

Dear Reader:

This report from the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee regarding the Belhar Confession is being sent to CRC congregations and classes for review. All responses to this report must be in the form of an Overture or Communication to Synod 2012. Such documents must be processed through a church council and then classis and received by the synodical services office by March 15 in order to be on synod's agenda.

If you have any questions regarding proper procedures, please contact the executive director or refer to the "Rules for Synodical Procedure" (pp. 6-7) available on the Synodical Resources site: www.crcna.org/pages/synodical.cfm.

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Prologue

The Belhar Confession speaks to a global reality. All who know something about the respective histories of Canada and the United States can recall the stories of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization that most often were inflicted on members of ethnic minorities. Previous synods of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), as this report will demonstrate, have repeatedly made statements that such expressions of injustice must not continue. Prophetic statements were adopted. A recent synod participated in a service of repentance and asked for forgiveness. All of that was good—but not sufficient. The CRC has not spoken *confessionally* to the issues of injustice and racism. Considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession provides an opportunity to do so now.

Some of the more frequently asked questions during the time of denominational discussion concerning the Belhar Confession have been “Why should North American churches generally, and the CRC in particular, adopt a confession that arose out of a situation in South Africa?” and “What does the Belhar Confession have to do with life here in North America?” These are important questions as we, as a denomination, approach the time of deciding (Synod 2012) whether or not to add the Belhar Confession to the forms of unity in the CRC.

Some years ago the synods of the CRC and the Reformed Church in America (RCA) agreed that the two denominations would cooperate in the process of discernment concerning the Belhar Confession. In that cooperative spirit, the following joint statement was developed as an introduction to the Belhar Confession:

From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world, “Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do.” These statements of faith, including the ecumenical creeds and the historic Reformed confessions, though centuries old and far removed from their place of origin, still guide our understanding of Scripture and of faith today, and of the life they call us to live.

In the late 20th century the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, like Christian leaders centuries before them, stepped forward to confront yet another critical issue that threatened the very core of the gospel message. The church and the society in which it ministered were torn by internal conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and subjugation of the disenfranchised. From this crucible of suffering emerged the Belhar Confession, a biblically based doctrinal standard of justice, reconciliation, and unity. This confession is intended to guide not only the personal lives of God’s children but also the whole body of Christ as it speaks and lives out God’s will—“to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” with God (Mic. 6:8).

Like the confessions that preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from a particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world—a testimony for all of God’s people in our time. South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the disenfranchised. The history of oppression in our own countries, and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time call for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—to confess that the Lord of life, who entrusted to us the “message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), is the Lord of our hopes and aspirations for a just and reconciled people.

Our South African brothers and sisters have asked us to join them in confession, forgiveness, and healing by formal adoption of the Belhar Confession, that

we might together say it aloud and live by it. May our prayer as we respond mirror the words in the “Accompanying Letter” to be read as a preface to the confession: “Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. . . .”

(*Agenda for Synod 2009*, pp. 282-83)

The Belhar Confession

I. Introduction

The denominational discussion about the Belhar Confession has been energetic and fruitful. In many instances the discussion was broadened to include consideration of the meaning of all confessions in the life of the CRC today and, not surprisingly, what it means to be a confessional church at this point in the CRC’s history. These were important discussions, and while we cannot claim that all are of one mind, the dialogue was an important factor in this three-year period of discernment.

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) is pleased to present this report to Synod 2012 in fulfillment of the instruction given to it by Synod 2009. This report begins with the mandate given to the EIRC, followed by the text of the Belhar Confession and its related materials, and concludes with the report of the EIRC.

II. Decisions of Synod 2009 and the mandate given to the EIRC

A. Synod 2009 decided the following with regard to the Belhar Confession:

That synod propose to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as part of the standards of unity of the CRC (as a fourth confession) and the revision of Church Order Supplement, Articles 5, 23-a, and 32-d and the Public Declaration of Agreement to reflect that adoption.

Grounds:

1. It is important at this time [in the light of our history and current reality] for the CRC to formally state its commitment to, and live out, the biblical principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice.
2. Adopting the Belhar Confession is an important testimony to the membership of the CRC that together we stand firm on matters that are rooted in scriptural teaching and flow from the heart of God.
3. It is an important testimony to Reformed churches worldwide that the CRC will stand with them in matters of confessional integrity.
4. Adopting the Belhar Confession is consistent with the decision of Synod 1996 when it adopted the recommendations concerning *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*.
5. This action would mean that the CRC is taking this step in concert with the RCA, a desire that previous synods have affirmed.
6. Since previous synods have expressed no difficulty with the Belhar Confession on biblical grounds, and given Dutch Reformed shortcomings over the past four hundred years (e.g., slave trade on the Gold Coast, numerous denominational schisms), this action would testify to our ecumenical partners and the world (as well as CRC members committed to unity, reconciliation, and social justice) that the CRC is taking a public stand to promote the principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice.
7. While there is no direct reference by name to the historic Reformed confessions in the Church Order itself, the Supplement to the Church Order, [as in] Article 5 (the Form of Subscription), lists the confessions by name.

8. Allowing for a three-year period of reflection (2009-2012) is consistent with the intent of Church Order Article 47 and its Supplement for a confessional matter of this magnitude. The additional time is given to the churches to adequately study and reflect on the proposal and be better prepared for response.

