

# A Historical Survey of the Acceptance and Impact of the Belhar Confession since 1986

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## Abstract

The Belhar Confession was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1982, and in 1994 it became the theological foundation for the newly emerging Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). Focusing on the themes of unity, reconciliation and restorative justice, it challenged apartheid in South Africa. Since then, it has become a “gift” to the world-wide church to challenge all forms of discrimination and oppression in the world. The Belhar Confession has been adopted by ecumenical bodies and other denominations both nationally and internationally. This article attempts to assess the acceptance and impact of the Belhar Confession in South Africa and globally. The methodology employed is that of a historical survey examining the responses of churches to the Belhar Confession and conducting interviews to assess the impact of the Confession in transforming lives and communities today.

**Keywords:** Belhar Confession; Dutch Reformed Mission Church; Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa

## Introduction

Much has been written about the Belhar Confession<sup>1</sup> (BC) since its drafting in 1982 and its subsequent adoption in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) (see, for example, Boesak 1984; Cloete and Smit 1984; Naude 2004; Plaatjies-van Huffel and Leepo 2017; Schrottenboer 1991). Now, some 35 years later, it is important to assess its impact on church and society.<sup>2</sup> This article aims to do just that as it looks at the reception

1 For the full text of the Belhar Confession (BC) see, “The Confession of Belhar,” *World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Semper Reformanda*: <http://wrcr.ch/belhar-confession/>.

2 For a review of the first 25 years of the Belhar Confession, see Boesak (2008, 143–172).

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>

Volume 48 | Number 2 | 2022 | #10994 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/10994>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

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of the BC within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), other churches and ecumenical bodies.

This research objective is not new, but what sets it out as different is the methodology employed. The researcher aimed to establish exactly what is thought and said about the BC today, in the year of its 35th anniversary since its adoption. While existing literature on the subject is used at times, the research that directed this article assumed that a qualitative approach by means of a questionnaire<sup>3</sup> and personal interviews would be most appropriate to assess current views about the reception and acceptance of the BC. Using this methodology, more than 20 key church leaders and congregants were interviewed both from URCSA and other churches. The research arrived at the conclusion that though the BC is not consciously promoted in most congregations and denominations, yet it is still very significant today, not only in South Africa but worldwide. The late Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel made a similar point in stating that “history shows that the Belhar Confession is growing into a wider tradition. It is a confession for the whole church seeking to be faithful to God, who stands in the midst of suffering of any and all expression” (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013).

## A brief History of the Belhar Confession

Since much has already been written about the history of the BC, it is not my intention to elaborate on the details surrounding its inception. However, it is necessary for the aim of this research to first offer some historical insight into the founding context and adoption of the BC.

The Belhar Confession emerged out of a very specific historical context.<sup>4</sup> It was during the time of apartheid in South Africa, which separated people by race and colour. There were many government policies in place, such as the Group Areas Act (1950), that grouped people into geographical locations and boundaries according to race. There were many such policies which ensured that Blacks and Whites were not allowed to marry or have personal and sexual relationships across racial lines or gather in public social spaces. In short, the apartheid policy secured White privileges on all levels:

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3 Some of the questions posed to the interviewees were as follows:

- Given the 35 years history of the BC since its adoption by the DRMC, would you say that the Confession is well received and accepted in the DRMC? Explain.
- Are DRMC congregations using/implementing the BC? If yes, in what ways?
- What are your views about the DRC family and their views about the BC?
- How have they received and accepted the BC?
- What do you think about the ecumenical organisation’s reception and responses to the BC?
- How will you assess the significance of the BC today?

