

URCSA MODERATOR'S ADDRESS TO JOINT DRC FAMILY GENERAL SYNODICAL COMMISSIONS: KRUGERSDORP 6-8 NOVEMBER 2006.

On 22 June 2006 the General Synodical Commission of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Moderamen of the General Synod of the Dutch reformed Church (DRC) (extended Executive Committees) met at Esselen Park to discuss the reunification process of the family of Dutch Reformed Churches. At the end of the consultative meeting the leadership group of both Churches unanimously committed themselves to guide their Churches resolutely in the process of reunification as expressed on numerous occasions by both Churches. They covenanted to a process that would be completed within three years. At the same meeting the leadership of the two Churches expressed their sincere wish and earnestly prayed to have the other two Churches, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), to form part of the reunification process because without them the family is not complete. They pledged themselves to contact them as soon as possible.

On 16 August 2006 the Executive Committees of the DRCA, URCSA, RCA and DRC met in Bloemfontein to discuss the same issue of reunification. The four Executive Committees too unanimously committed themselves to covenant for the reunification of the DRC family. They agreed to use the biblical term "covenanting" because they wanted to bring themselves and the reunification process under the authority of the word of God and the will of Christ. According to the statement released at the end of the meeting the four Executive Committees covenanted together, not from their own will or under pressure of some sort, but because they believed that the Lord, who graciously committed Himself to them, requires that of them.

A WORD ABOUT THE BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF "COVENANTING"

From Scripture a covenant always denotes a voluntary relationship that binds each party to the other. Whether it is negotiated, like a modern business deal or a marriage contract, as well as God's covenant with His people, the reality of the relationship depends simply on the fact that mutual obligations have been accepted and pledged on both sides. There is an unconditional undertaking on God's part to be "for those who enter into covenant with Him". When God tells Abraham, "I will establish my

covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you ... to be your God ... I will be their God” (Gen.17:6-80), the personal pronouns are the key words in the covenant: God is committing himself to Abraham’s seed in a way in which He does not commit Himself to those outside the relationship. Personal pronouns give a sense that everything depends on that covenant. Jesus has died for *me*, to be *my* Saviour, and that His Father is *my* God and Father, personally committed to *me*, and saves *me*.

The covenant relationship formed the basis of Israel’s ethic. Given the set of relationships with God in which Israel existed, the prophets required conduct appropriate to the relationship. The demand the prophets made was a demand for a proper reaction within a context of grace. Israel was called upon to demonstrate her response to the grace of her Exodus redemption by freely conforming to the covenant expectations. Her keeping of the covenant was the proper response to what God had done in their redemption.

The URCSA leadership has undertaken the “covenanting” for reunification within the DRC family as a commitment that should be honoured at all costs. After our historic meeting in Bloemfontein on 16 August 2006, we took a bold step to implement what we had undertaken to implement. Because we have resolutely committed ourselves to the process of reunification within the DRC family we have met with our leaders in the Synods of Free State and Phororo together with the DRCA leadership on 1 September 2006 in Bloemfontein and told them what we had promised to the DRCA leadership; to advise them not to take their brothers and sisters in the DRCA to court. If their brothers and sisters from the DRCA drive them out of their buildings they should leave the buildings peacefully. We are proud to announce here today that our Regional Synod of Free Sate has responded to our advice by unconditionally accepting it. In its recent Regional Synod sitting they have taken synod decision to effect the advice of the moderamen. No more will URCSA congregations settle their differences with DRCA congregations in worldly courts. We have done all these in the spirit of unity and reconciliation.

We believe that Christians should not fight one another in court and waste the money of congregants that was meant to build the Kingdom of God. As URCSA we commit ourselves to reconciliation and therefore invite the DRCA to engage with us on all levels to seek reconciliation and amicable solutions. At our meeting at Bloemfontein, we made the DRCA aware of this position and we still eagerly await their response.

We confess and state that we who were alienated from our brothers in the DRCA, DRC and RCA, and were strangers to the covenant of reunification are brought in to actively promote reconciliation and fulfill the covenant. We accept and sincerely believe that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us and our brothers and sisters within the DRC family. We emphasize that this has taken place in the shedding of Christ’s blood and that it is true and valid reality between

the other three Churches within the DRC family. We are individually and collectively called to proclaim reconciliation as the fulfillment of the covenant in Christ between our Churches regardless of threats, intimidations, and confrontations that may occur.

We are not going to let you go without authentic reunification even if our thigh is out of joint; we will wrestle until a complete reunification is accomplished (Gen. 32:25-26). We have committed ourselves to “covenanting” for reunification. We will keep check on what we say lest we appear shifting or contradicting ourselves. Our pledges remain our pledges; we will not change our stance. We are also committed to the time frames and time-lines of three years we have agreed upon in recent bilateral and multilateral talks.