(Acts of Synod 2009, p. 604)

B. Synod 2009 also adopted the following statement in introducing the Belhar Confession to the CRCNA:

As Synod 2009 brings the Belhar Confession before the church for consideration, synod shares with the whole church the profound nature of this moment in the life of the church and therefore one that must not be entered into lightly but rather with godly fear and trembling, humbly trusting that we will be faithful to the gospel. With these understandings synod proposes to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Since Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice, our confessions are and must be historic and faithful witnesses to Scripture. Synod observes that the Belhar Confession truly expresses the biblical goals of unity, reconciliation, and justice; the church's commitment to these goals; and the fact that "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church" (The Belhar Confession, Article 2).

Synod further observes that, as a faithful witness to Scripture, the Belhar Confession does not negate the biblically derived statements of synod on homosexuality, including those of 1973 and 1996. Finally, synod recognizes that injustice and enmity between peoples are two dimensions of all-pervasive human sinfulness, for which every human being needs Jesus Christ as Savior.

(Acts of Synod 2009, p. 606)

In addition, synod authorized the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC; formerly Interchurch Relations Committee) "to promote the study of the Belhar Confession in the churches during this consideration period," and designated the EIRC "to represent Synod 2009's proposal to adopt the Belhar Confession at the meeting of Synod 2012" (*Acts of Synod 2009, p. 607*).

Finally, Synod 2009 expressed its gratitude "to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa for enriching the heritage of Reformed churches worldwide by developing and writing the Belhar Confession."

The grounds accompanying the decision are the following:

1. The themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice as expressed in the Belhar Confession are important dimensions of our common faith in obedience to the demands of biblical teaching.
2. The testimony of the Reformed family of churches from the Southern Hemisphere is an important contribution to the awareness and faith of churches in other parts of the world.
3. The Christian Reformed Church in North America wishes to stand in solidarity with brothers and sisters who together bear witness to all matters that reflect the heart of the gospel.
4. Synod 2009 affirms the decision of Synod 1990, which stated that "the Belhar Confession is in harmony with 'the Reformed faith as a body of truth' articulated in the historic Reformed confessions. . . ."

(Acts of Synod 2009, p. 607)

III. Information provided by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

A. Following is a letter written in 1986 by representatives of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) when the Belhar Confession was first circulated to the global Reformed community.

1. We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed church family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate, nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the Scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.
2. We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risk involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the Church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before men that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by him before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from his throne and from on high, but before his throne and before men. We plead, therefore, that this confession would not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block, Jesus Christ the rock.
3. This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no one will identify himself with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their sincerity, honor, integrity, and good intentions and their in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity, or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly rather

than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in his own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct which work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.

4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation, and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society which have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace to our country.

(*Agenda for Synod 2009*, pp. 283-84)

B. The Confession of Belhar (1986) translated from Afrikaans

(The following text of the Belhar Confession is reprinted from the *Agenda for Synod 2009*, pp. 285-87.)

1. **We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. **We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2:11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);

- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:3-4);
- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 3:27-28; James 2:1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with 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 (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21-22).
- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world (Eph. 4:17-6:23, Rom. 6; Col. 1:9-14; Col. 2:13-19; Col. 3:1-4:6);
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness

and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right (Deut. 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph. 2:14; Isa. 1:16-17; James 1:27; James 5:1-6; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 6:20-26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4:16-19; Rom. 6:13-18; Amos 5);
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

- 5. 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 (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory forever and ever.

Note: This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (USA). This text is the same as what was adopted by the Reformed Church in America and what is in use by the Presbyterian Church (USA).

IV. Summary of the denominational discussion

Since Synod 2009, the EIRC has offered and facilitated presentations of the Belhar Confession to thirty (30) classes, three (3) regional gatherings,

and twenty-two (22) congregations. Additional presentations were made by the Office of Race Relations, the Office of Social Justice, and others—some of whom presented an affirmative position with reference to adopting the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity, while others presented a position at variance with the official recommendation adopted by Synod 2009. Some classes and congregations took the initiative to study and discuss the Belhar Confession without facilitation from EIRC or other participants. The facilitated discussions on the whole were marked by interest and vigorous dialogue, not only about the Belhar Confession per se, but also about what it means to be a confessional church in the 21st century. The latter was an unintended but a vital part of the denominational dialogue. To retain the vitality of that discussion is a desirable quality of our life as a denomination.

While there are voices that raise concerns about the theology (or lack thereof) reflected in the Belhar Confession, the participants in the discussion generally accepted the previous declarations of synod that the Belhar Confession is faithful to Holy Scripture and consistent with the teachings of the Reformed confessions. Therefore the sessions conducted by the EIRC focused on providing background information to the historical development and applicability of the Belhar discussion to the life and ministry of the CRC. Some individuals (and even a classis or two) interpreted that approach as being too proactive for the adoption of the Belhar Confession by Synod 2012. Lest this become a point of contention as synod considers our report, the EIRC wishes to make a clear statement of its rationale as the denominational discussion unfolded.

The denominational discussion has sparked significant interest in and vigorous dialogue about the significance of the Belhar Confession. The discussion also revealed a great deal of passion about the various positions discussed. There certainly was not yet a “being of one mind” concerning the recommendation to adopt the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. In summary, highlights and the most common issues raised in the discussion follow:

A. Many of the participants were unfamiliar with the Belhar Confession, its history of development, its confessional nature, or even why it is proposed as a confession for Reformed churches both inside and outside of South Africa. That, however, is not a question for the Black and Reformed Conferees that meet annually. The participants in that fellowship have spoken passionately and convincingly about the relevance of the Belhar Confession to the North American experience.

