

REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) met once since the last session of General Synod, on December 10-12, 2002, at the offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Chicago. The commission met once, for an extended time, to make it possible to meet with the Interchurch Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) on December 11, 2002. We also explored whether the efficiencies produced by having one meeting a year while utilizing email would provide adequate time to complete the work of the commission. Our meeting with the CRC was very gratifying; meeting only once as a commission was less so, since two of our members were unable to attend. Much of the rest of our meeting was focused on the study of the Belhar Confession, as indicated in this report.

The *Constitution* of the RCA gives responsibility for ecumenical relations to the General Synod (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). To be faithful to the ecumenical calling, General Synod needs a consultative body to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives as given by the church through General Synod.

Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and adoption in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102) by action of General Synod, CCU has served General Synod by coordinating the whole range of ecumenical involvements at all levels throughout the RCA. CCU advises General Synod on matters of ecumenical import; it communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies; it educates the whole denomination on ecumenical matters; and it advocates for actions and positions consistent with the RCA's confessions and practice.

"An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197) guides the work of CCU. By means of its ongoing ecumenical commitments both at home and abroad, CCU keeps before the RCA the essential questions regarding the nature of Christian unity and suggests ways of giving visible expression to the unity all believers have in Jesus Christ. Conversely, through referrals, General Synod presents Christian unity matters to CCU for study, implementation, and possible recommendations to General Synod.

To help summarize the scope of the ecumenical practice of the RCA, three groupings give visible expression to the RCA's ecumenism. These are general groupings and by no means exhaust the scope of the ecumenical life of the RCA.

Programmatic Ecumenism

Programmatic ecumenism refers to cooperative endeavors with other communions to create programs of ministry and mission. It may happen formally on the denominational level or more informally at the local level. It is usually prompted by a mutual desire to accomplish a specific ministry or mission goal. A few examples of this visible expression of ecumenical activity are: cooperative curricula development, disaster relief response, vacation church schools, food distribution programs, youth events, and joint services of worship. On the denominational level, the RCA continues to be involved in several cooperative world mission partnerships and many ecumenical involvements.

Conciliar Ecumenism

The various councils of churches (world, national, regional, state, or local) are expressions of this form of ecumenism. As communities of communions, the councils facilitate the collaboration of denominations in various programs of service and witness, recognizing and accepting the distinctive contributions of each corporate expression of the church catholic.

The RCA holds memberships in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA), the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC). The RCA has a membership application pending with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and in addition, one regional synod and several congregations hold membership in the NAE.

Through conciliar fellowship, Christian traditions meet and work together with the purpose of representing the unity of the body of Christ as primary. In and through the practice of ecumenism, unity is demonstrated to a fragmented society while a greater understanding is gained for each other's unique contribution to the whole body of Christ. Lively and passionate discussions demonstrate the depth of conviction that the various communion members bring to the table, yet members remain committed to unity and the principle of acting together in all matters except those in which differences of conviction compel members to act separately.

Conversational/Dialogue Ecumenism

Conversations and dialogue are expressions of ecumenical practice that take place between churches at the denominational level. These may be either bilateral (one-to-one), such as takes place between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church, or multilateral (more than two), such as took place between the *Formula of Agreement* (FOA) partners. Through WARC the RCA is represented in bilateral dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church. Dialogues seek to give faithful expression to what churches believe, identifying areas where there is commonality as well as areas that need further exploration because of historic differences of theology and practice. The goal is always to recognize and not to homogenize. The desired outcome is to discover whether parties can reach a level of consensus that recognizes sufficient agreement as a basis for substantial fellowship while admitting that continuing differences exist as a basis for ongoing mutual theological work.

ECUMENICAL OFFICER AND ASSOCIATE FOR ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

The general secretary of the RCA is its chief ecumenical officer. As such, the general secretary serves the denomination through various degrees of engagement with the leadership of other church bodies. Because of the vast scope of this engagement (both national and worldwide), the general secretary is enlisted as an ex-officio member of CCU. CCU is grateful for the wealth of experience—ecumenically, practically, and theologically—that the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson continues to bring to CCU.