4 Dirk Smit explains the nature of Reformed confessions, stating that they fulfil a plurality of purposes—for example: a) they provide the church with a language to proclaim God’s praise, both in liturgy and in ordinary life; b) they become hermeneutical lenses by which to read the Scriptures; c) they express identity and thereby contribute to a sense of belonging; d) they help to instruct and form new believers; e) they help the church to distinguish truth from falsehood; and f) they serve as forms of public witness to Jesus Christ the Lord as the Gospel (Smit 2009, 302).

economic, social, political and even religious. It led to the deprivation and dehumanisation of Black people. In the 1980s, a very volatile situation prevailed in South Africa, with active Black resistance against apartheid. It was in such a context that the BC emerged; therefore, the BC has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014, 303). Boesak makes the point that the BC is not about apartheid but about the struggle against apartheid (Boesak 1984). Perhaps this is the reason why apartheid is not even mentioned in the Confession. Yet, as John de Gruchy states, the BC was a significant contribution made by the DRMC in the struggle against apartheid: “With the Belhar Confession, we have come a long way from Cottesloe, yet the principles articulated in the Cottesloe Statement, as well as in the Message to the People of South Africa, were now finally and logically developed in a confession of faith by a church which, after years on the periphery, had come to the forefront in the struggle against apartheid” (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2004, 194).

At the 1982 Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) much debate was given to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declaration of a *status confessionis*<sup>5</sup> regarding apartheid in South Africa. Given the stance of the WARC against apartheid, together with the prevailing anti-apartheid activism in the country, it was the right moment for the DRMC to speak into the context. Prof. Gustav Bam advised the synod that the acceptance of the *status confessionis* necessarily should lead to the formulation of a confession. Consequently, the synod appointed a committee consisting of Rev. Isak Mentor, moderator of the DRMC, Rev. Dr Allan Boesak, vice-moderator of the DRMC, and three lecturers from the University of the Western Cape 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 (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2014, 312). The commission entrusted Smit to draft a document because of his involvement with other businesses on the synod. Although the authors of the BC do not wish to claim any personal honour for the drafting of the confession, it is known that Smit played a key role in putting it together. The BC was finally adopted by the synod of the DRMC on 12 June 1986.

## DRMC Reception of Belhar

It is a known fact that the BC has always had mixed responses in its acceptance within the DRMC. Nico Botha asserts that “it would be a gross misrepresentation to state that the whole of the DRMC courageously participated in the struggle for justice. It would be a blatant exaggeration of the ‘revolution’ against apartheid: some made a clear

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5 Allan Boesak played a huge role in getting WARC to adopt the *status confessionis*. He pointed out that WARC had a responsibility towards its member churches in South Africa who suffered under the apartheid theology and policy (Boesak 1984). Consequently, WARC declared with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid 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 1990).

commitment and others were supporting apartheid openly. Be it as it may, the DRMC was a site of struggle” (Botha 2013, 76).

Nico Botha notes that a number of church councillors and ministers had their names recorded in opposition to the BC (Botha 2013, 78). At the 1986 Synod, 400 members voted for the BC and 71 against it, although some of the latter are said to have reconsidered their decision and signed the Confession before the evening session. Incidentally, one of the co-drafters of the BC, Rev. Isak Mentor, was among those who voted against the adoption of the Confession on the grounds that it should be referred to all other Dutch Reformed churches in order to reach consensus—this was rejected by the majority present at the synod. So, after an intensive process of four years (from 1982 when the BC was first drafted) within the congregations, presbyteries and synods of the DRMC, the BC was eventually adopted by the DRMC in 1986 (Cloete and Smit 1984). Boesak points out:

Theologically and otherwise, it was a crowning moment in the development of what Black theologian Gayraud Wilmore (2006) called “the radicalisation of Black Christianity” in South Africa. For a Black “daughter church” of the White DRC with its overwhelming theological, political, psychological, and economic domination for over a century, that was a truly remarkable achievement. So, in a sense, Belhar became a symbol of struggle against that domination, the expression of victory over that domination, and a declaration of freedom theologically, ecclesially, psychologically, and politically. (Boesak interview 22 October 2021)

## Reception of the BC in URCSA

In 1994, the DRMC joined with the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (the Black Reformed Church) with the BC as their founding confession. These two churches formed the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This new denomination invited the DRC to unite with them, but that offer was rejected (Botha 2013, 79). Since the primary focus of this research was to look at the reception and acceptance of the BC within URCSA today, I shall turn my attention to responses from some of the participants.

