

# REUNIFICATION PROCESS DR CHURCH FAMILY

The four issues in this document were dealt with by the representatives of the URCSA, DRC, DRCA and RCA at the Achterbergh II meeting, 23-25 April 2007. Four task teams, consisting of two representatives of each church in a task team, met on 31 January to 1 February 2007 to do the first preparatory work. The task teams also met by telephone to complete their work for the Achterbergh II meeting. During the Achterbergh II meeting the themes were considered by expanded task teams in which all four the churches were represented. The meeting came to consensus with regard to the first three issues. The report on *reconciliation* was referred to the Interim Committee for Church Reunification.

## 1. CONFSSIONAL BASIS

The following were accepted as the first points of consensus between the four churches:

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

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

5. In a new *kerkverband* Belhar will be included in the confessional basis as a fourth confession, but it will not be expected of members and ministers who are not ready or willing to underwrite [accept] it as a confession.
6. The growing towards full acceptance of Belhar is an integral part of the processes of the new *kerkverband*.

## 2. MODEL

Consensus was reached on the following:

1. **As a Biblical church of Jesus Christ** we understand that the local church is fully *church of God* but also never exists as a church in isolation. In our reformed tradition this Biblical principle is expressed in the unity and communion [*kerkverband*] with one another and this is something which must always be a priority for local congregations. We confess that we need one another to be fully church of God also on local level and that this must be reflected in the model of a new *kerkverband*.

2. In a reformed church, **congregations** are legal entities in themselves and **keep their responsibility** regarding decision making and ministry. The General Synod does not prescribe to congregations on how to do their ministry.

3. Congregations will be encouraged and **helped to grow in unity** towards one another on local level, and where they so choose, even to form one structure, but will not be forced into one structure. There will be a specific and ongoing program in the new church to assist congregations in this regard.

4. We are in agreement that we must form **one new General Synod**. The competencies of the General Synod will possibly be to decide on the following:

\* Doctrinal issues (This refers to confessional and ethical matters. The way in which General Synod deals with these matters, is for General Synod itself tot decide )

\* Theological training

\* Bible translation

\* Hymn Books

\* Policy regarding .... [HIV etc]

\* Church Order

\* Ecumenical relations

\* Church and State

\* Communication and Media

*[The specific list must be finalised before presented to congregations as proposed in point 6]*

5. This one General Synod must be part of an organic model of unity where real **unity is reflected in all structures**, therefore also on the level of regional synods, presbyteries, and obviously also congregations on the basis of point 2 and 3 above. We understand that the best legal way to form one *kerkverband* is to start by forming one new General Synod by the existing General Synods. What must then follow as an essential part of the process is an organic and voluntary process by which regional synods and presbyteries form new regional structures in the way proposed by the new Church Order of the new General Synod. Regional synods and presbyteries are encouraged to start discussions and negotiations on how new regional structures could be formed, even before the constitution of the new General Synod.

6. Regional Synods and Presbyteries who are ready and willing, are free to form one synod or presbytery now already although, before the constitution of a new *kerkverband*, they also still belong to their own *kerkverbande*. The existing regulations in the respective Church Orders of the churches are used for the formation of these unity structures.

7. All four churches start a process to obtain the permission of all the congregations of the church [in the exact way currently prescribed in the church order of the particular church] for the following:

7.1 the forming of a new General Synod as expression of a new *kerkverband*

7.2 the formulating of the confessional basis for the new *kerkverband* [because the new General Synod must have a confessional basis]

7.3 to approve amendments to existing Church Orders needed for the formation of a new *kerkverband*

7.4 to approve that, after the forming of a new General Synod, a process will follow by which the regional synods and presbyteries engage in voluntary processes of expressing the one *kerkverband* at their respective levels

7.5 the name of the new *kerkverband*

7.6 the position of congregations with regard to ministry, property, etc. [points 1-3 above]

7.7 that there should be room for associate membership [*Still to be discussed further*]

8. The four actuaries of the four General Synods form a task team to evaluate the existing church orders and to start a process to amend them in the correct way in order to make such a process possible.