CCU is indebted to the Rev. Douglas Fromm, the RCA associate for ecumenical relations who serves as the staff resource person for CCU. As a part-time associate, he assists the general secretary in the development, coordination, and interpretation of the ecumenical policies and relationship of the denomination and represents the RCA in ecumenical meetings and assemblies. The Rev. Fromm also serves as pastor of Upper Ridgewood Community Church, an RCA congregation in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

ECUMENICAL NETWORK WITH CLASSES

In 1993 CCU initiated an effort to establish an RCA network of ecumenism throughout the denomination. The network's purpose was to help CCU disseminate information to the classes and to receive information concerning ecumenism at the local level from the classes and congregations. The network is composed of one individual from each classis who serves as an ecumenical liaison between CCU and the classis. A member of CCU contacts each classis' ecumenical liaison following meetings of CCU and mailings from the office of the associate for ecumenical relations. CCU has requested that each classis provide regular agenda time at stated meetings for a report from the liaison concerning updates on ecumenical matters and for receiving the information from the member churches of the classes for referral to CCU. After updating the list CCU will attempt to improve this network by means of email.

RCA ECUMENICAL APPOINTEES

In 1989 CCU established a means of reporting and accountability for all ecumenical appointees who represent the RCA in the ecumenical arena. A reporting form was developed (and is still in use) that affords a uniform reporting system to CCU. The reports are reviewed by CCU at each of its meetings, which allows CCU to keep abreast of events in ecumenism and changes in programs, activities, and personnel. Every effort is made to have CCU members be the ecumenical appointees to other denominations' synods, conferences, and ecumenical relations boards.

ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

World Council of Churches

The RCA is a charter member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and participates in its programs. RCA General Secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson is a member of the Central Committee of the WCC. The Rev. Douglas Fromm is a member of the U.S. Conference Board, representing the RCA.

National Council of Churches

The RCA is a charter member of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCCCUSA). RCA General Secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson has been active in the reformation and restructuring of the NCCCUSA. RCA delegates to the General Assembly of the NCCCUSA are: the Rev. Taylor Holbrook, Dr. Lynn Japinga, the Rev. Mark Nieusma, and the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. The Rev. Douglas Fromm is a member of the Executive Board.

World Alliance of Reformed Churches

Hosted by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches will hold their 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana, from July 30 to August 13, 2004. The theme will be "That All May Have Life in Fullness." At the start of this new century, Reformed denominations from all over the world will gather in celebration of life and faith in Jesus Christ. During that time we will also reflect upon the threats and challenges to life and seek God's will for our response. Members of the RCA family are invited to attend the gathering as Accredited Visitors. For more information about WARC and the General Council you may go to the website www.warc.ch or contact the Rev. Anna Jackson, who is a pastor in the RCA and member of the CCU and is also an executive committee member of WARC and program chair for the 2004 Assembly.

ROMAN CATHOLIC–REFORMED DIALOGUE

Since 1965 in the United States a series of dialogues has been held between official representatives of Reformed Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Participating Reformed churches have been the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC).

The dialogue was initiated and conducted under the auspices of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. At first the dialogues centered on ordained ministry issues and published reports: “Reconsideration: Theological Conversation on Scripture, Doctrine, and Ministry” (1967); “The Ministry of the Church” (1970); “Women in the Church” (1972); and “The Unity We Seek” (1977). The most recent round focused on the pastoral concern related to Catholic-Reformed interchurch marriage and families as expressed in “Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope” (2002).

At a meeting in New York on September 24-25, 2003, the ecumenical staff of the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops agreed that another round of dialogue would begin in the fall of 2003. The Christian Reformed Church in North America participated in this meeting and agreed to participate in the next dialogue. The meeting was chaired by the Rev. Douglas Fromm, RCA associate for ecumenical relations. An observer from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is to be included in the next round.