In responding to the question of how the BC has been received and accepted within URCSA 35 years since its adoption, Boesak<sup>6</sup> said:

The Belhar Confession was always a contentious presence in the DRMC, and perhaps even more so after unification with the NGKA, when the church became the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa in 1994. It was a *contentious presence* because it was such a *defining presence* for the church. More than the traditional standards of confessions we inherited from Europe, Belhar was a continuous *testing presence* for the church. From the start, the question was: “Are we ready to embrace not only the

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6 For more on Boesak’s role in the BC, see Fortein (in Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Vosloo 2013, 303–315).

confession in its words, but in its challenge to the church and South African society, and the consequences of the confession for the church?” The four pillars of Belhar, namely justice, unity, reconciliation, and the Lordship of Christ are not only theological affirmations; they have immense ecclesial, social, societal, and political significance. They are constantly in tension with our political and societal realities the church is called to give witness to in word and deed. That was true in the 1980s, and it is true now. The context of these challenges to the faithfulness of the church might have changed, but the fundamental challenges are the same, because the Word, in which Belhar rooted itself, remains unchanged. (Boesak interview 22 October 2021)

Boesak, in the above comment, acknowledges the contentious aspects of the acceptance of the BC within URCSA, but he is quick to establish the relevance of the confession. Jacques Beukes, a minister in URCSA, admits that there is general concern within URCSA that not enough is being done to implement the BC. He illustrates his point in the following:

My experience by serving on the curatorium of the Cape Synod for eight years was that even URCSA’s theological students, during their first meeting and interviews with the assessment commission, would mostly struggle to explain or describe what the BC is about. One of the questions we always asked the new theological candidates was whether they knew the Confession of Belhar and what they thought of it. Some theological students answered that they had never heard of Belhar, while others did not even try to answer as they did not know the Confession of Belhar. Most of the students were also confused with the Apostolic Creed, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dordt and Heidelberg’s Catechism. Only occasionally was there a theological student who was able to discuss it a little bit. This indicates that even those who felt called to become ministers within URCSA did not know the Confession of Belhar until their theological training. This ignorance is in sharp contrast with the official view of URCSA leadership and the URCSA General Synod. (Beukes interview 20 October 2021)

Kritzinger (Interview 21 October 2021) affirms this view by stating: “The reception and acceptance of BC are patchy in URCSA. It is more deeply entrenched in the former DRMC congregations. Sadly, the DRCA ministers were not required to sign BC when the two churches merged, so many former DRCA ministers are lukewarm about it. Some regard it as a ‘Coloured’ document. Many former DRCA members have either not heard of it or are uninformed (and indifferent).”

Although most of the respondents to the questions express concern about the implementation of the BC within URCSA, they nevertheless are mindful of its impact, especially among the leadership of the church and in some congregations of URCSA. Beukes acknowledges this:

However, I came to realise while I was serving the church on regional synodical task teams, that there are certain task teams who really make it their job to make the Confession practical by including certain excerpts in the litany, liturgy and even catechesis material. I am even aware of the development of short and appropriate group

study (Bible study) material and study guides that can help members to live and to love the Confession of Belhar. However, this is not always used by ministers or congregations. Or it is just that ministers, congregations and presbyteries are not always aware of these practical aids. I do acknowledge, though, that there are some ministers and congregations (although the outright minority) who really make an effort to include the BC in the service and the other tasks or ministries of the church. (Beukes interview 20 October 2021)

The responses from this survey primarily inform the sections that follow. This research attempted to do more than merely assess the impact of the BC in URCSA on a denominational level. The intent was to see how the BC is lived out in the congregations of the church. Did it really water down to the lived experiences of ordinary congregants? Are they aware of the BC, since many confessions of the church are not normally known by church members?

In assessing the impact of the BC on congregations within URCSA, I shall now refer to research conducted by one of my students. In 2019, I encouraged one of my students to engage in a master's research into assessing the impact of the BC in the congregations of URCSA. I shall briefly outline this work and its findings.

