and of themselves, to preserve church unity. The church must be sought not in any single institutional structure, but in the one faith in Christ offered in response to the Word of God (Gaillardetz 2008, 102). It is argued that the unity of the people of God cannot be cultivated otherwise than by promoting the return of the protesters to the one true Church of Christ, which in the past they so unfortunately abandoned. Return, we say, to the one true Church of Christ, which by the will of the founder forever remains what Christ himself destined the church to be for the common salvation of the human race (Neuner and Dupuis 1982, 376). The argument is that the church needs to be united around Christ, God's Word and the Holy Communion; as the church was divided around the table of Holy Communion. Listening to the Word of God together and sharing the bread and wine, makes the church a family of God.

In an African context the best way to express Church unity which is rooted in the Trinity, is to borrow the Swahili expression 'Ujamaa'. The reason to utilise this expression is because it has a rich and broad semantic field of meaning, suggesting the notion of extended family in the service of Julius Nyerere's programme of African socialism, which is similar to the first church ethos of sharing and having all in common. In this sense, African theologians appreciate the expression as denoting church unity (Gaillardetz 2008, 127). In the context of the unification process of the DRC family and URCSA, the meaning of this expression fits the context very well

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10 The Belhar Confession (1986) article 1 & 2: 'We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end. We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.'



in the sense that ‘family’ in the Western philosophy is a nuclear family (meaning homogeneous), but in this regard the family of a more extended and heterogeneous family, hence we speak of unity in diversity. This expression denotes the togetherness of the people of God, as called by God from all racial groups, reconciled by Christ.

Onwubiko (2001, 36) explains that the concept of ‘Ujamaa’ (properly understood as ‘togetherness’, ‘familyhood’) does not depend on consanguinity. It depicts a ‘community spirit’ of togetherness which regards all people as ‘brothers and sisters’. This community spirit in turn shapes distinctive African understandings of personhood. In most African societies there is a very limited sense of individual autonomy. Hence, URCSA as an African and Reformed church confesses this oneness or togetherness through its Belhar Confession and Church Order, as is stated in Article 4.3 of the Church Order, which reads as follows:

The believers accept mutual responsibility for one another in their spiritual and physical needs. The congregation lives as a family of God where they are inextricably bound to one another and where they mutually share joy and sorrow. Each considers the other higher than him/herself and no one only cares about his/her own needs, but also about the needs of others. In this way they share one another’s burdens and fulfil the law of Christ. (URCSA Church Order 2012)

One is human because of others, with others, and for others (*motho ke motho ka batho bang*): ‘I am because we are, and since we are, therefore we are, and since we are, therefore I am.’ ‘I belong, therefore I am.’ In an African context, the social aspect in this regard predominates the individualistic aspect. A human being exists as a person, naturally and necessarily enmeshed in a web of relationships. Human beings’ very existence, their human reality, is bound in those relationships. These relationships provide the most prolific, the most profound and the most intense source of motivation for living and for action (Gaillardetz 2008, 127).

In this sense, the expression *Ujamaa* is highly suggestive as a way of describing the church as the family of God. It is not surprising, then, that this metaphor is used in this article to denote the unity of the church in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as a Reformed and African church. The church family has its origin in the blessed Trinity in the depths of which the Holy Spirit is the bond of communion. Imagining the church as family offers a helpful path for relating the relationality of family life to the Trinitarian foundations of the church. Hence, the Belhar Confession opens with the unity of God, then moves to the unity of human beings (church and society) and ends with the unity of God, which is the circle that cannot be broken by any forces of evil (Gaillardetz 2008).

In an African perspective, the church is seen as a distinctive form of family, which clearly reflects the sense of reciprocal responsibilities and overarching interdependence that must exist among all church members. Given the traditional African emphasis on the extended family as a place of belonging and a context for a deeper experience of solidarity and care for others, the church as a family provides

an apt starting point for African ecclesial reflection (Gaillardetz 2008, 128). Hence, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as a Reformed and African church, issues the following Church Order (2012), article 4:

The congregation forms a community of believers in a particular place to serve God, one another and the world. The service of God has a bearing on the whole life of the congregation and therefore includes service to one another and the world. The essence of this service of God is found where the congregation meets round the Word of God and the sacraments. There God is worshipped and praised, his Word listened to, the sacraments received, and all needs brought before him in order to strengthen the believers in their faith and to prepare them for their service to one another and the world. The believers accept mutual responsibility for one another in their spiritual and physical needs. The congregation lives as a family of God where they are inextricably bound to one another and where they mutually share joy and sorrow. Each considers the other higher than him/herself and no one only cares about his/her own needs, but also about the needs of others. In this way they share one another's burdens and fulfil the law of Christ. The congregation's service to humankind and the world consists in proclaiming God's reconciling and liberating acts in and for the world, living out Christ's love, calling humankind to reconciliation with God and reconciliation and peace amongst one another. The congregation serves God, who in a particular 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. The congregation serves God by witnessing against all rulers and those who are privileged who out of selfishness seek their own interest and who have power over others and who do them wrong. (URCSA Church Order 2012)

This family concept of the church in southern Africa is not actualised beyond congregational borders, and it has not been a reality in South African Christians' experience in the Church of Christ, or in the so-called DRC family. The service of God, service to one another and service to the world have not been a reality because of enmity and hatred between whites and blacks, divisions within the church along racial lines, and in terms of class and gender, which are sins that Christ overcame on the cross.

This unity (family) was destroyed by sin and had to be restored by the reconciliatory work of Christ on the cross; in this sense unity is given through faith in Christ. This church unity is like a reconciliatory (saving) act of God. In fact, as part of a reconciliatory act of God, this church unity is achieved on the cross and is afterwards to be applied by the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people of God. This is the process of unification. The echoes of the Belhar Confession are that reconciliation is possible in Christ and that cultural, social and racial differences are gifts for the building up of the church and society, which should be heard loudly and clearly across South Africa and the whole of Africa.<sup>11</sup>

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11 [www.rca.org](http://www.rca.org) 2009.

Comprehensive reconciliation is only possible through Christ, his sacrifice on the cross and his Holy Spirit. This is so, because our sin, our wrong acts and practices are part of our history in our practical situation. These historical sins have been deposited in our personal lives and in our relationships, as well as in our patterns of behaviour and in the consequent structures which we have created. These sins have been cemented into the basic fabric of our lives and our relationships. What is even more alarming, is the fact that we as Christians remain sinners until the end of our lives, albeit saved sinners. This means that the possibility of sin (of falling short, of rebellion against God's ways, and of lovelessness) is a permanent situation in which we not only personally find ourselves, but in which we live in relationships and structures. Consequently we must guard and pray continuously against all possible aberrations from the Gospel in society and in Reformed practice. In view of the above, the statement now becomes relevant that reconciliation is only possible through the cross of Christ. Our sins and failures and their reflections in our personal relationships and structural lives cannot be rectified merely by change, by better behaviour or by new approaches. Our sin has to be wiped out, removed, destroyed and forgotten. König (1994:109) mentions that a good relationship with God and humankind is the sign of humanity existing in meaningful relationships; sin is the exact opposite, it is to live either in wrong or broken relationships or by overemphasising something in human life. In less meaningful relationships human beings might still be bound to one another because of shared jealousy or enmity against each other, but these feelings can never promote fulfilment and a meaningful life. Human beings might experience the breaking down of their relationships and live in isolation. Sin in this sense is essential lovelessness and a denial of the injunction to love oneself.

Furthermore, Koopman (2009:96-97) postulates that in the three articles of the Belhar Confession, those who make this a confession of faith, admit that separating, dividing and alienating the differences of South Africans in churches and society was not the plan of God, but rather the South African solution, for the reason that God is the God who unites different people from different contexts. In a context where the false gospel that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was not strong enough to reconcile people was proclaimed, the faith of the Belhar Confession objected: God is the God who reconciles humanity with Godself, humans with each other and with the rest of creation, and in the context of justice that wanted people to doubt whether they are fully human and whether they are fully children of God, the Belhar Confession states that God is the God of justice who identifies in a special way with the disadvantaged (Koopman, 2009).

## THE UNIFICATION PROCESS WITHIN THE DRC FAMILY AND URCSA

The process of unification needs to start somewhere when a split in the church has occurred. There is no church unification process without the first stage, which is a split or division. Therefore, it is very important to briefly sketch the background of the split that occurred in the church in general and specifically the DRC family. A further church unification process is of paramount importance, since the Belhar Confession emphasises that church unity is a gift and it is also an obligation that the people of God need to pursue. Hence, the point of departure for this discussion on the unification process within the DRC family lies in tracing the footprint of the split in the church in general and the DRC in particular.