9. We are in agreement that we must discuss the **possibility of associate membership** further. The reason for this is that we believe unity should not be exclusive but be as inclusive as possible. This is a practice that was lately followed in other reformed churches too, eg by the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*. We still need to research the detail and practical implications of this process. This category wants to make allowance for churches who want to become part of the reunited church, but for various reasons are not ready to fully become part of the new *kerkverband*. If we create this category it will obviously be with the hope that associate members will in time grow to full unity.

10. There are **other churches** who indicated that they are **interested in our unification process**. We recommend that the Interim Committee meet with them and brief them about where we are in our process at the moment.

### **For further discussion**

11. There are members who indicated that it would be of help to them if the possibility exists to retain some of their present structures in the model of the reunified church, even though they are also part of all new structures too. We want to have more discussions with churches or synods who have a strong need for this. As stated above, we want unity to be as inclusive as possible. We therefore want to meet real needs but obviously not in such a way that it jeopardises the unity as such or continues past divisions.

12. Clarity must be achieved on how the matters addressed in pt 5, 6 and 7.4 will work in practice.

## **3. JOINT VENTURES**

Consensus was reached on the following:

### **First Report:**

**1. The following principles/values guiding possible joint ventures were accepted by the working group and serve as recommendations:**

1.1 Church unity is a **PROCESS!**

- 1.2 It will take time – Let us be patient.
- 1.3 We work both from the “bottom up” and the “top down”.
- 1.4 Prayer is to be the foundation throughout the process.
- 1.5 All tasks must also benefit the local congregations.

## **2. The following concrete actions serve as recommendations**

### **2.1 The establishment of a Secretariat functioning from a central office and representing the four churches**

In order to get anything substantial off the ground we will need capacity. The establishment of the above mentioned office is therefore of the utmost importance. Due to vast differences in economic capacities, some partners might not have the ability to contribute financially as others can. We acknowledge that the different partners contribute different commodities or gifts to this process. The working group feels very strongly about this point and urges the Interim Committee to go ahead with the implementation of this proposal as a matter of great urgency.

It must be clearly understood that we are not asking for a separate office but for a single office that could deal with all the different activities of the church reunification process, including those of the Interim Committee.

### **2.2 Setting up of centralised, effective communication channels**

There is the need for a massive, funded communication strategy that will creatively explain the unity process to the wider church and even the public. One of the main tasks of such a secretariat would be to ensure that synchronised and clear communication regarding every aspect of the church unification process flows from a central office to the smallest of congregations in the most rural part of the country and to every congregation of the four different churches.

### **2.3 The establishment of new pilot congregations, reflecting our diversity**

It is a dream of the working group that at least 10 small pilot congregations (communities of faith) would be planted in 10 different regions in the country. These communities of faith should model our intentions for a truly non-racial church of the future

### **2.4 The establishment of conversation groups where members of the churches can meet and get to know each other**

The working group fully understands that not all the members of the different churches are ready for such a venture and therefore suggests that a number of conversation groups must be started, also in the ten different regions of the country. The idea is that such conversation groups will create a safe space where members from the churches can meet and get to know one another and also create opportunities where we can hear each others' history and background.

### **2.5 The publishing of common liturgical material, including a common hymnbook**

We sincerely believe that many walls come down when we sing and pray together. We therefore urge the different commissions of the different churches to come together as soon as possible to work on such material.

### **2.6 The establishment of a common working group reflecting on social and economic issues (e.g. The Accra Declaration)**

### **2.7 The establishment of a working group, clarifying the theological grounds for church unification, including fundamental discussions on justice and reconciliation**

### **2.8 The establishment of joint regional synods**

The working group fully understands that the process of church reunification is at different stages and points of advancement in the different regions in the country. The question would be, how to keep the momentum in areas where regional synods are ready for unification without hindering the process in the rest of the country. The working group therefore ask the working group on a “model” to formulate some guidelines on how such synods could unite in the interim period. It is important to do so in order to ensure that possible different ventures take place in an orderly and coordinated fashion.

In the meantime we also ask synods to investigate the options of unifying task groups and commissions (e.g. Service and Witness, Theological Training, KGA) to do synodical work together where ever possible.