Ntai (2018) conducted research in three congregations within URCSA to assess the acceptance and reception of the BC. The three congregations are Riverlea,<sup>7</sup> Melodi ya Tshwane<sup>8</sup> and Polokwane City.<sup>9</sup> He established that in the Riverlea congregation, though the BC was not formally promoted as a confession, yet it was lived out in the

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7 Riverlea is a township in Johannesburg that came into existence as a result of the notorious Group Areas Act of 1950, a law under the apartheid system, which legislated the violent tearing apart of vibrant, intercultural and racially rich communities like Albertsville, Vrededorp and Sophiatown in the then Transvaal, to be trashed close to the mine dunes in absolute squalor.

8 In his article titled "Concrete Spirituality," Kritzing (2014, 1) also gave a brief account of the history of Melodi ya Tswane URCSA:

"The congregation was established in 1992 under the inspirational leadership of Dr Nico Smith as a 'nonracial Reformed congregation' in the centre of Pretoria. Its present membership is largely Black and amongst its members are people who speak all eleven South Africa's official languages. It has joint ownership (with the Dutch Reformed Church [DRC] congregation 'Pretoria') of the historic Grootkerk building in Bosman Street in the inner city. The membership of the congregation was initially limited to domestic workers and a few families but has now diversified into a congregation of suburban families (including professionals, civil servants and business people), students and domestic workers, with a fulltime minister paid by the congregation and two tent-making ministers."

9 Polokwane city is new congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. Polokwane city is a congregation made up of Black people. The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) adopted the Belhar Confession, which propagates unity, justice and reconciliation. Polokwane City strives to see that the ideal is not only preached but a lived reality in the city. As the Blacks moved into the towns and the cities at the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994, members of URCSA from different regions found themselves challenged by the lack of worship facilities. This particular congregation was officially inaugurated on 5 April 2014 and has since been worshipping in garages of members of the congregation, a school hall, and lately in a church belonging to the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk.

life, work and witness of the congregation, as expressed by the minister of the congregation at that time, Reggie Nel:

Belhar Confession in our church is a living document, you would not find it anywhere in the walls of our church because we believe in living it. The worship service of all different races is not a strange thing to us here in URCSA Riverlea, in fact, it constitutes who we are as the church, and a clear sign that we have fully embodied Belhar Confession. (Nel, quoted in Ntai 2018)

Ntai (2018) then proceeded to illustrate that the BC is lived out in the social programme of the congregation in its attempt to address community challenges of poverty, drug addictions, and so forth. In this sense, he established that the BC is integrated into and at work within church communities.

In the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation, there is a more concerted effort to implement and live out the BC. Kritzinger, a minister in the congregation, was instrumental in integrating the BC into the congregational worship. Special effort was made to create awareness of the BC in the liturgy and worship each Sunday. The BC was also used to address issues of the integration of African languages, justice for women and ecological justice. Different African languages are used in worship, almost 50% of the church leadership are women, and members are encouraged to respond to environmental threats and injustice.

“I Stand Tall and Dignified” is a liturgical statement that was developed in Melodi ya Tshwane to embody the BC and is recited by the congregation early in the service, before the reading of the law. In the latest version of this statement, Kritzinger (2014) added a section where environmental issues are also addressed. It now reads:

I stand tall and dignified in the presence of God and among my fellow human beings. I accept myself as a precious and unique person, created through Christ to be the image of the living God. Together with animals, trees and rivers we are one living community, belonging to the earth, our common home. Guided by the Spirit, we discover who we are, as a family: *Motho ke motho ka batho*. (Kritzinger 2014)

The document “I Stand Tall and Dignified” is a clear indication of the congregation’s commitment to ecological justice. This initiative was prompted by the BC and also the Accra Confession produced by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004. The Melodi ya Tshwane is a notable example of how the BC is lived out.

In URCSA Polokwane City, Ntai’s research found that there were two contrasting views about the BC. The one view saw the BC as a political document that threatens the existence of the Apostle Creed in their worshipping services. The second view asserts that the BC is relevant and should be channelled to ensure that it is a living document that shapes the lives of the congregants. These contrasting views are prevalent in URCSA even today, 35 years since its adoption.