It is a given that throughout the history of the world, church divisions did in fact take place; and the longer the history continued the worse things became. For a number of reasons Protestantism became the prime example of a faith that gave rise to the forming of separate churches. Reformed theology and Western theology have developed in such a way that ecclesiology is commonly stated as the ideal mode. It airily evokes what the church is in the purpose of God, but disdains the messy human reality. So often ecclesiology offers 'God's eye view' but turns a blind eye to the human aspect (Avis 2006, 204). Hence the Reformation has never developed an ecclesiology which is compatible with its soteriology, because soteriology is found in the cross through the reconciling act of Christ where people from the messy human reality are reconciled with God and with their fellow human beings to make this gift (unity) a reality for the world. Once the human reality is not taken into consideration, then ecclesiology stands alone without soteriology and divisions are the results of such an act.

The diversity of Christian communities as reflected in the Scriptures was to increase over the centuries. The history of many of these divisions has been written by the victors, and so we as researchers and Christians tend to look back on early Christianity from the perspective of an orthodoxy challenged by different heretical and schismatic movements. The irony is that such an approach fails to take account of the ways in which many of these movements, that were later viewed as heretical or schismatic, assumed that they were in fact authentically Christian (Ehrman 2003).

Gaillardetz (2008, 90) argued that, as Christianity took root in the Mediterranean, it was inevitable that it would be influenced by larger cultural contexts. Before the distinctions in Christian traditions of the fifth century, a more sweeping division in Christianity began to develop in the third and fourth centuries; which corresponded to the two dominant cultures of the time. The eventual schism between the Christian churches associated with these two cultures is often dated to 1054, but they began drifting apart much earlier. This progressive drift was the result of a volatile confluence of political, social, economic and theological factors. As early as the

third century, one can detect subtle but growing theological differences between the Eastern and Western traditions. The Western theological trajectory was more practical, the Eastern more speculative. The longer the history continued, the worse the split or divisions became. For the purpose of this discussion, one needs to look into the South African historical context of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

The DRC is a well-known example of church division along racial lines. It is very important to map a historical overview of how this division started in the previously united DRC. Historically, the Dutch people established a settlement in the Cape in the year in 1652 and introduced Reformed theology on South African soil. All these years till 1857 people of mixed descent (including African people) were accepted as fully fledged members of the DRC in South Africa. On 29 April 1829 the DRC Synod handled an enquiry by the congregation of Somerset-West regarding separate facilities and services for congregants of mixed descent. At the infamous 1857 DRC Synod in South Africa, approval was given for separate services for 'coloured' members of the church (Modise 2013).

Various foreign mission organisations started working in South Africa, which led to the formation of a number of denominations among the indigenous people of South Africa, who would otherwise have been excluded from the main churches. This process motivated the DRC in South Africa to start its own independent mission work. In 1857 the DRC Synod decided to have separate services for its coloured members. The origin of URCSA lies in the DRC mission work via the establishment of DRMC and DRCA, which united on 14 April 1994 to form URCSA. There were, and are, both black and white churches in the Dutch Reformed alliance, as described below:

- The DRC, with two and a half million white members, was the largest of the three churches. This was, in fact, the oldest autonomous denomination in South Africa, having become independent of its mother church in the Netherlands in 1824. It commenced mission work among the indigenous peoples of South Africa in 1826 and among the black people of South Africa, as a result of which the three black churches of this bloc were created.
- A separate church, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) was formed in 1881. This comprised people of mixed race, known both officially and popularly as coloureds, and had a membership of 573 400 in 1970.
- The DRCA for African people was founded in 1963 as an offshoot of the DRMC with a membership of 924 000. In 1994 it was recorded that these two churches attempted to reunite as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).
- The Reformed Church in Africa for Indian people was founded in 1968. Its membership totalled only a few thousand (Best 2002, xxii-xxiii).

