

Overture to Synod
Christian Reformed Church of North America
May 2009

Classis Grand Rapids East overtures Synod 2009 to affirm the recommendations of the Interchurch Relations Committee, accept the Belhar Confession as a foundational standard of the Christian Reformed Church of North America equal to the historic three forms of unity and recommend to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar as a fourth confession of our denomination.

Background

The Belhar Confession was drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa. It was written during the struggle against apartheid and in the context of terrible injustice and racism, as well as brokenness and hostility within the church itself and the world. It was formally adopted in 1986 and has become one of the standards of unity for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, which is the denomination resulting from the 1994 merger of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. A full history of the development of Belhar in the South African apartheid context is laid out in the 2009 IRC report to Synod and that is incorporated herein by reference.

The Belhar Confession has been offered as a gift to the Church of Jesus Christ. The Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) have encouraged consideration of Belhar by the Reformed community. Belhar has been adopted by the Evangelical Reformed Church of Germany, and the United Protestant Church of Belgium and is presently under consideration by the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA as well as our own denomination.

The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church of North America 2007 mandated the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) to study and assess the Belhar Confession and to present recommendations concerning it to Synod 2009. The IRC after completion of its mandate has submitted its report and has made recommendations to Synod 2009 that includes embracing of the Belhar Confession as the fourth confession of our church (on par with the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and subsequent reaffirmation at Synod 2012 as is required by our Church Order.

Grounds:

1. We have reviewed the Overture to Synod 2009 submitted by Classis Pacific Northwest. We endorse that Overture and incorporate all of the grounds in support of its Overture herein.
2. Synod 1996 adopted recommendations of a study committee which was commissioned to review the biblical and theological principles regarding the development of a racially and ethnically diverse family of God. Synod 1996 declared 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.”

It further called for the implementation of strategies to make our established churches more ethnically and culturally inclusive and to plant and develop multiethnic churches. In accordance with that calling, our churches in Classis Grand Rapids East have striven to become more inclusive and diverse. We see future growth in the CRCNA occurring as a direct result of this pursuit. However, we realize that our church has existed through most of its history as an almost exclusively Dutch American Christian Church. (It is also seen by some as tied to the Dutch and Reformed churches that supported apartheid in South Africa.) That is our heritage. We believe that the failure to embrace the Belhar Confession as the fourth confessional standard of our church will reinforce this perception among African Americans with whom we serve and to whom we bring the message of reconciliation. Such failure would be seen as rejection of the Belhar and will make our calling to be a more diverse and inclusive church a more difficult challenge.

3. The unity of the Body of Christ is both a gift and an obligation for the church. It must be pursued. We must continually strive to attain it. Anything which threatens this unity has no place in the church and must be resisted. We see the Belhar’s relevance as far beyond the church setting of South Africa. It gives guidance for relationships and strategies within the church of all places and all times. It sheds light on how Christ calls us to function as salt and light in the world. We believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church of Jesus Christ in our time about such issues and that God speaks to us in this confession.
4. The three themes developed with the Belhar Confession are the unity of the church, reconciliation of people in Christ, and God’s justice and care of the suffering and poor. We see these themes as foundational biblical principles

that lie at the core of our Christian faith. They remain very relevant issues in the church and society today. These themes are not fully developed within the historic three forms of unity.

5. We believe that adoption of the Belhar Confession as a confession emerging from Africa would evidence our commitment to an understanding of the church as “God’s Diverse and Unified Family” and our commitment to making it a reality.

Classis Grand Rapids East

Al Mulder, Stated Clerk