While it may be hardly fitting to draw significant conclusions from reflecting on just three congregations in URCSA, yet it can be indicative of the varied experiences of the acceptance and reception of the BC in that church. There are some congregations where the BC is principally lived out, even if there is no formal promotion of it in the congregations. There are others where it is consciously lived out and used in worship, liturgy and practice and, equally, there are those who still have difficulties in accepting the BC as a confession and creed in the church because of what they consider to be its distracting political tone and notions.

The mixture of views about the BC is affirmed by some of the key leaders of URCSA. In response to the question of congregations using the BC, Boesak said:

Yes, they do, as far as I can determine. When Belhar became our confession, I immediately worked out litanies for the Sunday service liturgy, and it quickly became a regular way of using/popularising Belhar. I suspect that is still the case. Whether ministers preached about the *contents* of Belhar, urging upon our people the meaning of the confession if applied to our everyday lives, and to what extent, I do not know. In this 35th anniversary year, it seems there is a renewed effort to engage Belhar, and I am hoping it also depicts a new willingness to be confronted by Belhar. I have been asked a number of times to speak on Belhar, with those inviting me knowing full well my position on these matters and the reasons why I resigned from all positions in the church in 2008. The invitations came from organisations in the church (the men's ministries, the youth) but also from the executive. So, I am hopeful. (Boesak interview 22 October 2021)

Kritzinger (Interview 21 October 2021) affirms the same in his response, stating: "There are a number of ways that BC is used: a) in catechism material; b) as a liturgical statement (a summary of the BC is used as a responsive confession of faith or in a responsive litany as a confession of sin); c) in sermons, occasionally; and d) on pulpit cloths: in our congregation the cloth reads: "Stand where God stands." There have been suggestions that the structure of the whole Sunday service should be based on the BC, moving from one article to the next."

It can be seen from the above that while the BC has impacted the life, work and witness of URCSA, it clearly has to be saturated and more deeply embedded in URCSA at all levels of the church structures and congregations. In recent times, this has proved to be more complicated with the connection of the BC to support justice for gay and lesbian people. Boesak caused a stir within the URCSA General Synod in 2008 when he supported the rights of LGBTQI people. As he puts it:

The past 35 years have seen these tensions grow, in part because people like myself insisted on an application of Belhar that goes beyond the questions of racial justice. My understanding of Belhar has been far more comprehensive and fundamental than my church was ready to accept. I firmly believe that my views reflect the logic of Belhar: that the justice Belhar extols, is God's justice, and, therefore, radical and indivisible; reconciliation is radical and indivisible, unity means radical, indivisible inclusivity. All



this is, in turn, rooted in God's love. That means that I allow Belhar to challenge us not only on the question of racial justice, but on the sensitive and thorny issues of sexism, male domination, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia. So, all of a sudden, Belhar was no longer a weapon to be used against the racism of the White church only—it was a weapon turned against ourselves and our own sins, which we are always loath to admit to. That caused some consternation. The White DRC was quick to exploit these tensions for their own political ends. (Boesak interview 22 October 2021)

The point Boesak makes above is that the BC crossed many areas in addressing issues of injustice, including areas which URCSA found difficult to address, such as human sexuality. The wide use and application of the BC, as Boesak uses it, creates further complications in the reception and acceptance of the Confession within URCSA. Eberhard Busch expresses very well the need for living out the Confession and, perhaps, this can be attached to URCSA's response to the BC. Busch captures this in the following long comment worthwhile mentioning in full:

Confession does not mean: clinging to a confessional text that has once been called forth from the church. Confession rather means new witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of present challenges. A church that does not faithfully practise its own confession, does not thereby make this confession invalid, but is instead called to repentance by its own confession. The worst that could happen would then be that such a church, instead of such repentance, without unrepenting hearts, proudly exhibits their confession as a golden memory in a glass display cabinet. It has happened often enough that the church has not understood that the confession does not belong at home in a museum, but that it must be carried in front of them and that they must follow their confession, whenever facing new challenges and struggles. It is not enough for the church to have a confession. The church should *live* from and with its confession. (Smit 2009, 331–332)

In spite of its internal challenges, the BC has also had a profound impact and reception outside of URCSA. This is what we give attention to in the next section.