From 1957 onwards, these churches were linked in a Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches, the member churches of which met for consultation every four years. In 1982 this body was transformed into a General Synod, which had a certain amount of jurisdiction and which, from then on, met every two years. As will be seen, its member churches were separated along ethnic lines. This, of course, was very much in keeping with the doctrine of apartheid, although these ethnic divisions were also consistent with the strand of thinking in the international missionary movement, which favoured the creation of three independent churches. Still, although they were born of apartheid thinking, in time the black Dutch Reformed churches were to reject apartheid decisively. This was expressed in the 1994 formation of URCSA which brought the DRMC and DRCA together in a single united body. However, before this these churches had made their rejection of apartheid clear by moving into membership with the South African Council of Churches (SACC). They were to play a crucial role in forcing the abandonment of apartheid in both church and state in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Best 2002, xxii-xxiii).

URCSA consists of approximately 1 230 000 members, of whom about 500 000 are confessing members (excluding all those who are only baptised) and 683 congregations. Its name (which is in the continuous tense ‘uniting’) and its logo (which is an incomplete circle) reflect the church’s emphasis on unity, and its hope for even greater church unification within the family of God.<sup>12</sup>

URCSA consists of hundreds of congregations. These congregations belong to the regional presbytery and a particular number of presbyteries form a synod. The following is the composition of URCSA in a table form:

**Table 1: Composition of URCSA**

Regional synods	Presbyteries	Congregations	Ministers
Cape Synod	29	320	195
Northern Synod	19	133	84
Southern Synod	14	123	87
Free State	11	93	21
Phororo	4	40	18
KwaZulu-Natal	6	38	18
Namibia	6	29	22
Total	89	776	445

URCSA consists of seven regional synods, namely Namibia, Northern Transvaal, Southern Transvaal, Phororo (Northern Cape), Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and

<sup>12</sup> En.wikipedia.org/urcsa

Lesotho. Each region has its own moderamen, and every congregation is represented at these synods. Congregations are grouped together in presbyteries. At the general synod level congregations are only represented through their presbyteries. The General Synod determines the Church's policy, and the regional synods see to it that these policies are reflected in their various activities.<sup>13</sup>

If unity is indeed a fruit of the reconciliatory work of Christ on the cross, reuniting the DRC family and URCSA is of paramount importance, because it is a biblical and a confessional imperative. The process of unifying these churches is as important as calling people to faith in Christ, or as important as the Eucharist and the Word of God. When the people of God are gathered at the table of the Lord to partake of the Lord's Supper, they believe that this action does not only draw them into saving communion with God in Christ, but also constitutes them as Christ's body, the church. The metaphor of 'the body of Christ' has a standing history, with a rich scope of meaning.

The body of Christ could refer to:

- The Word made flesh.
- The Eucharistic body.
- The body of Christ, the church.

De Lubac (1949) argues that, although it is true that the church constituted the Eucharist, it was equally true that the Eucharist established the church. The fluid meaning of the metaphor 'the body of Christ' helped to preserve the importance of connections between sacramental theology and ecclesiology. Consider the following passage from a famous sermon by St. Augustine:

Since you are the body of Christ and his members, it is your mystery that is placed on the Lord's Table, it is your mystery that you receive...be what you see, and receive what you are. (Sermon 272)

For what is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The body of Christ is not many bodies but one body. Or as bread is completely one, although made of up many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, nonetheless remain present in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ. (Gaillardetz 2008, 87)

In fact, the unity of the church is indeed directly related to the world's coming to faith in Christ. (John 17:20ff)

At this stage it has become clear that the unification of the church is by no means an easy task. This is not only true of the process taking place in the DRC family and

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13 Minutes of the General Synodical Commission October 2015.

URCSA. There are a number of reasons, such as vested interests and ideologically supported suspicions, that complicate this process. A number of non-theological obstacles have already been dealt with in the journey to reunification.

Theologically, it should be kept in mind that the division of the church in general and in particular within the DRC family and URCSA, is a form of a sin and the reunification of the church is part of a reconciliation/redemption process, which means a fight against sin; and part of the process of overcoming the effects of sin. One should take into account the power of sin and the fact that sin creates structures of its own that resist dismantling. One should further remember that the divisions in the DRC family are part of the inclusive blueprint of apartheid that created extraordinarily strong structures that the people of God will wrestle with for decades to come; even in the democratic South Africa where apartheid has theoretically been dismantled, but internally still exists as internalised oppression and internalised domination. Only then can one understand the resistance against the process of reunification a little better. In one way or other communities grow, develop and pass through certain stages. Ultimately the entire society also grows and develops towards a particular point of transition (Bandura 1997, 23). The view that black people are inherently inferior to white people has been referred to as 'old-fashioned' racism. Old-fashioned racism was both blatant and explicit. Until 1994, apartheid was legalised in South Africa and this legalised system provided an extreme example of structural racism. This brand of racism involved behaviours, practices and attitudes that overtly defined black people as inferior to white people and less powerful. These behaviours, practices and attitudes have caused a serious division in society and have left the entire South African society in a state of disintegration.