## Final Report:

1. The group confirms the first report (as was tabled on 24-04-2007) but add the following to the report.
2. The group confirms the need for capacity on general synodical level to synchronise and facilitate activities but also feel that there are a number of actions that could be handled in a **decentralised manner through the regional synods**. This should be done as far as possible. Regions, due to contextual differences, will deal differently with some of the practical ventures. It is also important to constantly keep in mind that this process is an international process that involves other neighbouring states.
3. We ask the Interim Committee to investigate the **acquisition of translation equipment** as soon as possible.
4. The group confirms the possibilities that the establishment of **pilot congregations** could bring about but request that:
  - 4.1. This should be done *in consultation with the model working group*
  - 4.2. The different *regional synods* should also be consulted in this process
5. The different synods should also be consulted as soon as possible regarding the possible **reunification of some regional synods**, since all regions are not at the same point of advancement in the process.
6. The establishment of a **working group to work on the theological basis of the whole ongoing process**. This will include for instance a study of *Biblical metaphors* for unity. Also important would be the clarification of a *holistic (practical) ecclesiology* for a new church that would be both doctrinally pure and contextually relevant. Part of the vision and mission of the new unified church must be to make, as a unified community of faith, a positive impact in our society at large.
7. All of the above do have some implications for church leadership and ministry. We feel that it is therefore necessary to **involve members of our theological seminaries** in the process to ensure that they will be sensitive in their training of new leaders for the above mentioned challenges and needs.
8. The establishment of **an independent trust fund** to fund all of the above should be set up by the Interim Committee and the secretariat.
9. We finally propose that all the participating synods ensure that their **church order** is amended to facilitate the above mentioned proposals.

In a brain-storming session the following ideas were mentioned:

- \* Youth: informal gatherings of different churches, sleepovers, etc
- \* Preaching workgroups on presbytery level
- \* *Caring together* and forums (Northern Convent)
- \* Combined evening services
- \* Joint ministries: orphans, HIV/AIDS
- \* Multicultural churches
- \* Joint projects: marches, violence
- \* Forum for unemployment
- \* Skills development
- \* Empower the women to move ahead
- \* We need natural, spontaneous processes – do practical things together: camps with the youth, functions of movements for women
- \* Forums for outreach
- \* Prayer meetings
- \* Truth and love must prevail in joint ventures
- \* Adjacent congregations can help one another – sharing can be unequal – hidden resentments could surface – work on our attitudes
- \* Joint meetings of consistories
- \* Wonderful things are happening on grassroots level – joint lorry ministry in Harrismith, also to the prostitutes
- \* Get to know one another – start with one project and see what happens!
- \* Live our unity – it is a vehicle for more unity!
- \* Joint fundraising (bazaar)

## 4. RECONCILIATION

The following report was tabled and referred to the Interim Committee:

1. The attached document on a proposed reconciliation process was revised to reflect recent developments in the reunification process and new insights on how to improve the hearings and lower the costs. The new version is attached for approval by the plenary.
2. The process will start with a short term pilot project to establish the credibility of the reconciliation commission and refine the format of its operation.
3. The commission will give priority attention to localities where court cases over property have been instituted.
4. The commission may contract a researcher (or a team) to write a joint history of the estrangement between the churches (the bigger picture).
5. The commission may also contract a consultant/s to assist in the process.
6. All four churches of the DRC family will be involved in the reconciliation process, but primarily the NGK, NGKA and URCSA.
7. All three church councils in a locality will make presentations to the reconciliation commission, thus enabling them to seek ways towards reconciliation in that context.
8. The aim of the commission is to play a mediatory role, to defuse power struggles, and try to prevent further escalation of tension.
9. Short term goals: a) to set up a response team (moderators of all four churches, with secundi) to visit flashpoints if necessary; b) to get approval for the process from all four churches.
10. Medium term goal: to complete the pilot project by September 2007.
11. Long term goals: a) to complete hearings in all localities where tension exists between URCSA, NGK and the NGKA; b) to produce a comprehensive report on the process by the end of 2008 (with an extension period if necessary).
12. The Joint Reunification Committee (Achterberg) will take responsibility for the commission's work and its Executive will receive regular reports from the commission.
13. The ongoing process of reconciliation must be broad enough to promote a unified approach to issues like land reform, crime, poverty and socio-economic justice.
14. With specific reference to the issue relating to properties in the Free State and Phororo:
  - 14.1 The DRCA will draw up a document addressing the URCSA on the issue of truth and justice. This will be circulated to the other two churches as well.
  - 14.2 A response from this document will give rise to mediation so that the present conflict over properties can be resolved in a just manner.
  - 14.3 The process of unity and reconciliation, as well as truth and justice must proceed simultaneously with the overall process of the unification.
15. An appeal is made to every member of the family to become a partner on the road to unification.