## Ecumenical Responses to the BC

In addition to URCSA, several churches in other nations have adopted the BC as a confessional standard in one form or another. Some of these churches have struggled to accept the BC as a confession but have adopted it as a declaration (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa) or as part of their ecumenical confessions (Christian Reformed Church in North America). In this sense of its world-wide impact, the BC can be likened to the Barmen Declaration (BD) of the German Confessing Church. Smit states frankly that the “BC is a product of a conversation with the Barmen Declaration. Without Barmen there would be no Belhar” (Smit 2009, 325). See Smit (2009, 325–336) for a detailed comparison of the BC and BD.

Boesak (Interview 22 October 2021) notes that the BC was widely received and embraced in the Reformed ecumenical community. The Presbyterian Church (USA) and

the Reformed Church of America (RCA) have both accepted the BC formally as a new confession on par with traditional confessions. Churches in South Korea and Palestine, for example, identify with it. The World Council of Churches (WCRC) has made the BC a foundational point of reference together with the Accra Confession in all its discussions about the future direction of the world-wide Reformed family.

Beukes (Interview 20 October 2021) establishes that the BC 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. The BC, for Beukes, is regarded as a gift for the ecumenical church body.

The above is a clear indication of the world-wide acceptance and reception of the BC, but the question remains: What about the churches in South Africa? I shall now turn my attention to this question.

### The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)

The DRC has had a long and protracted struggle to fully accept the BC. There were at least two failed attempts to get the DRC to accept the BC as a confession in the church. I was a facilitator in the uniting process of the DRC and URCSA, appointed by the then WARC to guide the process. I was very excited by the two moderamen and their commitment to the process. I suspect such commitment led to the Kairos moment in 2013 when the General Synod endorsed the acceptance of the BC with an overwhelming majority. However, it failed to achieve the two-thirds majority required from congregations, presbyteries and synods to be accepted as a church confession. This is the current position and, unfortunately, it seems that the vision and priority of unity have been overtaken by other challenges within that DRC, such as challenges regarding human sexuality issues.

However, some of the DRC synods have accepted the BC and are implementing it within their bounds. For example, the Synod of the Cape is quite actively engaging in this, having expressed public support of the BC. There are examples of White and Black churches that are actually working as one congregation with one minister, though some may attribute this to mainly economic reasons rather than theological conviction. Beukes provides a more positive indication of how the BC has brought URCSA and the DRC together:

In the Western Cape (where I am from), the relationship between URCSA and the DRC is very healthy and well established. The two denominations work very well together and it is, therefore, understandable that the Western and Southern Cape regional Synod (of the DRC), Eastern and Eastern Cape Regional Synods (of the DRC), were the three regional synods with the two-third majority votes. Certain synodical commissions between the two denominations have amalgamated and share services, resources and personnel. Certain congregations and presbyteries (although very few) have decided to

become joint URCSA/DRC congregations and presbyteries. If this is doable in the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape, then I believe that there is still hope for unification in the DRC family. It is, therefore, clear that we cannot generalise what the view of the DRC on Belhar is, as it differs from regional synod to regional synod, presbytery to presbytery and congregation to congregation. (Beukes interview 20 October 2021)

In spite of the positive indication given above, the same cannot be said for the greater part of the DRC. It is clear that much still has to be done by the DRC to gain full acceptance and reception of the BC. Boesak (Interview 22 October 2021) offers reasons as to why the DRC struggles to accept the BC:

Why is the White DRC so dead set against Belhar? Some have advanced reasons that range from South Africa's unsuccessful battles with social cohesion after the euphoric days of the Mandela era. Some think the reasons are cultural. That may be true—but only partially. I am thinking of the thousands of young White people who are leaving the DRC every year to join charismatic churches where culture, race, and even social standing are not seen as obstacles. So, if they can be happy there, why not in a non-racial, united, Reformed church? We have had these debates ad nauseam with the Cape Synod, the supposedly more liberal wing of the DRC. All to no avail. Some think that the pressure of the wave of decolonisation and Africanisation and their juxtaposition with coloniality and Eurocentrism might be to blame. They may have a point there, but these are phenomena of the last few years only. Within an already united church, there would have been ways to handle those issues. I think the real reasons behind the White DRC's unwillingness to truly unite are racism, White supremacy and money. And the bitterness that comes with the loss of power. The White churches are too rich, and they are unwilling to share that wealth with the Black church. But apart from that, Belhar embodies a fundamental shift in the paradigms of power. Belhar is the first confession in the Reformed tradition to come from a Black church. It does not pretend to supplant the traditional confessions from Europe, but it does demand equal status. The White church cannot stand that. How can a church built of racism and White supremacy, priding itself on its direct lineage from Holland and the European tradition that produced the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, now accept a confession on the same level from a Black church? And a Black church they had created out of their need for separateness and superiority? A church that had acquiesced for well-nigh a century but in just over a decade became a leading factor in the struggle against their political, ecclesial, and economic systems? (Boesak interview 22 October 2021)

Although there may be other views about the DRC's reasons for not fully accepting the BC, Boesak offers a sober analysis on the subject.

## Other Churches in South Africa

Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2013) captured much information about the responses of churches in South Africa to the BC. It is not my intention to repeat the same. The focus of this research is to assess how the BC has been received and accepted 35 years later. For this purpose, the researcher obtained information from selected church leaders in the country to establish their current positions. I shall now briefly offer some of the responses.

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) accepted the BC as a declaration in 2010. The General Secretary at that time, Dr Jerry Pillay, brought it to the General Assembly with the request to be sent down to presbyteries and congregations for consideration and approval, but to his amazement, the assembly officially accepted the BC in the same meeting. The current General Secretary of UPCSA, Dr Lungile Mpetsheni, in response to the question of how the BC is used in UPCSA, stated that it is not used and that “There is a great need to make the BC popular among the congregations, presbyteries, committees, and fellowships of the denomination” (Mpetsheni interview 26 October 2021).

The Nederdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NHKA in Afrikaans) indicated that, to date, they had not accepted the BC. Van Eck, a minister in that church, summarises the position of the NHKA:

The General Commission of the NRCA received a request early in 1998 to consider Belhar. On 27 November 1998, the Commission requested Prof. J. H. Buitendag to submit a memorandum on Belhar to the Commission. The report was discussed on 16 September 1998 and added to the agenda of the 65th General Synod Meeting that was held in October 1999. Belhar was then discussed at the 65th General Synod Meeting. During the discussion, the following “conclusions” were reached based on the Buitendag report:

- Belhar is the same kind of confession as the Barmen Declaration, and in the Calvinist tradition, nothing in principle can be said against such declarations/confessions.
- Like all the other creeds of faith of the church, Belhar has its own context. Without this context, the heartbeat of the confession will be missed.
- The confession does not represent a Marxist point of view *vis-à-vis* a biblical perspective on social justice—to the contrary, the confession is biblical in its theological thought.
- The context of Belhar is not the context of the NRCA, and the decision to accept or not as a confession, is not for the NRCA to say. (Van Eck interview 22 October 2021)

The meeting, in the end, decided: “The NRCA takes note of Belhar, as well as the memorandum of Prof. J. H. Buitendag.”

According to the current chairperson of the NRCA, Dr Andre Ungerer, the BC has never featured on the agenda since 2010. He pointed out that their church in 2010 confessed to their past role in the theological justification of apartheid, which led to a schism in 2011, and they have been busy with litigation processes since then with the breakaway group. Against this backdrop, he added that “The BC is not significant for the NHKA. Due to our own internal struggle and the painful schism the NHKA experienced, there was never any endeavour to make it an agenda item in any of our meetings” (Ungerer interview 26 October 2021).