This 'new' show of resistance is a modern form of racism (Batts 1989, 18). Distinguishing between old-fashioned racism and modern racism is helpful, since it is useful to recognise and acknowledge the way in which racism has changed. This form of racism has created a sophisticated division among the people of God. Modern racism involves the giving of non-race-related reasons for behaviours that continue to exclude and discriminate against other people. It is very important to think of modern racism as internalised dominance, attitudes that are so deeply entrenched that they exist at a subconscious level. While modern racism is often not intentionally malicious, it is still based on the assumption that black people are inferior to white people. As a result, this more subtle form of racism continues to deny access to black people. The negative feelings that are attached to this belief do not change or disappear just because of changes in laws and practices. Instead, the feelings have to be submerged and hidden because of the changes in what is viewed as legal and politically correct in our society.

The reference in the negotiations to culture and language (like Afrikaans) is an example of non-theological obstacles and is quite comprehensible. The DRC was seen for so many years as the last bulwark for Afrikaners, that it comes as no



surprise that cultural arguments against unification should be brought into play. It is very interesting that the ball game has now changed from a non-theological basis to become more theological in nature, namely the acceptance and the optionality of the Belhar Confession as obstacles to the unification process of the DRC family and URCSA. Prof. Piet Strauss, the then Moderator of the General Synod of the DRC, stated the following in his greeting to the General Synod of URCSA at Hammanskraal in 2008:

It has, however, been said that we [DRC] are excluding the Confession of Belhar from the confessions of the new denomination planned and that we departed from the decision taken in this regard at Hartenbos in 2004. What we said is that there is strong resistance in the DRC against Belhar as a confession, but that we propose that there should be room for those in favour of and against Belhar. In essence this is still Hartenbos 2004. I also noted in the letter of the synodical Commission of your [URCSA] Cape Synod to our [DRC] Synod in the Western Cape that this “DRC-view” as endorsed by our [DRC] Western Cape Moderature was not acceptable to URCSA. In the same letter we are accused of “shifting the goalposts” around Belhar Confession. (Act of 2008, 137)

The Belhar Confession has always been a stumbling block in the unification process, with the DRC hitherto being unwilling to adopt this document as a confession. URCSA, for its part, has said that they are not willing to negotiate the exclusion of the Belhar Confession from a new, united church. The compromise the DRC is opting for is willingness to negotiate ways in which the Belhar Confession could form part of the confessional basis of a new, united church, on the condition that it must not be compulsory for all members of the new church to subscribe to the confession (*Ligdraer* 08.11.1998).

## THE BELHAR CONFESSION IN RELATION TO CHURCH UNITY

The Belhar Confession seems to have become one of the main stumbling blocks in the unification process, notwithstanding the fact that the General Synod of the DRC of 1990 found the Belhar Confession not to be inherently in conflict with its present articles of faith. In fact, there are remarkable agreements between the Belhar Confession and the two versions of Church and Society of the DRC (*Die Kerkbode* 27.01.95). These agreements do not concern side issues, but central ones related to the rejection of apartheid, and they represent a clear development in the thinking of the DRC. The above point is confirmed by the Rustenburg Declaration of November 1990 (Supplement to the *Ligstraal*, October, 1991, point 2.2), which reads as follows:

As representatives of the Christian Church in South Africa, we recognise that the South African situation owes much to the content of Western colonialism, to the stifling of conscience by inherited social attitudes which blind communities to the wrong they reflect and to a weakness common to the world-wide church in dealing with social evil. Now,

however, we confess our sin and acknowledge our heretical part in the policy of apartheid which has led to such extreme suffering for so many in our land. We denounce apartheid, in its intention, its implementation and its consequences, as an evil policy. The practice and defence of apartheid as though it were biblically and theologically legitimated is an act of disobedience to God, a denial of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a sin against our unity in the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