The dialogue will focus on the meaning and practice of baptism, the relationship of baptism to Eucharist, and the role of both sacraments in shaping churches and drawing them toward fuller communion. The dialogue will be methodologically designed to address issues that are theological, ecclesiastical, and pastoral.

The first meeting of this next round is scheduled for September 18-20, 2003, in Louisville, Kentucky. Participants from the churches will include a mix of sacramental theologians, historians, legislative or canon lawyers, biblical scholars, ecclesialogists, systematic theologians, liturgists, and pastors.

MORAVIAN–REFORMED DIALOGUE

The intention of the RCA through the General Synod action (*MGS 2000*, R-15 substitute, p. 105) to enter a Moravian-Reformed dialogue has been made known to the Moravian Church. The other Reformed bodies participating are the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ.

The second meeting of representatives from the participating churches was held on December 17-18, 2002, at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The focus of the dialogue was on mutual oversight of ministry. The Rev. Douglas Fromm, associate for ecumenical relations, was the RCA representative.

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

In an action taken by the Lutheran-Reformed Planning Committee (an ad hoc committee constituted after the 1997 vote for full communion between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches), the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee was created as a permanent committee. The following action was taken:

In fulfillment of the commitment made in a Formula of Agreement, a twelve-member Lutheran Reformed Coordinating Committee—with three members appointed by each

of the four participating church bodies according to their respective patterns for such appointments—will serve as the appropriate channel of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of these churches (action taken 9/1/98 Lutheran-Reformed Planning Committee).

The following understanding and factors relate to the membership and operation of the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee:

1. That the reconstituted committee begin operation June 1, 1999.
2. That one of the representatives of each of the church bodies be the primary staff person for ecumenical matters.
3. That matters which require internal legislative decision-making by the representative churches be made within the regular patterns of decision-making of the participating churches.
4. That the committee address ongoing relationship issues for the participating churches and serve to facilitate inter-church activities.
5. That the committee seek to ensure that commitments made in a Formula of Agreement be carried out.
6. That the committee engage work groups or other appropriate means for the fulfillment of specific tasks, with the reports of such work groups to be submitted to the planning committee for review and possible approval or, as necessary, for referral to the church-body heads and the legislative processes of the respective church bodies.
7. That the committee be the agent for planning national events for the participating church bodies with the agreement of the church bodies.
8. That attention be given to lay participation in the committee.
9. That each of the members of the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee serve at the will of the individual's parent church body and that some pattern of rotation be formulated to provide both continuity of membership and change.

The RCA representatives serving on the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee are: the Rev. Louis Lotz and the Rev. Douglas Fromm, associate for ecumenical relations. Due to the resignation of elder Carol Wagner, a third member is to be appointed.

The Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee met for its organizational meeting on September 28, 1999, at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, Illinois. The Rev. Lowell G. Almen, secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was elected to serve as chair for the 1999-2001 biennium.

The following outline of committee responsibilities was adopted:

1. To ensure that commitments made in a Formula of Agreement be carried out.
2. To refer matters that require internal legislative decision-making to the appropriate decision-making bodies of the participating churches.
3. To refer matters related to programs to the appropriate units of the participating churches, encouraging them to fulfill these specific tasks, and asking for regular progress reports.
4. To address ongoing relationship issues for the participating churches and to facilitate inter-church activities.
5. To propose national events for the participating churches.
6. To report annually to the participating churches on the status of inter-church activities.

Since its organizational meeting, the committee has met two times each year. The Rev. Douglas W. Fromm, RCA associate for ecumenical relations, currently serves as the chair of the 2002-2004 biennium.