MODEL OF THE NEW CHURCH

The model of the new Church should not take us time to debate it because it is a straight-forward issue and it has also been discussed in our bilateral discussions in the past and agreed upon. The model of an organic, united, reformed church, organized according to synodical-presbyterial principles has been canvassed and agreed upon. The following substantiations are given for conclusions made.

Substantiations.

We consciously and purposefully call the process *reunification* of the DRC family. The dictionary meaning of the noun *reunification* which is derived from the verb *reunite* denotes the act of bringing together that which was separated. The verb *reunite* means to bring two or more people or organizations together again after they have been separate for a long time; to come together again; to join together again separate areas or separate groups within an organization. In politics we may have a statement: His main aim is to reunite the party.

We are talking of reunification because we are reuniting four Churches which historically were one Church. Prior to 1857 the DRC was one Church. The seed of separation worship was sown at the synod of 1857 where ‘due to weakness of others’ the practice of serving the Holy Communion to separate communities was introduced. The first separate Church was established according to this model in 1881. Today what we are doing in reunification is restoring a situation that existed before. Thus the model of the reunited Church will be that one which existed before 1857; otherwise we cannot talk of reunification. Here we are talking

about something which was there before and now it has been restored to its original form.

Bilateral talks assumed an organic model

The Esselen Park meeting between the DRC and the URCSA expressly pronounced an organic unity model. Several DRC General Synods (Particularly the 2004 General Synod) articulated the model. At its 2004 General Synod the DRC decided the following about the model of the new Church: “N VERENIGENDE KERKVERBAND VAN SELFSTANDIGE PLAASLIKE GEMEENTES. Ons stel voor dat die presbiteriaal-sinodale kerkregeringstelsel as model vir die organisering van die nuwe een kerkverband gebruik word. Dit beten dat al die gemeentes as selfstandige gemeentes ingevoeg word in ringe, sinodes en een algemene sinode. In die proses moet ruimte gelaat word vir onderhandeling, nuwe moontlikhede en ‘n groei na mekaar.” Never in the bilateral talks between the two Churches was any model envisaged except the organic model. As a matter of fact the DRC has always said the model for the new Church should be the model used by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church I in Africa in 1994.

In the bilateral discussions between the URCSA and RCA before the sitting of the URCSA General Synod in Pietermaritzburg in September 2005 the RCA expressed a concern that their special emphasis on special mission and ministry of deliverance might not properly be articulated in a bigger reunited Church. The URCSA leadership assured them that their special ministry did not require a different model to ensure that the ethos of their mission is protected because within URCSA itself there are such special ministries. Reunification with the RCA on an organic model will enhance special ministries that are there within the URCSA and strengthen diversity in unity. In order to show its commitment to its undertaking the URCSA has already accepted the Laudium Declaration unconditionally. It is on the basis of this understanding that the organic unity model will add value to both Churches.

The URCSA came into existence as a result of Church unification between the former DRMC and the DRCA. The other members of the DRCA who were not satisfied with the unity process decided to continue as the DRCA. (We acknowledge and regret the pain that was caused from the encounter). The unification of the two Churches caused schism and pain between black members of the former DRCA. Members of this two Churches in the Free State, Phororo in particular stay in the same formal

and informal settlements, use the same crowded taxis to work, use the same language in fact they are one community. The only division they experience is on Sunday between 9hrs and 12hrs.

We are aware of the fact that the DRCA is canvassing a Federal Model with an overarching General Synod. We find this model as not only unproductive, but also seriously undermining our credibility as Church. If the schism between the DRCA and URCA came as a result of procedural flaws the remedy of that situation can never be sought in a strategy of separate development.

The new initiatives that resulted in the joint declaration for healing, reconciliation and reunification within the DRC family brought hope, renewal and restoration. Covenanting for unity and reconciliation between the URCSA and the DRCA can never become a healing reality unless an organic unity model is fully implemented. One may use an analogy of marriage of two people. A couple that was married in community of property and divorced, and want to reconcile and get remarried will have to revert to their original relationship if they seek real reconciliation. They cannot live under the same roof, sleeping in different rooms and sharing the kitchen, for example, and call that remarriage. If that arrangement is entered into the impression will be created that their reasons for divorce were never what it was alleged they were, but a device to create an opportunity for sleeping in different rooms but sharing the kitchen. The couple will only be making itself a laughing stock in the eyes of the skeptical world. In URCSA we should not even speak about it because it seriously destroys our integrity and exposes ourselves badly. Between the URCSA and the DRCA there is more to church reunification. We cannot turn a blind eye on the hurt we have experienced as two Churches. We should not take the matter of reconciliation and healing between the two Churches lightly. A visibly healing process should be put in place to restore the original position before schism. No other model can bring healing between the two churches than an organic model.