B. Many who participated in the denominational discussion affirm the significance of the Belhar Confession and believe that it makes an important statement about the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice at a time when both the church and the world desperately need to hear that message.

C. The denominational discussion also revealed that there are alternate voices surrounding the decision of Synod 2009. The alternate views most often expressed were that the Belhar does not meet a standard associated with the historic confessions, is too ambiguous, and is too South African.

D. Participants in the discussion frequently asked for the precise reason why the CRC is considering the Belhar Confession for adoption as a fourth

confession. The response consistently given was that the URCSA asked (see the accompanying letter) and Reformed churches around the world—by way of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC)—recommended that member denominations consider adopting the Belhar Confession so as to make it a part of the global Reformed confessional basis (Agenda for Synod 1999, pp. 197-200; Agenda for Synod 2003, pp. 235, 246; Acts of Synod 2007, p. 592).

Synod 2009 also took note of the North American contextual introduction to the Belhar Confession that was prepared by representatives of the RCA and the CRC. While not officially part of the Belhar Confession, it was felt that such a contextual statement would assist the churches in understanding why the Belhar Confession has been judged to be applicable to churches living and ministering in Canada and the United States. Please see the full text of this statement in the Prologue section of this report.

Finally, when the Belhar Confession was circulated to the global Reformed community, the leadership of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa wrote a cover letter to travel with the confession. Synod 2009 considered this letter to be an essential accompaniment to the Belhar Confession and encourages synod to take note of that letter in the discussion that presently engages the Christian Reformed Church. Because of the letter's significance, the EIRC decided to include it (unedited) in section III, A of this report.

V. History of the Belhar Confession's development in South Africa

Understanding the historical development of the Belhar Confession is critical in assessing its validity as a confession and its applicability to the life of the CRC today. In summary form the following historical survey is provided:

A. The development of churches in South Africa

1. Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa established in 1652; three confessions: Heidelberg Catechism (HC), Belgic Confession (BC), and Canons of Dort (CD); "white" denomination associated with the system of apartheid. The roots of apartheid philosophy go back to this time period, when the original settlers considered themselves God's chosen people and a superior race.
2. Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) established in 1881 by the exclusively white DRC for people of color. Initially (from the 1850s on) the separation of "coloreds" from "whites" in worship was optional at the discretion of a local church council. The separation was institutionalized when a new denomination was formed.
3. Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) established in 1963 for "blacks."
4. Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) established in 1968 for people of "Indian descent."
5. Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) established in 1994; the DRMC ("coloreds") joined with the DRCA ("blacks").

B. *Dates leading up to the Belhar Confession*

1. 1652 – The Dutch formed a station at the Cape and introduced slavery.
2. 1857 – The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa decided to have separate services for “colored” members (discrimination at the Lord’s Supper was already occurring well before 1857).
3. 1881 – The Dutch Reformed Mission Church was established by the “white” Dutch Reformed Church for people of color.
4. 1963 – The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa was established for “blacks.”
5. 1968 – The Reformed Church in Africa was established for “Indians.”
6. 1978 – The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (“coloreds”) and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (“blacks”) decided to work for unity, an ideal that took sixteen years to fulfill. In the process, the Belhar Confession was formulated (1982).
7. 1982 – The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which in 2010 was reconstituted as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), meeting in Ottawa, Ontario, with a South African serving as president (the current president is also a South African), declared a *status confessionis* concerning apartheid. *Status confessionis* is a Latin term meaning that which is foundational for belief and behavior and must be affirmed by professing members of the church. In addition to calling apartheid a heresy, WARC suspended the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.
8. Later that same year (1982), the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (which is now part of the URCSA), at a meeting in Belhar (a suburb of Cape Town) also declared a *status confessionis* regarding apartheid, reasserting that it is a heresy and a misrepresentation of the gospel. In addition, the DRMC drafted a statement (that in 1986 became the Belhar Confession) dealing with three issues: (1) the unity of the church, (2) reconciliation in Christ, and (3) the justice of God. The synod also adopted an official accompanying letter addressed to the DRMC member congregations to explain the decision to draft the confession and to attest to the seriousness, spirit, and purpose behind it. It must be understood that the original audience of this letter was the DRMC member congregations, and that explains the use of the personal pronouns in the letter. After the Belhar Confession was adopted in 1986 and was presented to the global Reformed community, it was decided that the original letter would accompany the Belhar Confession as an apologia and explanation for the development of this statement of faith. The resulting Belhar Confession was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in 1986. When these denominations united in 1994, the newly formed Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa reaffirmed the Belhar Confession as one of its four confessions.

VI. History of the Belhar Confession and related matters in the CRC

A. *The origin of the discussion in the CRC*

It is important to note that the CRC has a history of its own related to the Belhar Confession. What follows is a summary of that history. Synod has, on a number of occasions, encouraged further consideration of issues related to biblical justice (including issues surrounding racism) as well as the themes articulated in the Belhar Confession.