THE ORDERLY EXCHANGE OF MINISTERS

With regard to the orderly exchange of ministers among the *Formula* churches, a working group was established in 1998 and given the mandate to develop principles that would guide the churches. The RCA was represented by the Rev. Howard Moths and the Rev. Allan Janssen and RCA staff Vernon Hoffs and Douglas Fromm. RCA staff from the Office for Ministry Services and the pension and insurance offices met with the working group as consultants. Each of the *Formula* churches was represented by comparable staff and representatives from church order commissions.

The result of the several meetings of 1998 and 1999 was the creation of a manual entitled "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament: Principles, Policies, and Procedures." The manual contains a summary of the various practices of each church with regard to ministers' calls, installations, contracts, and ecclesial oversight. Among the topics addressed in the principles are: categories of service; nature of calls and contracts; the approval process; supervision of congregations; services of installation; accountability of pastoral care; and benefits such as pension, medical insurance, and life insurance.

Published in an extensive format, the manual contains a question and answer section comprised of the most frequently asked questions with regard to clergy exchange among the *Formula* churches. The manual was mailed to every clerk of the RCA regional synods and classes in 1999. The manual is currently in revision to accommodate changes in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* of the RCA adopted by the General Synod of 2001 (*MGS 2001*, R-88, p. 357). It will be reissued to the *Formula* churches and their appropriate offices and ecclesial assemblies.

MUTUAL APPOINTMENTS TO ASSEMBLIES, COUNCILS, AND COMMISSIONS

The RCA has received an invitation from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to name a permanent member to its Church Council, comparable to the RCA General Synod Council. CCU has appointed the Rev. Richard Brihn to serve.

The RCA has received an invitation from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to name a permanent member to its Committee on Ecumenical Relations. CCU has appointed the Rev. Liala Beukema to serve.

The RCA has received an invitation from the United Church of Christ to name a permanent member to its Executive Council, comparable to the RCA General Synod Council. CCU has appointed the Rev. David Baak to serve.

In accordance with the *BCO* of the RCA, the Commission on Christian Unity must have one member who is "from another denomination." For the past decade this appointment has been held by a representative from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Currently serving is the Rev. Susan Gamlin of the ELCA.

In accordance with the *BCO* of the RCA, the Commission on Theology shall have two ecumenical observers named by the commission; one is to be from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and one from other reformed bodies. Currently serving are the Rev. Scott Ickert of the ELCA and the Rev. Leanne Van Dyk of the PCUSA.

In accordance with the *BCO* of the RCA, the Commission on Christian Action shall have two ecumenical observers named by the commission. These two vacancies remain to be filled at this time.

In accordance with the *BCO* of the RCA, the General Synod Council shall have a non-voting member from the ELCA. Currently serving is the Rev. Paul Schreck.

CURRENT AREAS OF JOINT MINISTRY

At its most recent meeting, February 25-26, 2003, at the Interchurch Center, in the city of New York, the committee listed areas of cooperation and personnel responsible. They are noted as follows:

- Orderly Exchange: Craig Settlage (ELCA), Gene Kraus (UCC), Allan Janssen (RCA), Marcia Meyers (PCUSA)
- Theology: Jonathan Stranjord (ELCA), Ron Stief (UCC), Allan Janssen (RCA), Joe Small (PCUSA)
- Public Policy: John Stumme (ELCA), Ron Stief (UCC), John Paarlberg (RCA), Peter Sulyok (PCUSA)
- Outreach: Richard Magnus (ELCA), David Shoen (UCC), Richard Welscott (RCA), (PCUSA) person to be named
- Evangelism: Robert Wallace (ELCA), David Schoen (UCC), Bruce Laverman (RCA), Douglas Wilson (PCUSA)
- Global Mission: Bonnie Jensen (ELCA), Dale Bishop/David Vargas (UCC), Bruce Menning (RCA), Marian McClure (PCUSA)
- Racial/Ethnic: Fred Rajan (ELCA), Jaunita Helphrey (UCC), Ella Campbell (RCA), Helen Locklear (PCUSA)
- Communications: Eric Shafer (ELCA), Robert Chase (UCC), (RCA) person to be named Ann Gillis (PCUSA)
- Ministerial Formation: Jonathan Stranjord (ELCA), Steve Johnson (UCC), Gregg Mast (RCA), Dottie Hedgepath (PCUSA)
- Catechumenate: Barbara Berry Bailey (ELCA), Sidney Fowler (UCC), John Paarlberg (RCA), Martha Moore-Keish (PCUSA)
- Worship: Michael Burk (ELCA), Arthur Clyde/Sid Fowler (UCC), John Paarlberg (RCA), Martha Moore-Keish (PCUSA)