### PROPOSED RECONCILIATION PROCESS FOR THE DRC FAMILY

Status: This is a consensus document, agreed upon by the reconciliation task team of the DRC family, which met at Achterberg on 1 February 2007. An earlier version of the document was approved by the URCSA General Synodical Commission in June 2006, to execute a resolution of the URCSA General Synod in September 2005. It is hereby presented to the plenary session of the DRC family reunification process for adoption and implementation.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The intention of this proposal is to set in motion a process that aims to achieve reconciliation between estranged members, congregations or other bodies of the DRC family through a narrative process. When people who have become estranged tell their stories to one another, space is created for reconciliation to take place, provided they approach one another:

- with mutual respect
- in honesty and vulnerability
- as equals, levelled by the grace of God
- with a shared Christian commitment to unity
- with the firm will to achieve reconciliation, not to score points or win arguments

## 2. STARTING POINTS OF THE PROCESS

### 2.1 Purpose

The intended outcome is to foster a reconciliatory process, in all areas within the DRC family. A specific focus are those disputes that arose between the NGKA and URCSA primarily in the Free State and Phororo and the perceptions of possible DRC involvement. Since the estrangement in the Free State and Phororo is so complicated it is important not to raise unrealistic expectations of this reconciliatory process. However, it is proposed in the firm belief that the reconciling power of the risen Christ is at work among us and that conflicts can be resolved through honest and humble encounter, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If the DRC family does not believe this, we – and the gospel itself – lose credibility. We owe South Africa an example of the power of the gospel by finding a way of becoming reconciled and united.

### 2.2 Biblical basis

This process proceeds from the theological understanding of the church as the one Body of Christ, consisting of various members but united in a common purpose and in an ethos of respectful cooperation, in which the weaker parts of the body receive greater honour and attention (1 Cor 12:24). Attitudes of inferiority and withdrawal (1 Cor 12:14ff) or superiority and disrespect (1 Cor 12:21ff) betray the very nature of the Body. This key biblical image for the life of the church, in which the dimensions of unity, equality, diversity and justice are integrated, supplies the basis for the process proposed here.

The apostle Paul shamed the members of the congregation of Corinth who had taken one another to public courts, by pointing out that God gave Christians (“the saints”) the authority and responsibility to judge the world (1 Cor 6:2) and even the angels (1 Cor 6:3), but that they seemed unable to solve the (comparatively small) conflicts that had arisen among them. By handing over our disputes to legal processes in which the logic of the gospel often does not operate, we admit defeat (see 1 Cor 6:7) and make the gospel powerless.

In John 17 the Lord Jesus *prayed* for the unity of his disciples. In vv. 9-19 Jesus prayed that the Father should: protect them from the evil one (v.11, 12, 15), give them joy (v.13), sanctify them in the truth of God’s word (v.17), make them one (v.11, 21, 22), let them be with Christ in glory (v.24), allow God’s love for Jesus to be in them too (v.26). When these blessings become a reality in the lives of the disciples, they will have an impact on the community in which they live because God is a sending God (v.8, 18, 23, 25) who wishes others to believe through the witnessing (in word and deed) of Jesus’ disciples (v.20, 21, 23). Achieving unity and reconciliation among Christians is therefore an essential dimension of the church’s mission in the community. Ongoing division seriously detracts from the church’s witness. To realise this vision, we in the DRC family will have to commit ourselves to persevering prayer for unity and reconciliation. Ps 127:1-2 reminds us that it is God who builds the church and that our most fervent building efforts are in vain unless these are part of God’s work on earth, and in tune with God’s agenda of grace (v.2).

In the Bible reconciliation is seen primarily as the work of God, flowing from God’s love for the world. In Christ God took the initiative and showed us how estrangement can be overcome through suffering and sacrificial love (2 Cor 5:16-21). God involves and includes us in the mission of reconciliation, making an appeal through us to all who will listen. Reconciliation therefore means that we take responsibility, by willingly becoming part of God’s reconciling work on earth. It involves the restoration of relationships, no longer viewing others “from a human point of view” (2 Cor 5:16), but accepting them as brothers and sisters, as full members of the household of God and fellow heirs of the promise of salvation, no longer as strangers or aliens (Eph 2:19). Such restored relationships are called *shalom* in the Old Testament, which means harmony, wholeness and justice for all. Reconciliation therefore includes the restoration of the relationship between humans and God, between each human being and her/his own self, among human beings, and between human beings and nature.