CONFESSSIONAL BASE

The question of a confessional base of the new Church has also been discussed in bilateral talks between the URCSA and the other three Churches within the DRC family. The debate of the confessional base of the new Church revolves around the question as to whether the Belhar Confession (BC) will be included as one of the confessions or not. The position of the URCSA is very clear that the Belhar Confession will be one of the confessions of the new Church. At the beginning of the

bilateral talks all three Churches were highly skeptical about the BC, but with the passage of time the DRC and the RCA clearly demonstrated that the Belhar Confession will be part of the new Church. The DRCA had problems but it is our sincere belief that it too will enter the process of reunification, especially after the URCSA statement of how the Belhar Confession should be viewed en route to reunification. The bilateral talks between the two Churches were still to be continued before we were overtaken by the new events around the reunification.

At the last bilateral talks between the URCSA and the RCA the RCA delegation was asked as to whether they were against the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the doctrinal standard of the new church as it was alleged in the media by then. The RCA denied that they were against the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the new Church. The RCA however undertook to make a further study of the Belhar Confession together with their congregations.

On 16 August 2006 at a bilateral meeting between the RCA and the URCSA the same question was raised. The RCA delegation indicated that they had some questions they wanted to raise with the URCSA on the confession but they further indicated that the questions were not so serious that they can stop reunification process. It is in the light of these facts that the URCSA fully accepts and trusts the bona-fides of the RCA and its commitment to Church reunification on the basis of the teaching of the Belhar Confession.

The DRC has already expressed itself on the contents of the Belhar Confession. Already at its General Synod of 1998 the DRC has expressed its appreciations of the contents of the confession. The DRC General Synod of 2004 went a step forward and stated: “Omdat die Belharbelydenis ‘n belydenisskrif van een van die Famiekerk is, stel ons voor dat dit een van die belydenisskrif in die herstelde kerkverband opgeneem word” in terms of General Synod of 1998. The General Synod of 2004 went on to state that: “Ons is steeds oortuig dat die wesenlike inhoud van Belhar (ons verbintenis aan die Bybelse getuienis oor God Drie-enig, oor die eenheid van die kerk, oorgeregtigheid en versoening) baie wyd aanvaar word. Dit impliseernie dat alle gemeentes, predikante, kerkraadslede en lidmate van die nuwe verband dit vanselfsprekend as belydenisskrif hoef te onderskryf nie.”

The DRCA leadership has already indicated in our bilateral talks that they did not subscribe to the Belhar Confession. In a document issued by the DRCA leadership before the URCSA 4th General Synod held in

Pietermaritzburg in 2005 the DRCA expressed their views on the Belhar Confession. The URCSA Executive Committee responded to the document and the matter was to be discussed further in bilateral talks between the two Churches.

In responding to all the challenges by the three Churches and also in helping the reunification process the URCSA General Synodical Commission took a further-far reaching decision in June 2006: ***“We accept the challenge to become one united church in three years time. In this regard the Confession of Belhar shall not function as a precondition for unity. Instead the message of Belhar shall continue to be the inspiration and guide of both the process towards and the formation of the new church. In accordance with the decisions of both churches the Confession of Belhar shall function as a confession in the new church and we shall work together to help the church as a whole grow towards its complete acceptance. We shall take this decision for full ratification to our next synod”***. In response to the URCSA General Synodical Commission (GSC) initiative the DRC leadership expressed their deep appreciation and gratitude for that bold move and assured the URCSA GSC of their deep and firm commitment to the biblical imperatives of unity, justice and reconciliation, the three main themes of the Belhar Confession. It was on the basis of this statement that the DRC leadership said the two Churches are virtually in line with one another en route to reunification.

It is on the basis of these developments in bilateral talks and subsequent declaration of all four DRC family in Bloemfontein on 16 August 2006 that the URCSA believes that the position of the Belhar Confession is irrevocably located in the new reunited Church. It will be the duty of the reunited church to handle the matter with sensitivity and pastorally.

TIME FRAMES FOR CHURCH REUNIFICATION

The envisaged date for the DRC family reunification is generally assumed to be three years from now. After many years of multilateral and bilateral talks within the DRC family it is now time to make meaningful progress towards the concrete reunification. Some have welcomed the period of three years because the reunification will coincide with the 500th birth day of John Calvin. Some see the time frame as sufficiently long enough to prepare congregations and presbyteries. Members of these three churches waited long for this historic day. The URCSA sees the process unfolding as follows:

1. Today 6-8 November 2006 the joint General Synodical Commissions meet at Achterberg Krugersdorp. Joint task teams from all four Churches are appointed to work on the issues and processes for the reunification.
2. Special or normal General Synods of the four Churches meet separately in Johannesburg for two days in June 2007 to fast-trek the process.
3. Normal or special last General Synods of all four Churches meet to tie-up issues from special Regional Synods of the four Churches (September 2008).
4. Convening Synod (Stigting Sinode) meet in July 2009 (birth month of John Calvin) to establish a new Reunited Reformed Church.

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