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

October 2003 will be the fifth anniversary of the inauguration of the Formula of Agreement. Worship resources will be developed and sent to the four churches for their use in local and regional gatherings. It is suggested that Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2003, be designated as the date for anniversary celebrations.

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To encourage members and congregations of the RCA on Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2003, to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Formula of Agreement, which was adopted in 1997 and which declared full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the three Reformed churches:

**the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church
(U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ. (ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. It's appropriate to celebrate the Formula of Agreement, which declared these churches to be in full communion and allowed for the orderly exchange of ministers.
2. This historic action allowed these heirs of the Reformation to heal the breach between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions that occurred in the sixteenth century.

CONCLUSION

In 1997 the RCA voted to declare “full communion” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Since the adoption of the Formula of Agreement by Lutheran and Reformed churches, much has happened at all levels of church life. Staff, agencies, commissions, and councils continue to bring the Formula of Agreement into full capacity in each of the four churches.

Pastors have reported that clergy of the Formula churches have established weekly study groups focusing on the lectionary readings for the week. Pulpit exchanges, as well as joint eucharistic celebrations have been held between Lutheran and Reformed congregations. Cooperative local mission projects are in discussion and implementation. Pastors in urban and rural areas are meeting together to discern areas of joint ministry where challenges to human and financial resources are great.

One of our RCA pastors sums up the Formula of Agreement with these words: “The Formula of Agreement has given us permission to work together and prods us to do so. It has been a great and wonderful gift to the churches.”

GENERAL SYNOD REFERRALS TO THE COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Christian Churches Together

The 2002 General Synod voted:

To commend the general secretary for his work with other church leaders in the development of an expanding ecumenical table known as Christian Churches Together in the USA; and further,

to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to explore this initiative and report to the 2003 General Synod (*MGS 2002*, R-33, p. 157).

A decisive steering committee meeting of the Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT) was held January 27-29, 2003, in Pasadena, California; it continued to move forward this new, ecumenical initiative. Prior exploratory meetings had been held in September 2001 and April 2002.

The meeting on the campus of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, chaired by RCA General Secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, brought over fifty official participants from five “families”: evangelical/Pentecostal, historic Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, racial/ethnic, and Roman Catholic.

The purpose of CCT is to enable churches and para-church organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen the Christian witness in the world. All seek to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible. An initial draft-basis statement states the vision:

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. gathers together those churches and Christian communities which, acknowledging God's revelation in Christ, confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scripture, and in obedience to God's will and in the power of the Holy Spirit commit themselves to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another; to fulfill their mission to proclaim the gospel by common witness and service in the world for the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Lamenting that divisions within Christian witness and service often result in distrust, misunderstandings, fear, and at times even hostility, participants envision a new ecumenical table where unity can be celebrated in the midst of diversity. A common witness is envisioned through:

- Celebrating a common confession of faith in the Triune God.
- Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit through biblical, spiritual, and theological reflection.
- Engaging in common prayer.
- Speaking to society with a common voice.
- Promoting the common good of society.
- Fostering faithful evangelism.
- Seeking reconciliation by affirming commonalities and understanding differences.
- Building a community of fellowship and mutual support.