1. 1959 – “In view of the racial tensions and the flagrant violation of the scriptural principle of equality occurring in society and the church both in America and in our world, the church has a calling to register a clear and strong witness to her members and her world” (*Acts of Synod 1959*, p. 84).
2. 1984 – “The IRC is giving careful consideration to the synodical decisions of the [Dutch Reformed Mission Church] at its meeting in 1982, particularly the New Confession which is adopted” (*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 172). “It is also essential for our denomination to relate with integrity to those who long and work for racial justice in South Africa” (*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 220). “Furthermore, the confession adopted by the [Dutch Reformed Mission Church] can only be judged to be in essential accord with the declarations on race issued by the [Reformed Ecumenical Council] and by synods of the CRC. . . . In view of the relation of ecclesiastical fellowship that exists between the CRC and the [Dutch Reformed Mission Church] and other Reformed churches in South Africa . . . , and in view of the ecumenical relationship of the CRC with the Reformed churches of South Africa in the Reformed Ecumenical Council, it is incumbent on the CRC, out of integrity toward these relationships, to judge the rightness of the judgment of the [Dutch Reformed Mission Church] concerning apartheid (that it is a sin) and the “moral and theological justification of it” (that it is a theological heresy) and concerning the faithfulness of the Reformed confessions and Scripture of the . . . new confessional statement. As for the latter, it is our judgment that the new confessional statement is in accord with the decisions of several synods of the CRC” (*Acts of Synod 1984*, pp. 602-3).
3. 1985 – “Further informal discussions were held [with the Gereformeerde Kerk in South Africa] on such questions as the relations between the constituent synods of the ‘Algemene Sinode,’ reactions to the Belhar Confession, and the assessment of the recent constitutional changes in South Africa” (*Acts of Synod 1985*, p. 211).
4. 1989 – “That synod instruct the IRC to study the Belhar Confession and present recommendations to Synod 1990 in response to the REC request” (*Acts of Synod 1989*, p. 497).
5. 1990 – “That synod endorse the IRC’s evaluation (pp. 217-219) which judges that the Belhar Confession is in harmony with ‘the Reformed faith as a body of truth’ articulated in the historic Reformed confessions and is in basic agreement with REC and CRC decisions on race made over the past decades; and, therefore, that synod declare that it has no objection to its inclusion in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II

of the REC constitution” (*Acts of Synod 1990*, p. 625). Note: At a subsequent meeting of REC the recommendation to add the Belhar Confession to Article II of the REC Constitution was vigorously debated but then not adopted. Nevertheless, it is assumed that the position of the synod of the CRC stands.

6. 1996 – Synod considered an extensive report from its Committee to Articulate Biblical and Theological Principles for the Development of a Racially and Ethnically Diverse Family of God (*Acts of Synod 1996*, pp. 510-15, 595-619). This report was published in 1996 (by Faith Alive Christian Resources) under the title *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*.
7. 1997 – “We believe . . . the ministry of racial reconciliation has to take a greater role and priority in the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. . . . We therefore urge synod to increase its efforts and its commitment toward the advancement of racial reconciliation” (Pastoral Ministries Report, *Acts of Synod 1997*, p. 686).
8. 1999 – “The general synodical commission of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa met in Bloemfontein on October 19-22, 1998. The CRC delegation was warmly welcomed to the meeting and was permitted a presence at the discussion table for the duration of its visit. We brought greetings, and in response we received greetings to our churches in which the relationship between our churches was prized, our well-being was prayed for, and our churches were challenged to adopt the Belhar Confession as their own. . . . The URCSA’s challenge to the CRC to adopt the Belhar Confession needs further reflection. . . . The URCSA believes it is necessary that the Belhar Confession be accepted as part of the confessional basis of a new, unified church in South Africa. To the URCSA this is a nonnegotiable condition” (*Agenda for Synod 1999*, pp. 197-200).
9. 2003 – “The general secretary of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) reiterated what he had told the IRC earlier, namely that the URCSA was asking churches in ecclesiastical fellowship with it to study the Belhar Confession to determine what place that confession might take among the faith statements of the respective denominations. The IRC has received this oral invitation as an official request from the URCSA and has committed itself to review and study the Belhar with a view to making a recommendation to synod about its status sometime in the future” (*Agenda for Synod 2003*, p. 235). “The CRC did make an initial decision regarding Belhar in 1990 when it said that the Belhar Confession ‘is in harmony with “the Reformed faith as a body of truth” articulated in the historic Reformed confessions and is in basic agreement with REC and CRC decisions on race made over the past decades. . . .’ (*Acts of Synod 1990*, p. 625). . . . Synod 1990, however, did not say anything about the Belhar Confession’s status within the CRC itself, and that is the kind of decision the URCSA would like the CRC to consider” (*Agenda for Synod 2003*, p. 246).
10. 2004 – “The BOT is also committed to seeing the implementation of the decisions made in 1996 when synod adopted the report *God’s Diverse and*

Unified Family" (Board of Trustees Report, *Agenda for Synod 2004*, p. 68). "The Christian Reformed Church has always had a good track record on addressing hunger and poverty but has realized that more needs to be done to address the *root causes* of world hunger. Understanding that hunger is always part of a complex web of natural disasters, poverty, oppression, structural injustice, and spiritual alienation, the CRC formed the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action (OSJHA) to address these root causes. Today, the OSJHA works to develop a deeper understanding of, and response to, God's call to let justice flow like a river in our personal and communal lives and in the structures of our societies, especially as it relates to hunger and poverty" (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 68-69).

