

## **An Inside Story:**

### **The Making and Shaping of**

### ***Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony***

by Morris N. Greidanus

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am thankful to the church for trusting me to be on the committees that led up to and wrote *Our World Belongs to God*. The Writing Co-op at Calvin College and the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship provided time, space, and encouragement to put my notes and memories in order. The staff of the Calvin College library and the denominational archives provided detailed records.

—Morris N. Greidanus, 2017

## To Witness with Relevance

Throughout its history, the Christian church has engaged in writing new creeds and confessions to express its growing understanding of the faith and to confront confusing teachings and heresies. That development is visible in the [ecumenical creeds](#) and the [Reformed confessions](#) embraced by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Since its beginning in 1857, however, the CRC has held firmly to its confessions as its Forms of Unity, not wishing to add to or subtract from them without weighty reason and careful study.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, as the church is called to witness with relevance in an ever-changing world, the need to clarify confessional statements and even to craft new ones will invariably arise. In this regard, a remarkable number of confessional initiatives took place in the 20th century:

- The German “Confessing” church adopted the Barmen Declaration in 1934 in opposition to organized Nazi attempts to form a “German Christian” church.<sup>2</sup>
- The United Church of Canada wrote its “New Creed” with the comforting theme “We are not alone” in 1968.<sup>3</sup>
- The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, to which the CRC was closely linked at the time, asked professors G.C. Berkouwer and H. Ridderbos to draft a new confession. It was called a “Proef van een Nieuw Belijden” (“A Taste of a New Confession”). Two major Reformed synods of 1974 and 1975 received it warmly.<sup>4</sup>
- The Reformed Church in America published “Our Song of Hope” in 1975 as a “provisional confession of faith.”<sup>5</sup>
- The Mennonite General Conference adopted the “Mennonite Confession of Faith” in 1963.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Belgic Confession, Art. 36, and Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 80.

<sup>2</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), states: “The theological renaissance was further stimulated by churchly resistance to Nazi totalitarianism; the German ‘Barmen Declaration’ of 1934 insisted that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God that men are to hear, trust, and obey.”

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/new-creed>

<sup>4</sup> <https://standardbearer.rfpa.org/node/39630>

<sup>5</sup> Eugene P. Heideman, *Our Song of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1975). See also [rca.org/resources/our-song-hope](http://rca.org/resources/our-song-hope).

- The Presbyterian Church (USA) wrote a new confession to add to their others in a *Book of Confessions*.<sup>7</sup>
- The Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa drafted the Belhar Confession in 1982 as a strong statement against “apartheid theology” and practice, and formally adopted the new confession in 1986. Since then it has been adopted or affirmed by a number of other Reformed churches.<sup>8</sup>

The Christian Reformed Church was not isolated from this confession-writing activity. In the 1960s it was actually making a surprising number of confessional statements in various areas of the church’s life as its ministries and agencies went diligently about their work in God’s world.

In the decades around 1971 the CRC synods discussed war (Vietnam, nuclear weapons, draft evasion), worship, women in office, film arts, capital punishment, world hunger, race, dancing, and many more topics that were in the air at the time. In this way and by extensive studies conducted by appointed committees, the CRC applied the faith and biblical insights to then-current problems. A number of study reports, in fact, included near-confessional summaries. For instance, the report of the Task Force on World Hunger includes a liturgical Declaration on World Hunger.<sup>9</sup>

### **A New Confession for the CRC?**

Since the church had been adding such near-confessional statements incidentally as issues arose, it was no surprise that eventually some would ask for more comprehensive changes. Thus, in 1971 Classis Chatham presented an overture to synod, suggesting that “it is necessary and desirable to re-express the faith of the church in a new confession which will replace the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort as a statement of truth and as our standard of

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<sup>6</sup> Mennonite General Conference, *Mennonite Confession of Faith* (Scottsdale, Pa./Kitchener, Ont.: 1963)

<sup>7</sup> [oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/constitutional-services/constitution](http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/constitutional-services/constitution)

<sup>8</sup> *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive, 2013), p. 145

<sup>9</sup> *Acts of Synod 1978* (Christian Reformed Church), pp. 80-81, 619

unity.”<sup>10</sup> Classis Alberta North came<sup>11</sup> with a similar but different request. They endorsed the notion of re-expressing the faith in a new confession but found it “premature” to speak of replacing the three Reformed confessions.<sup>12</sup>

Synod’s advisory committee leaned on the comments of Alberta North and agreed that “it is always desirable for the church to confess its faith in contemporary ways”—so, “recognizing that at times it becomes necessary for the church to augment its confession,” synod asked for a committee to study the how, whether, and what of such an addition.<sup>13</sup>

The committee was to report in 1972! That is very little time for a study committee.

