

UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA GENERAL SYNOD

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Vision: *A Committed and United Church in service of
unity, reconciliation and justice to all people through Christ*

PASTORAL LETTER TO URCSA CONGREGATIONS ON THE DECISION OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH GENERAL SYNOD'S ACCEPTANCE OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION

20 October 2011

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

In the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 15:13 we greet you: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in your faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope.* We can indeed hope, because we believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

On the 13th October we experienced firsthand that God indeed cares for his Church in South Africa when He led the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to vote with a majority of more than 90% in favor for the acceptance of the Belhar Confession. That made us very hopeful.

This event was attended by the Moderator Prof Thias Kgatla and the Scribe Dr Dawid Kuyler as fraternal delegates to the meeting. Dr Johan Botha and Rev Colin Goeiman also were present at the occasion. Our colleague, Dr Egbert Rooze, from the United Protestant Church in Belgium also attended with us.

Before we come to what the exact decision is and the implications of the decision we would like to share with you the process that led to the decision as well as the context in which the decision was taken. We are convinced that by sharing this with you, you might have a better understanding of the decision itself.

Background and situational context

On the agenda of the general Synod were proposals on Belhar, including the one from the Cape that asked that the Synod should adopt Belhar as a Confession.

The way that the Synod dealt with issues was to have sessions in the evening for enlightenment where the delegates could discuss the agenda, bring more views to the table so that proposals could be amended. I attended this session together with dr Egbert Rooze and witnessed how those in favour of Belhar and those against Belhar with passion shared their views. One proposal was to refer Belhar to Regional Synods and congregations to vote and report back to General Synod and then the General Synod would make a decision. According to the DRC Church Order this is the way prescribed and a two-thirds majority of church council members have to vote in favor and two-thirds of regional synods each obtaining a two-third majority will pave the way to a General Synod that also have to vote with a two-third majority. A new addition was added that the congregation also has to give approbation to the church council decision and a whole procedure was prepared for the church order.

Those against Belhar raised objections like it is liberation or black theology, not a confession, politically motivated, unbiblical etc. People were warned that congregations will break away if Belhar is accepted. One minister said that in his church council of 141 out of the 144 members voted against Belhar.

Listening to these arguments and the passion it was presented, I was disturbed and worried. Those in favor of Belhar also presented their cases with passion and said that they need this confession because it spoke about unity, reconciliation and justice in a unique Biblical and reformed way and that it addressed the South African context. People pleaded that the confession should be judged on its own and not with perceptions. Dr Braam Hanekom and rev Nelis van Rensburg came to the session and pleaded that the General Synod should take a decision on Belhar as it was done at the Cape Synod and then request that the formal route be followed. They explained the process that they followed at the Cape where it happened.

Going to bed I was not sure what would transpire the next day.

The people who brought greetings like dr Jerry Pillay and dr Peter Borgdorff also challenged the DRC to be aware the eyes of the world were on the meeting. They shared how their denominations are dealing with Belhar.

During the morning a policy for church reunification was tabled and accepted. In the decision it said that Belhar should be part of the confessional basis and that its acceptance by members should be

optional. This was more or less the old Achterberg proposal. By making it a decision they moved from the previous view of proposals to a decision and policy. It was like a Madiba jive: there was movement but merely lateral movement. Not something that lifted our spirit at the meeting.

Then after lunch for two hours the acceptance of Belhar was debated and about 29 people took part in the discussions of which only six spoke against Belhar.

The same arguments of the previous evening prevailed. It was good for us from URCSA to be present and hear how old and young pleaded with passion why Belhar should be accepted because it was biblical, articulated the gospel for our time etc. A young minister stood up and said that he is 31 years old. Half of his life was in the old SA and the other half in the new SA. It was still in him to be like the old SA and therefore he needed Belhar to remind him every day how he should be as a Christian in the new SA. He could not live without Belhar.

The other views were also tabled and some of the arguments against Belhar were very very painful to hear.

The voices of those who were afraid how their congregants would respond if Belhar was accepted were also heard. At some stage it sounded that some supported the notion that in the church that we should listen to people and it was frightening that in a Reformed Church Gods voice would be replaced with the voice of people.

Some wanted Belhar to be referred back for study as an option of postponing the issue.

Dr Braam Hanekom and rev Nelis van Rensburg at the table closed the debate with arguments why Belhar should be accepted. Rev Nelis van Rensburg showed how Belhar fits all the general requirements of a confession.

After two hours of a thorough debate the delegates were asked to vote and indicate where the General Synod stands concerning the Belhar Confession for the Dutch Reformed Church. They needed to decide to accept the Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis and to request the moderamen to put into place the process to achieve it.

Our hearts were pounding and before our eyes a miracle happened when we saw that more than 90% of the delegates showed that they wanted the Belhar Confession as part of the Dutch Reformed Church confessional basis. Never will the sea of orange colored cards with which they voted be erased from our minds.

The emotions were high and tears of joy rolled. We could not speak to one another. We hugged and cried. The Spirit of God moved like a tsunami to wash away the fears and to bring courage and hope to people.

For us from URCSA it was indeed an awesome moment. We witnessed God at work.

Therefore brothers and sisters, we thank God for making this possible. We thank God for the new leadership of the DRC for having the courage to go this way and to show real leadership and not to fear what people would say. The new leadership in the DRC has shown their true colors as leaders and not merely running with others. Prof Nelis Niemand showed that he could guide a Synod in a very loving way to give their opposing views. His team members supported him well. A new era has dawned with this leadership.

We thank God for the ministers and members of the DRC who never gave up their hope to work for the acceptance of Belhar through word and deed, many times at a great cost. We confess that we as URCSA have not supported them in their journey as we should have done. We ask for their forgiveness and applaud their courage.

We plead with URCSA members and ministers to acknowledge and encourage the DRC at local and regional level on their journey towards the full acceptance of Belhar as a Confession.

We also pray for those who oppose Belhar and who feel as if they have lost their cause. It is our prayer that they as our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ will not distance themselves from those who confess that Jesus is Lord according to the Belhar Confession but continue engaging with them as fellow believers. Our unity in Christ should hold us together. We urge them not to separate themselves and form separate congregations.

Together with churches overseas who accepted Belhar, we rejoice in the work of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

The way forward

The Dutch Reformed Church took the first step in accepting Belhar by showing the way to regional synods 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 the assurance that they will ask URCSA to be part of this journey.

In the light of what happened at Boksburg URCSA is now challenged to look again at the relationship with the Dutch Reformed Church that is guided by the moratorium on Church unity talks. The Dutch Reformed Church also put on hold a proposal that they, the DRCA and RCA continue with a federal unity structure.

Our current relationship with the Dutch Reformed Church is being mediated by the World Communion of Reformed Churches through dr Jerry Pillay. The moratorium on church unity talks led to this mediation. During the mediation three issues were identified and later three task teams were appointed

to deal with the issues: The acceptance of Belhar was one of the three issues: the other two are the commitment to unity and restorative justice & reconciliation.

As URCSA Executive we have set up a meeting with the DRC Moderamen under the auspices of dr Jerry Pillay for the 29th November 2011 to discuss the decision of 13th October and the implications for the way forward.

We as the Executive will also engage with the leadership of our Regional Synods on this important issue.

We would like to conclude with the words from article 5 of the Belhar Confession:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

Greetings in Christ

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'D. A. Kuyler'.

Dr Dawid Kuyler

Scribe: General Synod URCSA

On behalf of URCSA Executive

Prof ST Kgatla

Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel

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