Participant categories include: denominations, communions, associations of churches, and national Christian organizations (not to exceed 20 percent of total participation). Another decision reached at the Pasadena meeting is that a "consensus approach" to decision-making will be the model of how such diversity can work together in unity. An organizational plan will be developed this year and submitted to denominations and Christian organizations for approval.

The advisory committee recommended:

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To commend the general secretary and the Commission on Christian Unity for their work with other church leaders in the development of an expanding ecumenical table known as Christian Churches Together in the USA; and further,

to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to continue this initiative and report to General Synod 2004. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

Christian Churches Together in the USA is an emerging, expanded, ecumenical table that brings additional partners into the ecumenical conversation (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Pentecostal) for a new level of relationship that offers a common witness for Christ to the world.

Ecumenical Addresses

Dr. Oliver Patterson and the Rev. Gretel Van Wieren addressed remarks to the synod in response to the 2000 General Synod instruction to the RCA to reflect on and study the Belhar Confession to deepen the church's commitment to deal with racism and strengthen its commitment to URCSA and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13, p. 100).

THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION FOR THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

Dr. Oliver Patterson

It is indeed a pleasure for me to discuss the theological implications of the Belhar Confession for the Reformed Church in America (RCA) at this 197th session of the General Synod. My first introduction to the Belhar Confession came in 1996 when I was part of a delegation led by Dr. Edwin Mulder and the Rev. Douglas Fromm. It was the first church-to-church meeting between the RCA and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). It was during that meeting that we were requested to take the Belhar Confession seriously.

In preparing for this talk, I reread many documents, including my greetings to the General Synod of the URCSA in 1997, where the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell and I were the RCA ecumenical delegates. At that gathering I said:

As you (URCSA) move toward a new and just society, the Reformed Church in America wishes to work collaboratively with you. We are proud to affirm the centrality of the Belhar Confession, and I could not be personally prouder that this confession, which speaks to the unity of humanity, emerges from Africa. I sincerely hope that you will resist, however, the temptation to localize its message to South Africa. Clearly, the Belhar Confession is as relevant today as it was a decade ago, because it directly addresses man's inhumanity to man: racism, ethnic cleansing, gender prejudice, language-cultural enmity, and social and economic injustice.

I still believe today that the Belhar Confession is most relevant to the work of the RCA. I agree with those who have described it as a gift. In fact, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity of the Reformed Church in America selected it to serve as the theological foundation for its work. A major problem with gifts, however, is that we often do not quite know what to do with them.

In Deuteronomy 1:7 we are given an excellent example of people given the gift of liberation, but wasting that gift due to disobedience. God had given the Israelites the Promised Land, all the land from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates. It was an eleven-day walk to get to the land, but the people of Israel took forty years. Why? They were disobedient, afraid, and, of course, they angered God.

The Belhar Confession is a wonderful gift to the RCA, but it has been wandering through the denomination for nearly thirteen years. We certainly do not wish to be like the people of Israel and waste this magnificent gift because of fear and disobedience, and we clearly do not wish to anger God.

As the Rev. Gretel Van Wieren has noted, there are three central theological topics that are of great significance in the Belhar Confession for the Reformed Church in America. First, there is the affirmation that for the church of Jesus Christ the unity of humanity is an obligation. We have no choice. We are obligated to love one another, to pursue community, and to be a blessing to one another. Obviously we cannot discriminate against any group: Native American, African American, European American, Hispanic American, or Asian American.

The second major theological concept is reconciliation. The RCA is blessed because it is a peacemaker. You and I and all members who are the body of Christ are to be reconciled.

Whatever enmity, hatred, and bitterness that exist between and among groups are to be reconciled. For example, if hatred exists between and among blacks, Native Americans, and whites, there must be reconciliation.

The third major theological concept is justice. The RCA must oppose any form of injustice. We must stand where Christ stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged. Racial injustice is not to be tolerated.