### **The New Confession Committee**

Surprisingly the committee was named the *New Confession Committee*, while its mandate was really “augmentation” of the confessions. Members of the committee were Dr. L. Oostendorp (chair), Dr. J. Kromminga, M. Greidanus (secretary), L. Schalkwyk, and H. Arens. The committee soon learned that it represented the two sides of the discussion quite well. To begin its work, the committee prepared a survey and sent this to consistories by November 1971. The survey asked local congregations the questions that synod had assigned:

- How can the church confess its faith in contemporary ways today?
- Do you consider it necessary that the church augment its confession at this time?
- In what areas do you consider it desirable to augment our confession?

The committee’s cover letter reassured the church “that we understand our mandate to allow only for augmenting (increasing) the church’s confession and not for reducing or diminishing it in any way.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Acts of Synod 1971*, p. 624

<sup>11</sup> The churches receive the annual synod’s agenda well before the meeting, allowing for local discussion, comment, and related overtures.

<sup>12</sup> *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 672-73

<sup>13</sup> *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 109-10, 148

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the New Confession Study Committee, Nov. 10-11, 1971

Each committee member also went home to study some part of the task—that is, what other churches were doing, the function of the creeds, a study of how the word “confession” is used in the Bible, and a number of the study committee reports that showed where further confessional statement was needed.

The study committee received 367 responses from the churches, and the results of the survey revealed that a majority of the churches were “not ready at this time to augment its confession.” Many were alarmed at the idea of tampering with the confessions.

The New Confession Study Committee reported these findings to Synod 1972. The committee urged at the same time that synod ask the churches to focus attention on the task of confessing the faith today, and to nourish that concentration by writings and study.<sup>15</sup> The 1972 synod continued the committee’s mandate. Therefore the committee decided to meet with several denominational leaders to learn from them. That discussion considered whether any new statement should be brief (like the Apostles’ Creed), or detailed (like the Belgic Confession). But rather than providing a decision on format, the final takeaway was this: *Our members are not familiar with the confessions.*

Therefore, the committee<sup>16</sup> recommended the following steps to the churches that could make the current confessions more accessible to more church members:

1. Produce new translations of the confessions.
2. Church-school materials should quote the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort as well as the Heidelberg Catechism.
3. It would be helpful to sing some favorite catechism passages, like Lord’s Day 1.
4. Prepare a booklet summarizing the faith we confess, and another to collect the CRC’s doctrinal and practical statements.
5. Encourage preaching/teaching on the other confessions as well as the catechism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Minutes, Mar. 1-2, 1972; see also *Acts of Synod 1972*, pp. 30-31, 402-14.

<sup>16</sup> S. DeYoung replaced L. Schalkwyk on the committee by this time.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes, Nov. 15, 1972; see also *Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 65.

All of this was put into motion; the confessions and the ad hoc ways in which we confess received more attention. It helped that the CRC had its own printing plant at the time, and that the committee received excellent cooperation in these suggested projects.

### **A Helpful Alternative**

Four years passed as these recommendations began taking shape. In 1976 the committee agreed on a recommendation suggesting a helpful alternative: to “augment our confessions by an additional creedal statement that reflects especially on the church’s place in the world and its mission to the world.”<sup>18</sup>

What helped the committee to move to this next step was its discovery that the dilemma—replace or augment—could be overcome. It did not have to be all or nothing. We learned about a third way. For instance, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, which is committed to the Westminster Standards, periodically adopts a “testimony” which speaks to issues not covered by the Westminster Confession.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Rev. Edward Van Baak, a CRC missionary in Asia, stopped by a committee meeting to make the same observation about the church in Japan. It regularly issued a “testimony” that comments on the confessions.

With that in mind, the committee’s 1977 report to synod noted that areas like church and state, Christian hope, the mission of the church in the world, and many others needed to be addressed in the current context. But it asked for a “modest approach”:

The committee proposes a modest approach to this evident need. In the first place, in order both to reflect the supplementary character of the proposed new document and to allow the church to decide for itself whether to consider it a confession in the classical sense, we propose that we speak of it as a “testimony” rather than a “confession.” In the second place, rather than spring immediately into a writing effort, we propose that a special committee be appointed to address

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<sup>18</sup> Minutes, Dec. 1976

<sup>19</sup> *Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 654

a forthcoming synod (probably two years hence) on various matters related to the writing of such a “testimony.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Planning What to Write**

Synod agreed “that there is a need to move in the direction of formulating a contemporary testimony in view of the secularization of modern life and culture.”<sup>21</sup> It promptly appointed the “special committee” and, for the first time, called it the *Contemporary Testimony Committee*. It was a strongly theological, pastoral group of G. Spykman, A. Kuyvenhoven, M. Greidanus, T. Hofman, R. Mouw, and C. Tuyl.<sup>22</sup>

The Contemporary Testimony Committee (CTC1) held its first meeting on October 5, 1977, to organize itself and to assign research. In January 1978 it met again to explore the mandate and to discuss what status the church had in mind for the contemporary testimony and, consequently, what it was to aim for.