11. 2005 – "The CRC and RCA delegations first met in December 2002. Three items were given priority for consideration: (1) the so-called orderly exchange of ministers from one denomination to the other, (2) a unified approach to dealing with the Belhar Confession as requested by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and (3) a concerted effort to find new ways to cooperate in ministry and among our congregations and classes. Our discussions with representatives of the RCA have been guided by the following agreed-upon items (as reported to Synod 2003): . . . Examine the Belhar Confession together because the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) has requested both the RCA and the CRC to study and adopt the Belhar. It may be possible for our two denominations to formulate a united statement of agreement on it. That would be a powerful statement to the URCSA" (*Agenda for Synod 2005*, p. 240). "The RCA has made great strides toward a greater understanding and acceptance of the Belhar Confession. The CRC participants in the dialogue group encouraged the RCA to produce their study materials in a form that would allow for its use as a discussion guide in the CRC context" (*Agenda for Synod 2005*, p. 241).
12. 2007 – "That synod encourage the ongoing work of the Interchurch Relations Committee to inform and engage the churches concerning the Belhar Confession and the issues raised by it through: (1) a greater dissemination of the Belhar Confession to the congregations in order to familiarize the denomination with it and the issues raised by it, and (2) regional level dialogues to be initiated by the Interchurch Relations Committee as part of their process of expediting a recommendation to Synod 2009" (*Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 592).
13. 2009 – "That synod propose to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as part of the standards of unity of the CRC (as a fourth confession) and the revision of Church Order Supplement, Articles 5, 23-a, and 32-d and the Public Declaration of Agreement to reflect that adoption" (*Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 604; see grounds in section II, A of this report).

The summary of synodical decisions listed above concerning the history of the Belhar Confession and related matters in the CRC references the decisions of Synod 1996. At that time synod adopted a comprehensive statement titled *God's Diverse and Unified Family*. The EIRC encourages synod's

delegates to read that report, also referenced above. While synodical reports are at risk of collecting dust on bookshelves, this particular report is critical to the discussion on the Belhar Confession. There is substantial consistency in the content of synod's decisions concerning matters of racial justice and what is confessed in the language of the Belhar Confession.

That consistency is clearly demonstrated in Synod 1996's adoption of the twelve biblical and theological principles as follows:

Creation

1. The world as God created it is rich and God glorifying in its diversity.
2. The created world with all its diversity has its unity in the one God, who created it through Jesus Christ.
3. The unity and diversity of the human race and of created reality reflect the unity and diversity of the triune God (namely, his oneness and threeness).

Fall

4. A fundamental effect of sin is the breakdown of the community.

New Creation

5. The uniting of all things in Jesus Christ is at the heart of God's eternal plan for the ages.
6. Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another are inseparable in God's saving work.
7. Already in the old covenant the scope of God's mission is racially and ethnically inclusive.
8. In Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church, God gives new power to the church, power to break down walls of separation and create a community that transcends divisions of race, ethnicity, and culture.
9. The church is God's strategic vehicle for embodying, proclaiming, and promoting the unity and diversity of the new creation.
10. God calls Christians to find their deepest identity in union with and in the service of Jesus Christ.
11. Obedience in matters of racial reconciliation calls us, individually and corporately, to continually repent, to strive for justice, and to battle the powers of evil.
12. Christians live and work in the hope that one day the reconciliation of all things will be fully realized.

(Acts of Synod 1996, pp. 512-13)

Following the adoption of these principles, Synod 1996 also adopted the following recommendations:

That synod, on the basis of the above principles, declare that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people, and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God's Word and the Reformed confessions.

Grounds:

- a. The . . . report demonstrates that the Bible declares this reconciled community to be God's will.
- b. The confessions declare that the catholicity of the church means that Christ "gathers, protects, and preserves" the church "out of the entire human race" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21 [Q. and A. 54]).

[And] that synod call the whole church—individual members, congregations, assemblies, agencies, and other ministries of the CRCNA—to respond to the biblical and theological principles regarding the development of a racially and ethnically diverse and united family of God by committing themselves

- a. To pray and work for the increased enfolding of ethnic-minority persons into the CRCNA in order to reflect more fully the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada and the United States.
- b. To ensure the equitable representation and meaningful participation of ethnic-minority persons in leadership and other roles of influence at all levels of denominational life.

(Acts of Synod 1996, p. 513)

While these decisions of Synod 1996 do not directly address the CRC's adoption of the Belhar Confession, they do lay the biblical and theological framework for giving serious consideration to the Belhar Confession's emphasis on unity, reconciliation, and justice. The 1996 decisions of synod focus primarily on the one unified family of God while the Belhar Confession covers a broader area of biblical teaching. Nevertheless, the consistency and overlap between these two sources is striking and can be considered as complementary.

Finally, it is appropriate to emphasize that the adoption of the Belhar Confession would not replace the confessions already affirmed as the basis of our unity, but rather, the Belhar should be seen as connecting and complementing our historic creeds.

B. Connecting with our ecumenical partners

The synod of the RCA in 2010 officially adopted the Belhar Confession as a fourth standard of unity. During the time of the EIRC's consideration and in conversation with representatives of the RCA, it was judged that a statement of introduction to the Belhar would help present the confession in the North American context. A joint statement was developed and is cited in the Prologue above. In addition, a letter was sent to all the ecumenical partners with whom the CRC is in ecclesiastical or corresponding fellowship. Not all of them responded, but a number of them that did respond have not yet taken up the matter of how to respond to the Belhar Confession. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) will be considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession at its general synod in October 2011. Finally, while not a church in ecclesiastical fellowship, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) voted not to adopt the Belhar Confession. It should be noted, however, that 63 percent of the PCUSA presbyteries voted in favor of adoption. The motion to adopt the Belhar Confession did not pass because the polity of the PCUSA (as in the RCA) requires a two-thirds majority to adopt a motion.