The majority of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in South Africa have not heard about the BC, nor has it been cited or used in the majority of their congregations. Some pastors who have acquired knowledge of the BC through ecumenical engagement and academic study speak about it, but this is extremely limited. Some of those pastors participate with the South African Council of Churches, but since not much is really said about the BC in the SACC, the confession is not popularised. The SACC addresses issues spoken about in the BC, such as unity, reconciliation and justice, but it is often not connected to the BC.

From the above information, it can be deduced that most churches in South Africa do not implement or promote the BC. It seems that in the past 35 years, the BC has gained more acceptance outside of South Africa than it has done within. With this background in mind, we ask the question: Do you think the BC is still significant today?

Mpetsheni (Interview 26 October 2021) responded: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” The Belhar Confession was penned in 1986 at the height of the apartheid regime to address divisions, inequalities, and injustices. It would never be thought that 27 years after 1994, South Africa would be at a point of invoking the efficacy of the BC. South Africa, like many parts of the globe, has experienced a deterioration in valuing human dignity. Corruption has contributed to the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Classism, racism, nationalism, and sexism have become some of the marks of division and discrimination. Spirituality has been fragmented along with the marks of division as if we serve different gods. UPSCA is not spared from these ills, and an appeal to the BC could help the denomination to address its challenges. It is a pity that the confession has been reduced to just a document that could be placed on the shelves and gather dust. It is time to put it to use.

Kritzinger (Interview 21 October 2021) adds that:

due to rising manifestations of (ever-present) racist attitudes and structures, it (BC) is more relevant and necessary than ever. URCSA itself is torn by tensions and divisions; we need to drink our own medicine to be healed. Like all confessions, it is time-bound and requires interpretation, but the way in which it links unity, reconciliation and justice is exemplary. One of the big mistakes some people make is to reduce the BC to those three emphases, whereas all five articles are essential to get the big picture right: Art 1 adds the indispensable emphasis that this is GOD’S church. Art 5. adds the focus on discipleship and obedience: Jesus is Lord. Nico Botha (Botha 1991) and others have argued (rightly, to my mind) that the BC should be read ‘backwards’—starting with Art 5.

Although Ungerer said that it is not a priority for the NRCA because of the schism, Van Eck (Interview 22 October 2021) from the same church responded:

(It is) still very significant. All five articles are still applicable today to our context, maybe even more so in 2021. This is especially the call for reconciliation (Article 3),

social justice (Article 4), and especially the call to obedience (Article 5). Maybe a new 'Belhar' is necessary ...

Perhaps, in his response, Beukes reflects the mixture of views most appropriately:

So often I hear people comment and say that the Belhar Confession is actually an obstacle. An obstacle for honest discussion, an obstacle for true unification and an obstacle for reconciliation. So often I hear people comment and say that the Belhar Confession has lost its significance (or never was significant), that it is out-dated and irrelevant to present-day South Africa, and that it reminds people of emotional, historical, and symbolic events of the past. Nevertheless, I believe that the confession of Belhar is still very significant to our context. ... Perhaps the reason may be because the Bible is always relevant for any context and since the Confession has numerous biblical quotations, this might also be the case why the BC is so contextual and relevant. Over the 35 years, the Belhar Confession was used on various topics and challenges such as injustice, poverty, corruption, ethical leadership, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, LGBTQI discourse, HIV/AIDS, globalisation, violence, gender-based violence, etc. ... the list is long and, therefore, it is evident that the confession is still relevant, significant and meaningful for this day and age. (Beukes interview 20 October 2021)

## Conclusion

This research briefly traced the historical development of the BC from the perspective of assessing its reception and acceptance 35 years later, since its adoption in 1986 by the DRMC. The research has shown that though the BC is not actively promoted and implemented in URCSA and by other churches in South Africa, it has an extended impact on ecumenical movements and churches across the globe. The BC is still significant as it declares the lordship of Jesus Christ, and calls for unity, reconciliation and justice in the world. In the final analysis, the BC has been offered as a "gift" to churches and ecumenical movements. In keeping with its modest nature, it seeks to draw no attention to itself except to the principles it encourages—the hidden curriculum to transform church, society and the world to reflect the reign of God.

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