Clearly, the contemporary testimony was not to be a fourth form of unity.

The reason for the testimony was also not any claimed inadequacy in the three forms of unity, nor a drastic change in the faith. The church had concluded, rather, that times change, the Spirit moves, and new things happen.

The committee also thought the contemporary testimony should be more than a loose collection of statements about various issues; it should be a unified testimony to the whole of faith. A playful but helpful image for the contemporary testimony emerged: the committee referred to it as “a seasonal flower next to perennial plants.”<sup>23</sup> When the committee turned its attention to areas that should be addressed, it discovered 56 topics—some big, some less so. It looked for ways to categorize them and for an organizing pattern.

- Sin – saved – serve, like the Heidelberg Catechism?
- Creation – fall – redemption, like the Belgic Confession?

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<sup>20</sup> *Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 660

<sup>21</sup> *Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 89

<sup>22</sup> *Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 150

<sup>23</sup> CTC1 Minutes, Jan. 5, 1978

- What about the kingdom theme so evident in the gospels?

The committee came to Synod 1979 with a detailed and apparently persuasive report.<sup>24</sup> It listed issues that needed attention, proposed a central theme, offered a variety of structures, and commented on the possible status of the document.

The categories under which the topics should be addressed were as follows:

- the church
- basic issues in human relations
- fundamental human needs
- issues in the larger public domain

The committee hoped for a testimony that would “articulate the *kingdom* vision of our unique strand of Calvinism. If that vision should determine the document,” then the testimony would “not only join orthodoxy with piety but . . . also insist on the inseparable connection between ‘that which is to be believed’ and ‘that which is to be done.’”<sup>25</sup>

It also noted that “although education in home, church, and school has received much synodical, classical, and consistorial attention, we have no confessional statement on this topic.”<sup>26</sup>

Various structures were proposed, and some samples of such confessional writing were provided.

The committee also urged that while the status of the contemporary testimony could not be determined ahead of time, the committee that would write the document should begin its work knowing that the church was “aiming for a contemporary testimony that might eventually gain confessional standing.”<sup>27</sup>

Synod 1979 adopted these recommendations. It proposed a timeline that a draft of the contemporary testimony be completed by 1983, followed by circulation of the draft to the

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<sup>24</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, pp. 75-76, 519-33

<sup>25</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, p. 524

<sup>26</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, p. 527

<sup>27</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, p. 531



churches for study, after which the writing committee should incorporate any revisions necessary and produce a final draft to the Synod of 1986.<sup>28</sup>

### **Writing the Testimony**

The synod's executive committee began to look for nine persons, men or women, subscribing to the three forms of unity and willing to commit themselves for six years to write the contemporary testimony. After some shuffling the committee included Gordon Spykman, Morris Greidanus, Robert Recker, Lawrence Den Besten, Calvin Hoogendoorn, Richard Mouw, Bastiaan Nederlof, George Vandervelde, and Aileen Van Ginkel: two theologians, one sociologist, one missionary, one lawyer, one philosopher, one medical professor, and two pastors.<sup>29</sup> There was some carryover from the previous committee: Spykman, Mouw, and Greidanus. It was a wonderfully congenial and creative working group.

This reconstituted committee (CTC2) decided early on that the format of the contemporary testimony would be a full-perspective approach rather than an issue-oriented approach. And it began to think of various levels: a synopsis, a "fleshed-out" creed, and a "prospectus for the testimony (not necessarily in confessional language) which will circumscribe the issues to be addressed."<sup>30</sup> These levels emerged in the 1983 draft as the Preamble, the body of the contemporary testimony, and a collection of essays relating to topics addressed in the testimony.

After discussing a variety of themes suggested by committee members, the group coalesced around Bastiaan Nederlof's suggestion: "Our World Belongs to God." It stuck!

Larry Den Besten came to one of the first meetings with the UCLA style guide for gender-inclusive language (then just becoming a concern). Some thought it unnecessary: "Everybody knows that 'man' is a generic term for 'woman and man.'" But the committee agreed with Den Besten—and saved the contemporary statement from soon having outdated language.