Reconciliation isn’t possible without truth and justice. It can only be achieved in a spirit of humility, when we do not blame others but speak the truth to them in love (Eph 4:15). Unless we approach one another as “beggars”, with empty hands, we will not be acting from God’s grace but merely come to settle a score and to win an argument (or a court case). If we approach one another from a position of power, looking down on others, we destroy the possibility of reconciliation. The grace of God levels us with one another at the foot of the cross to be lifted up together by the Spirit of God into a life of shared obedience and joy.

We find in the Bible at least three distinct reconciliation roles that we are expected to play from time to time, depending on the situation in which we find ourselves. First, there is the *Zacchaeus* option, which refers to the role of a perpetrator of injustice or fraud who confesses his wrongdoing, apologises for it and takes concrete steps to make restitution to those s/he harmed (Lk 19:1-10). Then there is the *Ananias* option, the painful journey of the (potential) victim to extend forgiveness and healing to a perpetrator who harmed him/her or his/her loved ones (Acts 9:10-19). Finally there is the *Barnabas* option, where a third person, who wasn’t involved in the estrangement between two other people takes the initiative to bring them together (Acts 9:26-30).

It is clear that reconciliation is not a simple or instant matter. As we notice in Mt 18:15-20, it could take a long time to restore harmony in a community. Reconciliation is a long journey (Lk 24:13-35), in which

it is important for us to: a) share our stories of disappointment and loss, anger and frustration; b) expose ourselves to the living Christ and his word; c) eat together (or observe other rituals) in the presence of the Lord.

This attempt at finding reconciliation between our three churches is based on a joint acceptance that it is a shame, and a denial of Christ, to continue with our divided churches, particularly when we take each other to court over properties. It is a symptom of how carnal (Greek: *sarkikos*) we are (1 Cor 3:3): involved in “jealousy and quarreling”; and of how conformed we have become to this age (Rom 12:1-2), with its possessive understanding of property ownership. We fail to act as faithful stewards (*oikonomoi*: caretakers and managers) of *God’s property*, which God has merely *entrusted* to us. We run the risk of being controlled by greed and selfishness, so that we do not give glory to God nor bring good news to society around us. Our salt has lost its taste (Mt 5:13), because we are unable to resolve our differences in the name of Jesus and to share God’s resources (like land and buildings) with fellow members of the one Body of Christ.

### 2.3 Historical factors

The process of reconciliation within the Dutch Reformed Church family has to deal with the consequences of our South African economic and political history. One cannot deny that the changing political circumstances over the past 150 - 350 years influenced the DRC family in a fundamental way. In fact, the DRC family were key role players in that history, sometimes on opposing sides of the political divide. This did great damage to relationships and entrenched power differences across the DRC family. Division, mistrust and manipulation were widespread. In the recent past much has changed for the better, even though tensions remain, particularly around issues of poverty, community facilities, crime, place names and language.

The establishment of the URCSA in 1994 succeeded in overcoming some of the division in the DRC family, but also had the unintended consequence of causing a new division. The adoption of the Belhar Confession and the procedures followed in unifying the NGKA and NGSK caused some congregations in the Free State and Phororo to withdraw from the URCSA in order to continue the NGKA. This caused widespread tension over church properties and resulted in various court cases. The period of 1994-2006 can be seen as one of increasing estrangement, with successive waves of pain, anger and resentment washing over the DRC family. For a time the Convent meetings of the regional synods in the Cape and Southern/Northern Transvaal created positive momentum for unity in those regions, but the shadow of the tensions in the Free State and Phororo kept falling over those processes. It is now clear to all concerned that a satisfactory resolution of these property disputes and a softening of attitudes from all sides involved in the conflict are a prerequisite for the reunification of the DRC family. Reconciliation is a prerequisite for – and an essential dimension of – reunification.