VII. Content of the Belhar Confession

A. An overview

Like the Belgic Confession (1561), the Canons of Dort (1618-1619), and the Barmen Declaration (1934), the Belhar Confession is a declaration of faith that emerged when certain practices in society and also the church were so clearly contrary to biblical teaching that the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel was at stake. The Belhar Confession focuses not only on the importance of believing and proclaiming biblical principles aright but also on the importance of obedient living and costly discipleship. The Belhar Confession's call for faithfulness in the areas of unity, justice, and reconciliation is both a timeless and a timely affirmation that such biblical themes are at the core of what it means to be the body of Jesus Christ in the world. While the

specific history of injustice in South Africa became the occasion for the drafting of a confessional response, both the political/social and the religious environments are similar in countless places around the globe. Similarly, North American history provides us with numerous examples that, at the core, were and are similar to the experience of people in South Africa. The current practice of injustice, in all its forms and in every land, lends support to the position that the Belhar Confession is universally applicable and relevant.

The five articles of the Belhar Confession and its tone-setting Accompanying Letter (the full texts for both are cited in section III above) can be summarized as follows:

1. Faith in the triune God

The Belhar Confession first confesses faith in the triune God. However, it goes further in identifying the practices of such a God “who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit.” This phrase clearly echoes Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 54 (Lord’s Day 21). (See John 10:14-16; Acts 20:28; Rom. 10:14-17; Col. 1:18.)

2. Unity of the church

The structure of the Belhar Confession is similar to the Canons of Dort, a confession that also arose out of a serious controversy in the church. Articles 2-4 of the Belhar Confession begin by affirming biblical doctrines and then reject teachings that are contrary to Scripture. It is self-evident that the unity of the church is paramount in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures as a gift to all of the disciples of Jesus. The unity of the church is in Christ and is the reality for all who follow him. The Belhar Confession states this as the principal reality in response to the polity of the church in South Africa during the apartheid era, when church unity was compromised based on racial heritage. The message is the same for the church everywhere. If 11 a.m. on Sunday morning is still one of the most racially segregated hours of our time, then this message is for all who live in such a cultural environment.

3. Reconciliation of people in Christ. This is the gospel for all—regardless of race, color, or origin. The gospel of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5) is God’s activity among people of all races as he gathers them unto himself. Reconciliation in Christ supersedes all human divisions. In Christ all are one.

4. God’s justice and care for the suffering, and the call of the church to work against injustice. While some have alleged that this emphasis in the Belhar Confession identifies it with “liberation theology,” it is indisputable that the Holy Scriptures teach us much about God’s concern for those who are suffering and are the victims of injustice. The prophets of the Old Testament, as well as the teaching of the New Testament, repeatedly emphasize that the church is called to “preach good news to the poor . . .” (Isa. 61:1).

5. A call to integrate the faith we confess and the practices by which we live. This inclusion in the Belhar Confession represents the best dimension of the Reformed tradition. The integration of what is confessed and what is lived in every sphere of human existence is of one piece. Word and deed together—what we confess and how we live—are integral to the Belhar Confession’s understanding of how God is for us and in us.

All of the confessions adopted since the Protestant Reformation emerged within specific circumstances. Likewise, the Belhar Confession emerged from within a specific South African experience. However, the themes of the Belhar Confession are biblical and universal. Even if one assumes the Belhar Confession to be primarily a response to the practice of forced (racial) segregation in South Africa (though its themes reach far beyond the issues of racial discrimination alone), the global picture reflects that racial divisions are a cancer-like reality in many cultures. The North American experience is no exception. Forced segregation has also been practiced in both Canada and the United States, and the practice of functional racial divisions is deeply embedded in North American culture (e.g., Native-American, Aboriginal, and First Nations residential schools, reservations, the containment of Japanese during World War II, public school segregation, the Timothy Christian School episode in CRC history, and so forth). In that sense the Belhar Confession speaks to the context of life in the CRC as well as the general cultural setting within which CRC members live and work.

As was true among the nearly 200 participants in the focus groups that preceded the decisions of Synod 2009, some participants in the denominational discussion felt that the Belhar Confession lacks applicability to the North American context. Many more of the participants preferred to discuss how synod might best respond. Suggestions and preferences ranged from that of synod gratefully noting and receiving the Belhar Confession as the testimony of the South African churches, to that of synod (like the general synod of the RCA) adopting the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession complementary to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. Specifically, suggestions made and discussed were considered by Synod 2009 as follows:

1. Propose the adoption of the Belhar as a fourth confession.
2. Adopt the Belhar as an ecumenical confession (a new category not on par with the historic three confessions).
3. Approve the Belhar Confession as a statement of faith on par with the Contemporary Testimony.

Synod 2009, upon recommendation of its advisory committee, chose to adopt option 1 by a 75 percent vote. Both at Synod 2009 and during the denominational discussion there appeared to be a strong conviction that the Belhar Confession raises deep issues for considering our biblical faith and our understanding of the core of the gospel.

The denominational discussion also engaged the issues that flow from the specific content of the Belhar Confession. For example, the statement in Article 2 “that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.” Does such a declaration exclude consideration of a member’s ethical and moral lifestyle practices? The EIRC believes that such statements need not be interpreted as excluding all other considerations. In fact, at the 2008 synod meeting of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, it was suggested that the Belhar Confession demands the inclusion of all people into the membership and offices of the church, including those committed to same-sex relationships. It is noted, however, that the synod firmly rejected this suggested interpretation as flowing from the Belhar Confession as adopted in 1986. Synod 2009 of the CRC, furthermore, in anticipation

of this concern, adopted a supplemental statement that is pertinent to this point. Synod, in effect, stated that adopting the Belhar Confession would not cancel out or contradict previously adopted ethical guidelines that guide the church (*Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 606).