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<sup>28</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, pp. 75-76

<sup>29</sup> *Acts of Synod 1979*, p. 138; *Our World Belongs to God* (2008), Preface

<sup>30</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Mar. 13-14, 1980, Art. 13, 15

Committee members composed and reviewed models of a preamble (I was asked to rework these drafts with other Toronto members). And the major elements of the testimony's confessional section fit neatly within the rubrics of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

The committee aligned with its mandate and worked together with harmony and friendship; moreover, it consulted with those who did not share its view of things. For instance, it had a lively discussion with Rev. J. Piersma and Dr. P.Y. DeJong about their concerns as shown in their writing of "Our Testimony—An Appeal."<sup>31</sup>

By June 1981 the committee chair, Gordon Spykman, warned us to step up the pace as the realities of a 1983 draft-submission deadline sank in. In spite of binational and coast-to-coast travel, he increased the meeting schedule, called for subcommittee meetings, and assigned sections to committee members, asking them to circulate<sup>32</sup> these to all the members "to stimulate them to get on with the task."<sup>33</sup> Much of the committee's approach to writing the testimony fell into place at this June 1981 meeting:

- The theme "Our World Belongs to God" expressed the kingdom theme that would permeate the document. "Renewal" cried out to be added to Creation – Fall – Redemption, so the general sections became Creation – Fall – Redemption – New Creation.
- Committee members who drafted a section (e.g., on missions) were to review and note which issues were actually addressed.
- Further, the committee tried to find ways of stating repentance and confession in the same paragraph, rather than having a separate section on confessed failures. An example of that approach is paragraph 51 as proposed to Synod 1983:<sup>34</sup>

Since God chose to reveal his image in women and men,  
one sex does not look down on the other,

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<sup>31</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 11-12, Art. 6

<sup>32</sup> This was done before the advent of Internet and email. With some nostalgia I paged through carbon copies in the archives.—MNG

<sup>33</sup> CTC2 Minutes, June 5, 1981

<sup>34</sup> *Acts of Synod 1983*, p. 419. See also the 1986 approved document (para. 47) and the 2008 revision (para. 45).

nor do we flaunt or exploit our sexuality.  
Our roles as men and women are shaped  
more by God's gifts and commands  
than by cultural patterns.  
Sexuality can become disordered in our broken world,  
but Christ's renewing work gives hope for order and healing,  
and surrounds suffering persons  
with a compassionate community.

This sample illustrates the style that developed for the main section of the contemporary testimony. It also shows restraint in that we could not say more than the church had decided by then on gender and sexuality issues. And to avoid overuse of "ought" and "should" language, we used what we called the "confessional indicative," which has the force of stating how things are to be.

Rich Mouw had written a preamble in this style, as well as sections on Christ and the Scriptures. He was asked to rework the balance of the material in the same way and share it with George Vandervelde for reworking.<sup>35</sup>

- We had also been researching what other churches were doing in confession-writing. Our minutes list the following as items to remember:<sup>36</sup>
  - the dignity of being single
  - the role of the state and the role of the church with regard to the state
  - that the church should maintain a distance from identifying with any particular economic system
  - that some statement should be made with regard to Christian education
  - that a positive statement should be made regarding God's gifts in music and the arts versus a narrow reactionary asceticism
  - that something ought to be said in the area of ecumenical relations, especially regarding Reformed/Roman Catholic and Reformed/Anabaptist relationships in the light of certain statements in our confessions

Another level of presenting the contemporary testimony also came into view: a commentary on the contemporary testimony in which issues would be treated in more

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<sup>35</sup> This section summarizes items from CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 5-6, 1981.

<sup>36</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 5-6, 1981, Art. 6

detail. This concept incorporated the earlier idea of providing a collection of essays on the testimony's various topics. The proposed commentary<sup>37</sup> eventually became the Study Version of Our World Belongs to God. It contained the 58 paragraphs of the testimony, 37 brief essays with discussion questions on paragraphs of the testimony, and lists of confessional and scriptural references.

By January 1982 we had to get a progress report ready for that year's synod. We discussed the option to employ a writer full-time but instead asked our reporter (M. Greidanus) to write the report and "to work over the material thus far produced and to polish up its style, etc."<sup>38</sup> We also asked several people to read the draft critically from their perspectives, and we encouraged committee members to share sections of the draft with colleagues whose reactions they would value.

We reconvened for our April 1982 meeting with a stack of contemporary testimony revisions and commentary sections. The committee read through these, made suggestions, and asked the authors or the reporter to make further revisions.

After working on some commentary sections, we agreed to this approach:

1. Take note of current trends; welcome what is good in such trends.
2. Confess and report on past sins/errors.
3. Reject/condemn contemporary errors.
4. Warn the church about such dangers and call the church to obedience.

Further, we agreed to the following:

- In general this should be done in the context of an address to secularism, striking the note that the earth is the Lord's.
- We should also deal with current issues that were not dealt with in our confessions, or were dealt with inadequately.
- The tone of this writing should perhaps be more informational/analytical than confessional.