*Church and Society* is a witness document which was accepted as a policy guideline for the DRC at the General Synod; it was also accepted in October 1986, and incidentally in Cape Town as well. Naude (2012, 148) argues that on the surface there is a strong convergence in the content of the Belhar Confession (1986) and the DRC witness document *Church and Society* (1986). It is very important to note that DRC Synod members view the Belhar Confession as being on the same level as the two versions of *Church and Society*, but *Church and Society* was never declared as a confession. Furthermore, there was no *status confessionis* that led to the drafting of a confession called ‘Church and Society’; therefore the argument does not hold up. In that sense, the way these two churches view *Church and Society* and the Belhar Confession became a stumbling block in the way of unification in the 1990s and early 2000s.

## THE PROCESS OF ACCEPTING THE BELHAR CONFESSION BY DRC

A wave of acceptance of the Belhar Confession is evident in the Dutch Reformed Church. The DRC regional synod of the Southern and Western Cape accepted the Belhar Confession as a confession of faith that is based on Scripture and Reformed traditions in May 2011. This synod confirms that the Belhar Confession expresses the biblical claim for justice, reconciliation and unity in a different way than other confessions. In that sense the Southern and Western Cape Synod adopted the Belhar Confession as their confession, with the view to submit the proposal to the General Synod of the DRC in 2011.<sup>15</sup> The proposal was tabled and the DRC General Synod opened the door for the acceptance of the Belhar Confession according to Article 44 of the DRC Church Order.

There was a great hope from URCSA after the 2011 General Synod of the DRC when the said Synod started the process to accept the Belhar Confession at the General Synod, with an all-out effort to drive the process through to local congregations, presbyteries and regional synods. This process was seen as a great breakthrough in the DRC, but at the same time there was a stumbling block in the process of accepting the Belhar Confession. This obstacle is contained in the DRC’s

14 Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, Supplement to the *Ligstraal*, October, 1991. Peace and Unity in God’s Eyes. Bloemfontein: Sending Press.

15 [www.elizemorkel.co.za](http://www.elizemorkel.co.za)

Church Order, Article 44 for the change of Article 1. Article 44 states that all regional synods should obtain a two-third majority for the Church Order Article to be changed. In this process of accepting the Belhar Confession, six out of 10 regional synods convened and three of them (Free State; Namibia and Northern Cape) said ‘No’ to inclusion of the Belhar Confession to their Church Order Article 1. Highfield did not reach a two-thirds majority and only two said ‘Yes’ to the inclusion of the Belhar Confession into their Church Order. Taking these statistics and article 44.1<sup>16</sup> of the DRC into consideration, it is clear that the Belhar Confession cannot be included into the confessional basis of the DRC in Article 1. The Church Order of the DRC is written in such a way that church unity in relation to the Belhar Confession should be very difficult; one needs to look how the DRC plays with words within Article 44<sup>17</sup> in terms of the amendments of Article 44.1 and 44.2. All other articles can be amended by a two-thirds majority of the General Synod; while 44.1 and 44.2 may be amended only after all regional synods have approved it with a two-thirds majority, and then the General Synod with a two thirds majority. This church thus uses the Church Order as gatekeeper for the Belhar Confession not to enter its Church Order. We have learned from the apartheid era that if one needs to keep people separate, one needs to have many acts and regulations; this is the same situation in the DRC at this point in time. The Belhar Confession is part of the package of the church unification together with church unity and restorative justice. If one may use the metaphor of the three legged pot for the united church, without the Belhar Confession this church will not stand. These three points are the points of reference in the memorandum of Agreement between URCSA and DRC.

It is significant that church divisions, poverty, classism, oppression, social injustice and hatred were seen as issues exclusively pertaining to the DRMC. The acceptance of the Belhar Confession by other Reformed churches in the world proved that the DRC was not serious and genuine about its claims that the Belhar Confession dealt exclusively with DRMC issues. The Belhar Confession’s relevance is not confined to southern Africa or its religious context. It addresses three key issues of concern to all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people; reconciliation within the church and society; and God’s justice. The Belhar Confession as a Reformed confession has been carried by URCSA on behalf of all Reformed churches.