Also frequently discussed is Article 4 (the justice section) of the Belhar Confession, which states “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” Does this declaration mean that God is not the God of the rich? The EIRC believes, and Synod 2009 concurred, that this statement is fully consistent with what is written in Isaiah 61 and repeated by Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry in Luke 4. It is a confessional statement of God’s concern for those in special need and not a limiting statement for God’s providential care as experienced by all. Nevertheless, does this language suggest an implied endorsement of what is known as “liberation theology”?

Liberation theology can be described in a variety of ways, but at its core it is “an interpretation of religious faith from the perspective of the poor, oppressed and victimized” (B.A. Robinson). It is true that the Belhar Confession emerged out of a crucible of suffering, and it is also true that the language of the Belhar Confession clearly calls the church to recognize “that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry” (Art. 4). But such language is not the exclusive domain of liberation theology, and the phrase “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” does not mean that the Belhar Confession is flawed in its biblical understanding of God’s concern.

The EIRC believes that the phrase “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” should be read in the context of the rest of the article, and the EIRC notes that the language of this article is remarkably close to the language of Scripture. It is possible to read into almost any phraseology some unintended meaning, and it is more likely, as John de Gruchy argues, that the Belhar actually provides “a creative Reformed response to the challenge of liberation theology” (John W. de Gruchy, “The Church Always Reforming,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 12:2 [1991], p. 174).

B. Is the Belhar Confession biblical and consistent with the Reformed confessions?

This is the critical question that Synod 2012 must answer again as it considers adopting the Belhar Confession as the fourth confession for the CRC. Synod 1990 adopted the EIRC’s evaluation “that the Belhar Confession is in harmony with ‘the Reformed faith as a body of truth’ articulated in the historic Reformed confessions and is in basic agreement with REC and CRC decisions on race made over the past decades; and, therefore, that synod declare that it has no objection to its inclusion in the list of Reformed confessions in Article II of the REC constitution.”

That decision represents more than the formal approval to add the Belhar Confession to the constitution of REC. To say that there is harmony within the various confessions also affirms, at least implicitly, that the Belhar Confession is biblical in its content and confessional affirmations. Because several synods have affirmed that conclusion, it likely is not necessary to make the case again. Furthermore, the Reformed ecumenical organization(s) of

which the CRC is a member have also affirmed the biblical and confessional integrity of the Belhar Confession.

C. *Would the Belhar Confession enrich the CRC's confessional basis?*

The EIRC believes the clear answer to be yes. The following points are the EIRC's reasons for recommending the adoption of the Belhar Confession:

1. The Belhar Confession fills a significant gap in our confessional heritage. There is little mention in our three historic Reformed confessions (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) of the significant biblical themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. These three confessions were written within sixty years of each other and were adopted within the context of conditions in northern Europe. Much has been learned about the fullness of the Reformed faith since that time, and the Belhar Confession supplements the confessions that have guided Reformed churches.
2. The Belhar Confession's content is the gospel and is fundamental to our faith. The biblical themes of the Belhar Confession are larger in Scripture than some of the other themes the historic confessions focus on. For example, Scripture is less explicit about total depravity than the obligation for God's people to live in unity. Further, countless passages of Scripture indicate God's concern about justice for the poor, widows, orphans, the suffering, and so forth.
3. The Belhar Confession addresses key issues of concern to all churches. For example, racism and other forms of exclusion are universal. The Belhar Confession is currently being studied by a number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. According to Professor Lyle Bierma, a leader of the Middle Eastern Council of Churches believes that the Belhar is highly relevant to the conflict in Palestine and Israel.
4. The time and place of the Belhar Confession's origin expand the breadth of our confessional base, making it more representative of worldwide Reformed faith throughout history. What is particularly significant is that the Belhar Confession is the first and only confessional contribution received from the Reformed community in the Southern Hemisphere. Also, the Belhar Confession is the only confession in the global Reformed community's history that wasn't written during the sixty-year period from 1561 to 1619.
5. The Belhar Confession can enrich our Christian way of life. As the letter from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa points out, the Belhar Confession functions as "an instrument for profound self-examination, to help determine whether the church really lives by the faith it proclaims." The Belhar Confession's theological confrontation of sin has made a contribution to the reconciliation effort among Reformed churches in Southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa. It may do so elsewhere. In South Africa, the Belhar Confession has also been integrated into Christian music, worship, and personal and corporate confessions of guilt. It can be used in the same way by CRC congregations.

VIII. Why adopt the Belhar as a confession?

There are some participants in the denominational discussion who are suggesting that synod “affirm,” perhaps even “endorse,” the Belhar Confession but not adopt it as a fourth confession. Presumably, if the Belhar Confession were “affirmed” or “endorsed” instead of “adopted,” then it would have a standing in the CRC similar to the Contemporary Testimony. It is important to note that the proponents of this alternative action by synod, for the most part (with some exceptions), have not raised principal objection to the Belhar Confession as such. It should also be noted that the EIRC report to Synod 2009 mentioned that this option had been considered by the committee but, for various reasons, was not recommended as the preferred way forward. At least part of the reason Synod 2009 decided for the adoption route is that “affirming” or “endorsing” the Belhar Confession seemed a less than adequate response to the global reality, as well as to the context of injustice, racial tension, and disunity within which the CRC does its ministry. The themes of the Belhar Confession, it seems to the EIRC, deserve more than mere affirmation. Because the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa declared, and the Reformed Ecumenical Council recommended, that the Belhar Confession have confessional status, speaking confessionally is the preferred and more excellent way.