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<sup>37</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 5-6, 1981, Art. 10

<sup>38</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Jan. 25-26, 1982, Art. 6

- The subject matter of the commentary sections might be introduced by an appropriate reference to the area alluded to in the contemporary testimony.<sup>39</sup>

We then approved the draft of our report to synod.<sup>40</sup>

By now we could provide a clear rationale for the testimony's theme and its status:

"Our church has been motivated to see that we owe this world a clear witness to our Lord, a contemporary statement of our hope and of the light of the gospel. Therefore we have taken as our theme for this testimony, 'Our World Belongs to God!' By this theme we wish to proclaim God's rule in a world that thinks it is out of control or that it's controlled by human technique."

About the status of the contemporary testimony we said,

"A testimony is of lesser rank than a creed or confession. It could gain the stature of a creed as the church uses it in its witness and ministry. But our first concern is to write an accurate statement of our faith that speaks clearly to our time."

We provided a revision of the summary/preamble, beginning this way:

As followers of Jesus Christ,  
living by faith in a world  
    which some still think they can control,  
    which others view with deep despair,  
we declare with hope and trust:  
our world belongs to God!

We asked for reactions from the churches, and submitted our progress report.<sup>41</sup>

We met again June 7-8, 1982, a week before synod met, and assigned a lot of rewriting to all committee members. Since Morris Greidanus was asked to rewrite the

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<sup>39</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Apr. 5-6, 1982, Art. 13

<sup>40</sup> The quotes that follow are taken from our report to synod, *Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 576-580.

<sup>41</sup> *Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 576-580

contemporary testimony and to go over all the commentary essays, the committee asked the consistory of First CRC, London, Ontario, to release him for a month to work on the documents.

We also enlarged the list of reader-reactors who would be asked to comment on the contemporary testimony, and we agreed to ask for a review its style.<sup>42</sup> Dr. Richard Tiemersma of the English Department at Calvin College offered a detailed and witty critique. He created uniformity in punctuation and grammar, and he identified the right tone for the document.<sup>43</sup>

Synod 1982 accepted our progress report on the one-sentence recommendation of the advisory committee: “That synod invite churches and individuals to react to the Contemporary Testimony Committee Report.—*Adopted.*”<sup>44</sup>

## Reactions and Revisions

In October 1982 all committee members were encouraged to complete their revising and rewriting so that the whole document could be revised further in November. Bastiaan Nederlof agreed to check the commentary to look for places where scriptural references should be inserted.<sup>45</sup>

We met in January 1983 with a completed commentary and contemporary testimony to consider. We had responses from the reader-reactors as well; these were included where suitable in the final revision. And with that we sent our 45-page report off to be included in the agenda for Synod 1983. While recalling the mandate and the history, the report observed that all committee members had a hand in writing a part of the contemporary testimony. The report included the 62 paragraphs of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* as well as the commentary essays.

The report was received well by synod. It was agreed that no “editing from the floor” would take place. The committee took note of comments for later revision; three “friendly amendments” between the advisory committee and the Contemporary

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<sup>42</sup> CTC2 Minutes, June 7-8, 1982

<sup>43</sup> CRCNA Archives, Box 557

<sup>44</sup> *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 56

<sup>45</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Oct. 5-6, 1982, Art. 9

Testimony Committee's representatives at synod were inserted, and then these recommendations were adopted:<sup>46</sup>

That synod grant provisional approval to the revised draft of the Contemporary Testimony with the Commentary for submission to the churches for use in worship, education, and outreach and for discussion and ask that written response be sent to the Contemporary Testimony Committee secretary, Prof. Robert Recker, by January 1, 1985.

That synod instruct the Board of Publications to seek ways of ensuring wide circulation of the Contemporary Testimony among the churches.

That synod instruct the stated clerk to send copies of the Contemporary Testimony and the Commentary to the churches in ecclesiastical fellowship with a request for their written evaluation by January 1, 1985.

The committee met again in November 1983 to rejoice in the warm reception of this work, to continue revising the testimony and the commentary chapters, to finish other commentary chapters, and to consider reactions from the churches and individuals.

There was some suspicion of the *form* of the contemporary testimony, which we planned to address in the future, as this note in the committee minutes indicates:

In our final report to synod we should make some justification for the semi-poetic form in which the contemporary testimony is framed. We do in no way condone the idea of some that therefore the points of doctrine articulated therein are not firmly believed and confessed.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Acts of Synod 1983*, p. 707

<sup>47</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 29, 1983, Art. 5

We worked with the Board of Publications (later renamed CRC Publications) and the stated clerk<sup>48</sup> to bring *Our World Belongs to God* before the CRC and other churches in a variety of ways:

- We prepared a liturgical version of the Preamble with responsive readings.
- We sent pastors a set of aids for preaching/teaching with *Our World Belongs to God*.
- One congregation held a special service with readings from *Our World Belongs to God* and sung responses.
- We introduced *Our World Belongs to God* at retreats and adult education settings.
- A response form was included with the copies of *Our World Belongs to God* and suggestions for its use; this form was sent to all consistories and ministers of the CRC.