The URCSA General Synod of 2005 confirms that the Belhar Confession, although written and accepted by the church at a specific time and place, is a living

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16 44.1 Amendment of the Confession is possible only after it has been approved by a two-thirds majority of each synod and two-thirds of all the church councils, each supporting it with a two-thirds majority.

17 44.2 Article 44.1 and 44.2 of the Church Order are amended after each synod has approved it with a two-thirds majority and the General Synod thereafter approves it with a two-thirds majority.  
44.3 The General Synod may, with the exception of Article 44.1 and 44.2, amend or augment the Church Order with a two-thirds majority.

confession inspiring the church worldwide, and is not aimed against certain groups and not confined by political or geographical boundaries. The act of acceptance of the Belhar Confession nullifies the false claims of the DRC that this confession is exclusively a DRMC confession that addresses the DRMC issues.

Furthermore, the Belhar Confession has become such a symbol of the faith and perseverance of suppressed and oppressed people in a situation of a ‘total onslaught’ on their human dignity, heritage and history, to mention only what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed so clearly about the gross injustices of this system supported by the DRC, that a ‘No’ by the DRC to the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession can only strengthen the existing impression that both structurally and at grassroots level the DRC has shown very few signs of remorse for its support of apartheid. The failure of the DRC to accept the Belhar Confession as the fourth confession will be interpreted as a sign of the utmost insensitivity.

This is all the more so as the confession of the DRC that apartheid is a sin, and its confession of the role played by the DRC in establishing and upholding apartheid, have not achieved any sort of credibility with those who were on the receiving side. The few very carefully formulated sentences penned during a few synodical meetings were not very credible, and this impression of a very faint and softly spoken confession is strengthened by the fact that virtually no public and symbolic acts followed – acts like confessing at the synodical meetings of the other family members or asking them to cooperate in a few big worship services where public confession could be made to those who suffered – or even organising services of confession at the local level. The DRC appears to think it may just possibly, here and there, incidentally and unintentionally, have hurt a few people, so that a few rather unemotional words can easily rectify the situation.

## THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA ON THE BELHAR CONFSSION

However, there is another way of looking at it. If church unity is a given, a fruit of the redemption wrought on the cross, is it not true that the people of God should accept one another unconditionally? Is this not what God does, not justifying the righteous, but the godless? Is agreement on the articles of faith or cross of Christ the basis for unity? Should churches (re-)unite because they agree with each other or should they (re-)unite because they are one in Christ, and afterwards grow closer to each other in their faith while they live in mutual fellowship? What is the best situation for agreement: living at a distance and bargaining in a negotiation process, or living in fellowship in which we share something of our life experience? Is not one of the grave problems of the DRC from grassroots up to the level of the local church council and minister that these whites have had virtually no exposure to the atrocities of the apartheid era – in state, society and church – and that the only hope

of their ever having such exposure may be in living in the same local church as those Christians who have experienced apartheid directly? Does not the name Uniting Reformed Church invite this church to go into a unification process with the DRC *without* the condition of prior acceptance of the Belhar Confession?

The position of URCSA is very clear in terms of the Belhar Confession in the new unified church, that the Belhar Confession is a requisite confession in the new united church, because the Belhar Confession is the substance that needs to lead the DRC family and URCSA towards unity, reconciliation and restorative justice.

## CONCLUSION ON THE BELHAR CONFESSION

This article is concluded with the statement of the General Synod executive in 2005, when it showed its commitment to the Belhar Confession. This statement is supported by the words of the Executive Committee of the General Synod in 2005 in its report:

We are called to strengthen our confessional commitment NOT dilute it. Compromising on the Confession of Belhar for the sake of the continuing weakness of some in the DRC, is betrayal not of only of the URCSA, itself, but of the ecumenical Reformed family who have turned to the Confession of Belhar for continued inspiration. These are reasons why Belhar is precious to the URCSA. It is for these reasons we regard it as 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. It is for these reasons that we so passionately protect it from wilful misinterpretation, deliberate mudslinging, and mischievous political manipulation.

The author has attempted to show in this article how the church unity process has development between the DRC family and URCSA. On this fervent concluding note, acceptance of the Belhar Confession by the ecumenical partners of URCSA serves as a sign of hope for URCSA that one day the Belhar Confession will be accepted by the DRC family and that church unity will be realised.

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