Another important dimension that EIRC wishes to call to synod’s attention is the following. Speaking confessionally to an issue is different from affirming or endorsing the Belhar Confession to be a good and helpful expression of the faith. The Contemporary Testimony, as popular in the CRC as it is, and as beautifully written as it is, it is *our* testimony. It is our statement of what we believe the CRC is to be and to do. In many ways it is as much a statement to ourselves about what we believe (subject to periodic revision) as it is a statement to the world. But, however it is affirmed, it is not a confession, was not written as one, and has never been proposed to the global Reformed community as a confession. The Belhar Confession is consistent with what CRC synods have said about the Belhar Confession’s themes for decades. It has been called a confession that is “a cry from the heart” by a part of the Reformed family that suffered injustice and dehumanizing racism for several hundred years. While the Belhar Confession was given voice in the context of South Africa, the experience of the oppressed and disenfranchised is a global problem and also finds expression in our North American communities of which we are a part and within which our congregations minister. It is because the Belhar Confession also speaks to us and our faith formation that the EIRC reaffirms its recommendation that the Belhar Confession be adopted as a fourth confession and be considered a standard of our faith and faithfulness to the gospel’s message.

IX. Church Order Supplement revisions

Church Order Supplement Article 5 lists the confessions in the Form of Subscription. In the event that synod adopts the Belhar Confession, it is appropriate that it then be added to the list of confessions within this supplement. Similarly, Church Order Supplement, Articles 23-a and 32-d would also need to reflect the adoption of the Belhar Confession as part of the forms of unity for officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church. The recom-

mentation of the EIRC is simply that the office of the executive director be authorized to make the appropriate changes.

If these changes are accepted by Synod 2012, the question has been asked whether all current officebearers would be required to once again sign the Form of Subscription. That question can only be answered by synod itself, but the EIRC suggests that such a requirement is logistically very difficult and probably unnecessary. If the changes are accepted, the Belhar Confession will be included in all future references to the confessions of the CRC. If any officebearers should be faced with a difficulty contained in the Belhar Confession that would prevent them from giving their assent with a clear conscience, then the same procedure would apply as is already the case for such a difficulty with any of the other confessions that are part of our standards of unity.

X. Conclusion

The EIRC was instructed by Synod 2009 to represent (and defend) the Belhar Confession decision at Synod 2012. The denominational discussion exposing some alternate convictions notwithstanding, the EIRC feels compelled to now place this matter before the church with the same recommendation it brought to Synod 2009. All confessions are rooted in specific historical events and circumstances. The Belhar Confession is no different and comes to us as a “cry from the heart” from brothers and sisters both outside and inside the Christian Reformed Church. It is our prayer that synod will take a confessional stand on the fundamental importance of the unity of the church and the importance to proclaim the message of reconciliation, and make an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of biblical justice in a sinful and broken world.

XI. Recommendations

A. That Synod 2012 adopt the Belhar Confession as part of the standards of unity of the CRC (as a fourth confession) and authorize the executive director to implement the revision of Church Order Supplement Articles 5, 23-a, and 32-d and the Public Declaration of Agreement to reflect that adoption.

Grounds:

1. It is important, in this time of unprecedented global realities, for the CRC to formally state its commitment to, and to live out, the biblical principles of unity, reconciliation, and justice.
2. Adopting the Belhar Confession is an important witness to the membership of the CRC that together we stand firm on matters that are rooted in scriptural teaching and flow from the heart of God.
3. It is an important witness to Reformed churches worldwide that the CRC will stand with them in matters of important confessional issues.
4. Adopting the Belhar Confession is consistent with the decision of Synod 1996 when it adopted the recommendations concerning *God's Diverse and Unified Family*.
5. This action would mean that the CRC is taking this step in concert with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and that the CRC wishes to reflect our unity with them, a commitment that previous synods have affirmed.

6. Since previous synods have expressed no difficulty with the Belhar Confession on biblical grounds, and considering our own struggles with the issues raised in the Belhar Confession, as well as identifying with the struggles of other churches in the Reformed family over the past four hundred years (e.g., slave trade on the Gold Coast, numerous denominational schisms, etc.), this action would bear witness to our ecumenical partners and the world (as well as CRC members committed to unity, reconciliation, and justice) that the CRC is taking a public stand to promote such principles.
7. While there is no direct reference by name to the historic Reformed confessions in the Church Order itself, the Supplement to the Church Order, in Articles 5, 23-a and 32-d, as well as the Form of Subscription itself, do list the confessions by name.

B. That synod declare the inclusion of (1) the Accompanying Letter, (2) the joint statement of the RCA and the CRC, (3) the statement introducing the Belhar Confession to the CRCNA, and (4) the Prologue section of this report to be part of synod's adoption of the Belhar Confession.

Ground: These documents are important to the proper understanding of the Belhar Confession's context and applicability.

C. That synod encourage the churches to incorporate the themes of the Belhar Confession into their discipling and liturgical ministries.

Ground: Adding the Belhar Confession to the standards of unity in the CRC, and in view of the current issues facing the global society and the church, discipling the current membership of the CRC is a first step in living out the Belhar Confession's themes and embracing its values.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee
William T. Koopmans, chair