We recommended and synod agreed that it would be wise to extend the time for the churches to respond to this material from January 1, 1985, to 1986, since it took some time to get the material ready and to the churches.<sup>49</sup>

Then we took time to reflect and wondered whether all that needed to be said had been said. For instance, George Vandervelde was concerned that the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification was not explicit. Rich Mouw thought that we should expand the areas of cultural activity and ecumenicity.<sup>50</sup>

We began to consider whether we needed to prepare a “biblical textual guide” to the contemporary testimony. We did not want to “proof text” the document, but we should find a way to show where its themes originate in Scripture.

We thankfully noted that *Our World Belongs to God* was being used in the churches. Pastors reported on contemporary testimony-based sermon series they had presented,

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<sup>48</sup> A denominational leadership position appointed by synod; the responsibilities of that position are now included in those of the executive director.

<sup>49</sup> *Acts of Synod 1984*, pp. 580-81

<sup>50</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Nov. 29, 1983, Art. 16



and the Board of Home Missions used paragraphs of the Preamble in its report to Synod 1984.<sup>51</sup>

The Living Word Committee (later called Sermons for Reading Services) asked us to prepare seven written sermons on Our World Belongs to God for use in churches that were currently without a pastor. We agreed that this was another good way to put the testimony before the church, and we asked the five theologians on the committee to prepare the sermons.<sup>52</sup>

We received a large number of responses from within and beyond the CRC. Many church councils sent in detailed comments. The mission agencies commented carefully. Dr. Eugene Heideman of the Reformed Church in America, Dr. J. Veenhof of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, the bishop of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and many others received Our World Belongs to God, responded warmly, and also raised our awareness of some incompleteness in the document.

For instance, we met with Dr. G. Wilson, a member of the Presbyterian Church in Canada committee that produced “A Living Faith,” a similarly contemporary statement. He noted a heavy emphasis on task and obedience in comparison to the joy in the Lord that characterizes the Westminster Confession.

Andrew Kuyvenhoven, editor of the CRC’s weekly magazine, *The Banner*, wrote an editorial that encouraged each member to study the draft of Our World Belongs to God and to react to it. He also noted that it missed an emphasis on personal piety.

Other responses did not find enough of the joy and adoration that should be part of the covenantal relationship. We took these comments to heart. As we revised many of the articles in response to incoming reactions, we were especially aware of the comments about joy, grace, and the fairly heavy accent on doing and obeying.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 35

<sup>52</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Feb. 12-13, 1985, Art. 6

<sup>53</sup> CTC2 Minutes, Sept. 4-5, 1984, Art. 16; Feb. 12-13, 1985, Art. 8-9

Our report to Synod 1985 included new chapters to the “Commentary on Contemporary Issues” (as we began to call it) and asked for direction on the matter of scriptural references. A number of respondents had asked for them. We were promptly directed to prepare scriptural references.<sup>54</sup>

We asked B. Nederlof to prepare these references, but we wanted to make clear that in contrast with “proof texting,” a confession agrees with or answers to the Scriptures. So we decided to provide the references as follows:

- in the form of an appendix
- structured according the captioned sections
- with a limited number of references to the historic confessions<sup>55</sup>

When the document’s scriptural references were adopted by Synod 1986 with the following grounds, our concerns about the proper relation of Scripture and confession were alleviated.

- a. These passages are sufficient to demonstrate that the language and concepts used here are an obedient answer in our time to what God speaks to us in his Word.
- b. Attaching biblical references meets the expressed desire of many respondents to the draft.<sup>56</sup>

By the time the final draft was presented to Synod 1986, we could report that some 12,000 copies of the Study Version and 31,000 copies of the Liturgical Version were in circulation. We emphasized happily that this testimony was more than written by a committee—it was *read and revised by the church*.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Acts of Synod 1985*, pp. 790-91

<sup>55</sup> CTC2 Minutes, June 18-19, 1985, Art. 10

<sup>56</sup> *Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 680

<sup>57</sup> *The Banner*, Sept. 1986

The delegates to synod approved *Our World Belongs to God* warmly with this affirmation, “This document is true to the Scriptures and our confessions, and is helpful in expressing our faith in a contemporary manner.”<sup>58</sup>

### **The Testimony in Use**

A big help to the further distribution and use of *Our World Belongs to God* was that a new *Psalter Hymnal* was adopted, pending a few revisions, at that same synod. This auspicious confluence gave the opportunity to include the full text of the contemporary testimony in the hymnal, where it became readily accessible to worshipers each Sunday.<sup>59</sup> This hymnal even included a hymn titled “Our World Belongs to God.” The hymn restates the main themes of the testimony in singable fashion.<sup>60</sup> Paragraphs of the testimony easily became part of the liturgy in many congregations—for instance, as a confession of sin, as an affirmation to the sermon, or as a declaration of faith.