People in poor and rural communities often attach a very high value to land, due to the fact that they lack so many other securities in life. It is understandable that the church building and manse of a poor congregation are key symbols of its identity, which people find extremely painful to lose, and for which they will do almost anything to retain when they run the risk of losing it. This attachment to church properties is not inherently bad, but it can be taken too far.

We certainly take it too far when we spend huge amounts of the hard-earned tithes and offerings of God’s people to pay attorneys and advocates, thus squandering the precious resources that members of our churches have given for God’s kingdom work to continue in our communities. This amounts to “stealing” funds away from the urgent projects of evangelism, education, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, poverty alleviation, job creation, etc. that we owe to our suffering communities. This is not just a mistake; it is a downright disobedient and irresponsible use of God’s resources. Paul’s harsh words in Gal 5:15 are applicable to us: “If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

### 2.4 Conclusion

This process therefore proceeds from the following starting points:

- a) We are dishonouring the name of God through our division and our fighting over properties, especially if we take this fighting to court;
- b) We are failing as God’s image bearers – stewards, caretakers and managers of God’s property – by failing to resolve our conflicts in terms of the gospel;
- c) Each of our three churches has contributed in some way to the division and the court cases; this process is not about one or two innocent church(es) proving the other church(es) guilty; we all come with humility and repentance to seek a new beginning together before the face of God;
- d) There is a better way to resolve conflicts among Christians, and that way is the way of love (1 Cor 12:31). Love makes us speak the truth to one another (Eph 4:15), to seek reconciliation as an essential part of our worship of God (Mt 5:23-24), and to genuinely care for one another in word and deed (1 John 3:18).
- e) This process is a call for the conversion of our three churches: away from the road of confrontation and negativity that we have adopted; and back to the way of love and unity, forgiveness and reconciliation, compassion and justice, which the Lord of the church has set out for us in Scripture:

*\* that God has entrusted to his church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the*

*church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

*\* that God by his lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God, by his lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable his people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world. (As formulated in the Belhar Confession).*

### **3. THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

#### **3.1 “Taking ownership” of the process**

It is essential that the whole DRC family take joint responsibility for this reconciliation process. For the process to succeed, the General Synodical Commissions of all four the churches, as well as the regional synods of Free State and Phororo/Northern Cape of the NGK, NGKA and URCSA need to endorse this document. However, the direct oversight and responsibility for the process will be in the hands of the “Achterberg” Joint Reunification Committee (JRC).

The four participating churches will sign an agreement (at each new stage or “level” of the process), solemnly committing itself to the process as an act of faith, in obedience to the Lord of the church. The wording of this commitment (covenanting together) should reflect the theological insights developed in this document (2.1 above). This commitment will be made by each General Synod, regional synod and participating local congregation. It will contain an undertaking by each church to suspend all court cases, at least for the duration of the commission’s operation, so that the three parties can really “give peace a chance”.

#### **3.2 History of the estrangement**

The events of division unfolding in each local situation were deeply influenced by the larger events surrounding the formation of the URCSA in 1994. The task team regards it as essential that the whole story of the unification process between the NGSK and NGKA, followed by the later withdrawal of some congregations to reconstitute the NGKA, should be written down as one of the first steps in the reconciliation process. This report will help each local process by painting the “bigger picture” beforehand, so that all those details need not be repeated in every locality but can be assumed to be known by all.

For such a historical account to be acceptable to all the parties, it will probably have to be written by a team of authors representing all the different viewpoints on the events. If it is written by one person, it will have to be discussed and edited by a team representing the NGK, NGKA and URCSA, so that all of them can identify with it. The JRC will appoint or contract the person(s) who will take responsibility for this.

### **4. THE PROCEDURES AT THE HEARINGS**

#### **4.1 Composition of the commission**

The task team proposes that the commission should consist of seven (7) people: a) a chairperson who is a respected conciliatory figure from another church; b) two members nominated by each of the participating churches (perhaps retired ministers), who are respected as conciliatory figures. No church member who wishes to make a submission to the commission may serve on it. The chairperson should be acceptable to all three churches.

It may be helpful to involve a group of observers, invited from the ecumenical partners of the three churches, to accompany the process in an advisory and supporting capacity. They would also have to be acceptable to all three churches, to ensure their credibility and to enhance their contribution to the process.