Liturgists who wanted to express the faith in new words frequently used the new testimony. The funeral manual *In Life and in Death* includes several sections of *Our World Belongs to God* among its readings.<sup>61</sup> *Sing! A New Creation*, a 2001 collection of then-new worship songs, uses a paragraph from the testimony.<sup>62</sup> And the more recent hymnal, *Lift Up Your Hearts*,<sup>63</sup> a combined effort of the CRC and the Reformed Church in America, includes a number of readings from the document, making it in this way available to a larger group of congregations.

*Our World Belongs to God* found a place as well in faith formation within the church. Its Study Version was used widely. CRC Publications (later renamed Faith Alive Christian Resources), the CRC agency that produced educational material for the churches, developed several courses that taught the faith by using this contemporary testimony.

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<sup>58</sup> *Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 680

<sup>59</sup> *Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 680

<sup>60</sup> *Psalter Hymnal* (CRC Publications, 1988), 459

<sup>61</sup> *In Life and in Death* (CRC Publications, 1992)

<sup>62</sup> *Sing! A New Creation* (CRC Publications, 2001), 283

<sup>63</sup> *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive, 2013)

One example: *Living your Faith in a Messed-Up World*, aimed at older teens and young adults.<sup>64</sup>

Our World Belongs to God also proved useful in ecumenical contacts to provide a brief summary of the faith as confessed in the CRC. It was circulated to the CRC's main ecumenical contacts for comment, and it was presented at a Toronto conference on "Confessing the Faith Today." Further, Reformed institutions like Calvin College used it to introduce new students and faculty to the Reformed expression of the faith.

In these ways Our World Belongs to God settled into the life and fabric of the CRC as a useful expression of the Christian faith. Because of its role as a contemporary testimony, it also found its way into discussions surrounding the CRC's Form of Subscription<sup>65</sup> and the CRC's adoption of the Belhar Confession.<sup>66</sup> And as changing times introduced significant matters that a relevant testimony should address, the document eventually needed updating.

### **A Time for Revision**

The term *contemporary* emphasizes relevance to the present time. And from the start, the intention with this testimony was to update and revise it as time, insights, and events moved on. The thought had been, as in the Reformed Church in Japan, to issue a new statement each decade. The first decade passed with no action, but by 2005 a request came to synod from CRC Publications, recognizing that "as a dynamic statement of faith," the testimony "must periodically be reviewed and perhaps revised if it is to speak contemporaneously"; synod agreed and asked CRC Publications to propose an updated version to Synod 2007.<sup>67</sup> The committee appointed for this task had some continuity with the 1986 committee. Morris Greidanus and George Vandervelde had worked on the first edition, and they were joined by Clayton Libolt, Michael Goheen, Sheila Holmes, Leonard Vander Zee, and Elizabeth Vander Haagen.

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<sup>64</sup> *Living Your Faith in a Messed-Up World: A Look at the Contemporary Testimony* (Faith Alive, 2008)

<sup>65</sup> See *Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 448-61; *Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 761-64.

<sup>66</sup> See *Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 765-77; *Acts of Synod 2017*, pp. 699-700, 707.

<sup>67</sup> *Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 734

For the second edition, we dealt only with the paragraphs of Our World Belongs to God, not with the Commentary on Contemporary Issues. Our chair, C. Libolt, urged us to retain the structure and tone as much as possible while addressing new issues such as embryonic research, the Internet, and the place of other religions. Looking back at the testimony after two decades, we also found that some things could be stated more clearly. We reviewed as well the emphasis on doing and obeying, and we added to the sacraments section.

Since we could now communicate with the churches via the Internet, we received rapid responses. And because the task was to revise rather than to write a new testimony, we were able to send a draft to synod by 2007.<sup>68</sup>

After receiving further reactions from the churches, we presented a final draft to Synod 2008, which adopted the revision with the following grounds:

- a. Using the language of our time, the revision summarizes our faith and speaks to the concerns of our day in agreement with Scripture and the approved confessions and in harmony with the 1986 Contemporary Testimony.
- b. A provisional revision has been before the churches for a sufficient length of time and has received unprecedented review by many individuals and councils, including the Calvin Theological Seminary faculty and a synodical advisory committee. The revision committee has used these comments in preparing this updated 2008 version of Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony.
- c. The Scripture references in the 2008 version (which are intended to highlight broader themes rather than to serve as proof texts) are substantially the same as those in the 1986 edition; as well, the full text of the 2008 version, including the Scripture references, has been before the churches through the denominational website since early March 2008 and by way of the *Agenda for Synod 2008* since early April 2008.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Agenda for Synod 2007*, pp. 64-78

<sup>69</sup> *Acts of Synod 2008*, pp. 458-59

## Entering a Different World and Place

The 2008 revision entered the world in a bright new booklet, and its approved text was posted to the CRC's website ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org); see [Our World Belongs to God](#)). In 2013 the updated testimony was also included in [Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources](#),<sup>70</sup> published by Faith Alive for use in both the CRC and the RCA as a companion to the 2013 *Lift Up Your Hearts* hymnal. So in this way *Our World Belongs to God* joined [Our Song of Hope](#) (RCA, 1978), the [Belhar Confession](#), and the long-held ecumenical creeds and confessions of both the RCA and the CRC in one volume.

*Our World Belongs to God* is now also mentioned in the CRC's [Covenant for Officebearers](#), which elders, deacons, ministers, commissioned pastors, and professors sign when they are ordained and/or installed to serve in their offices for the church.<sup>71</sup>

In 2016, while seeking a suitable status for the Belhar Confession in the CRC, synod proposed that the following synod “recategorize the Belhar Confession to the same status as that of a contemporary testimony in the CRC—same as *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*.”<sup>72</sup> Synod 2017 subsequently affirmed the 2016 proposal<sup>73</sup> after first defining the category of *contemporary testimony*.<sup>74</sup> In this way the tentative place that was claimed for *Our World Belongs to God* from its start became also a home for the Belhar Confession. The Belhar fits well, of course, with the statements against racism in *Our World Belongs to God*.<sup>75</sup>

## Questions for the Future

What will the church do next with *Our World Belongs to God*? The year 2018 completes a decade for the 2008 revision, so questions arise:

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<sup>70</sup> *Our Faith* (Faith Alive, 2013), pp. 156-176

<sup>71</sup> Church Order, Art. 5

<sup>72</sup> *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 906, 913-14

<sup>73</sup> *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 707

<sup>74</sup> *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 699: “A *contemporary testimony* is a dynamic statement of faith that serves the CRCNA—its congregations and members—as an important statement that speaks to essential matters in a given time period. It is useful for study, faith formation, teaching, and worship. As such, it must periodically be reviewed if it is to speak contemporaneously and perhaps (1) be revised if authorship belongs to the CRCNA or (2) be provided newly revised accompanying explanatory material if authorship belongs elsewhere.”

<sup>75</sup> *Our World Belongs to God* (2008), para. 16, 30, 47

- Do we need another revision?
- Are there new issues to address?
- Will this testimony one day receive confessional status?

Meanwhile, *Our World Belongs to God* continues to describe who we are and what we believe. It also continues to function in liturgies and organizational statements of belief. For example, Synod 2016 received a report on the design for a combined global mission agency that would unify the CRC's World Missions and Home Missions agencies (now combined as Resonate Global Mission). In a section titled "Biblical Values That Undergird Our Mission," that report quoted paragraphs of *Our World Belongs to God* to describe these important points:

- God's mission as central to our being as the church (para. 41)
- God's loving care for creation and people (para. 4)
- The comprehensive scope of God's redemptive work in Christ (para. 42)
- The church as the worldwide body of Christ formed by the Spirit and the Word (para. 30)<sup>76</sup>

On occasion, we also hear of reactions from outside the CRC. For instance, a Dutch journalist was amazed to see the phrase "*Our World Belongs to God! Every Square Inch*" on the outdoor sign of the Edmonton, Alberta, Christian High School.<sup>77</sup>

#### *A Closing Personal Note*

On a personal level, I recall a time when I was being treated for lymphatic cancer. My family was distressed, and I was too ill to realize what was happening. Our son adapted paragraph 12 of *Our World Belongs to God*, framed it, and hung it in my hospital room—words about God's tender care. I had worked on these words in both the first and second editions of the testimony. They spoke to me and for me, and comforted us both:

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<sup>76</sup> *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 756-57

<sup>77</sup> *Gereformeerden Overzee* (Agnes Amelink, Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, Amsterdam, 2006), 128

**E**ven now,  
as history unfolds  
in ways we know only in part,  
we are assured  
that God is with us in our world,  
holding all things in tender embrace  
and bending them to his purpose.  
The confidence that the Lord is faithful  
gives meaning to our days  
and hope to our years.  
The future is secure,  
For our world belongs to God.

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