#### **4.2 Pilot project**

To test the credibility of the commission and to establish the format of its hearings and report writing, the commission will first engage in a “pilot project” of a month. This will involve a first group of four or five towns, where the narrative reconciliation process will be tested and refined. After this pilot project, the commission will submit an interim report to the JRC, for evaluation and subsequent report to the four General Synod executives. The report will contain recommendations on the way forward. If the evaluation is positive, the process will be extended to other localities. If the commission suggests any changes to its composition or functioning, these will be discussed and approved by the JRC. If the commission feels that the process is not working, it could recommend to the JRC that the project be terminated.

#### **4.3 The ongoing project**

If the pilot project is successful, the commission continues its work by visiting one locality at a time, and ideally complete the “hearing” in that area within the space of two or three days (a maximum of one week). The local church councils of the NGK, NGKA and URCSA will each make a written submission to the commission (with all necessary documentation like letters and church council minutes to substantiate its

view) two weeks before the hearing, in which each church explains “its side of the story”: what happened, when it happened, why it happened, in whose name the church properties were registered, how the parties reacted to the actions of the other parties, etc. Feelings of anger, hurt and disappointment will all be expressed in these submissions, but church councils will also be expected to make constructive proposals on how reconciliation can be achieved.

After hearing all the submissions, there will be an opportunity for the commission members (and participants) to ask questions to the other participants in order to get clarity if anything is still unclear. The commission should also identify differences of opinion or interpretation. The commission will not allow any speaker to attack or insult another participant (clear “ground rules” for interaction will be drawn up by the commission), but it will allow the participants to interact by asking questions or by contesting viewpoints, to help the commission to establish the “facts” of the situation.

The commission will have the right to invite particular people to come and tell their stories, if it is of the opinion that their contribution could clarify certain questions. People who tell their story will not “testify” under oath, since the commission has no statutory or legal function, but each participant will be asked to make a solemn declaration in the name of the triune God to speak the truth in love.

#### **4.4 Commission reports**

After each hearing, the commission withdraws from the public to write an interim report. In this report the commission will do three things: a) tell a detailed story of what happened, constructed from the three written submissions and the interactions during the hearing; b) identify and analyse the factors that caused the division and conflict; c) make concrete recommendations on the way towards reconciliation in that particular town/city.

Once a month the commission submits a consolidated report to the JRC executive on the hearings in the localities that it visited. If any urgent action in a local situation is proposed by the commission, this is communicated to the local church councils by the JRC executive. All other recommendations of the commission are discussed at full sessions of the JRC.

### **5. SHORT, MEDIUM AND LONG TERM PLANNING**

The task team identified the following time dimensions for the reconciliation process outlined above. The pilot project is a medium term goal, which should be completed by December 2007. The full execution of the reconciliation process is the long term goal, which could be completed by the end of 2008.

The task team felt that provision should also be made in the short term for urgent situations that may arise. When tension develops in a particular locality between congregations of the three churches, an emergency reconciliation team should be available to visit the area at short notice. The task team proposes that the emergency team should consist of the moderators of the General Synods of the four DRC churches, each having a list of secundi to go in his place if he is not available. Similar to the idea of “visible policing” in crime prevention, the idea is here of “visible church leadership” to diffuse urgent situations and prevent further estrangement between our churches, if possible.

### **6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The commission will cost money, since a number of people will have to set aside their other responsibilities and devote time to the hearings. A number of key decisions will affect the budget: Do all the hearings take place at a central venue (e.g. Bloemfontein), or does the commission move physically from town to town? Perhaps the pilot project can be done in Bloemfontein, to limit the variables in the early stages of the commission’s work.

The following items should appear in the budget for the pilot project:

Travel costs of commissioners to and from central venue 2 X 7 X R1 000	R14 000
Rental of transport (combi?) in Bloemfontein during hearings	R10 000
Accommodation costs 7 X 30 X R300	R63 000
Remuneration for chairperson (@ R500 per day) 1 X 30 X R500	R15 000
Administration (photocopying, etc.)	R5 000
Writing a history of the larger process – contract researcher(s) (?)	R10 000
Unforeseen expenses	R10 000
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>R127 000</b>
Compensation to church councils of ministers on commission (?) 6 X 30 X R250	R45 000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>R172 000</b>

A round figure of R130 000 should be adequate to fund a month-long pilot project of the commission.