The challenge of the Belhar Confession is that it is a call to action. One could rightly state that the RCA clearly affirms the theological principles of the unity of humanity, reconciliation, and justice. For example, the RCA has passed the "Decade Freed from Racism." It has established the Commission on Race and Ethnicity and charged it to transform the RCA into a multicultural church freed from racism. The Belhar Confession, however, informs all churches that follow Christ that words are not enough. It challenges us to actively and visibly pursue and seek the unity of humanity, reconciliation, and justice.

How are we, the RCA, to move from words to action? Our mission statement does identify our task:

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

The real issue for you and me is how do we equip our congregations to heal the broken racial and ethnic relationships that exist in each of our cities, towns, and hamlets. Before we can do anything as a denomination, we need to understand how complex and difficult this task is. Racism is a deep and ugly illness. It involves a belief system about one group's superiority and another group's inferiority. Moreover, it is the fusion of that belief with power that leads to institutional racism: genocide, slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Most racists truly do not believe they are racists. They are merely bit players in a complex of institutions. Again it's in the mind. Some have described it as a type of blindness.

The problem is made even more complex because racism also infects those who are oppressed. The psychological term for this is internalized racist oppression. If you're a black person who believes black people are ugly, stupid, and immoral you suffer from internalized racist oppression. Quite simply you've internalized all the negative stereotypes about black people into your belief system.

It reminds me of a joke the long-passed comedian Godfrey Cambridge use to tell. He was standing on the platform of the Long Island Railroad in his \$1,000 handmade Georgio suit, bathed in \$100-an-ounce Boss cologne, and supported by custom-made \$500 Dexter alligator shoes waiting for the railroad to take him to his eastern shore 100-acre estate when a white man started screaming at him: "Nigger, nigger, nigger." Astonished and shocked, Godfrey exclaimed in horror: "Where?"

I find that to be a funny story, but the brilliant researcher Claude Steele (2003) has shown the impact of negative stereotypes (i.e., stereotype threat) upon performance. Here's a couple of examples from his research. He selected black and white students who were at the same level of math ability. When the black students were told that they were going to be compared to white students on a math test, they scored a full standard deviation below them. He repeated the experiment, but the subjects were whites and Asians. This time the white students scored a full standard deviation below the Asian students.

He and his colleagues have even measured stereotype threat on athletic performance. White athletes consistently played below their ability when competing against black ath-

letes. Some have noted that the great white basketball players in the NBA are virtually all from Europe. Could it be that the stereotype about the inability of white men to jump is held in the U.S.A. but not in Europe?

Once we realize that this is very much a mind problem, we must seek transformation by the renewal of our minds. Matthew 9:17 says, "No one pours new wine into old wineskins." Vincent Van Gogh puts it this way: "If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced."

Sydney Harris, the author, is helpful when he reminds us that:

Most people are mirrors, reflecting the moods and emotions of the times. Some people are windows, bringing light to bear on the dark corners where troubles fester. The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.

Here are some very practical things the RCA can do to actively and visibly pursue and seek the unity of humanity, reconciliation, and justice. These are educational experiences designed to turn us from mirrors into windows, designed to renew our minds, designed to make us into new wineskins, and designed to let the silenced voice within our spirit be heard.

Anti-Racism Training. The RCA has engaged the Lutheran Human Relations Association to do anti-racism training for denominational and regional staff. Those who have attended the training events have found them to be truly transformative. People have not only learned about others but have learned a lot about themselves and the roots of their stereotypes. Now we do have a problem. Many have not attended. We need as many folk to attend as humanly possible, and not just the denominational paid employees. If you have not heard of this training, please seek information about it. Keep the pressure on. The plan is to eventually train our own facilitators. We hope to have integrated teams of blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans doing these workshops at church and classis levels. But we need people who are committed to a just society to join us. We need you.

Cross-Cultural Interactions. I've heard the Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson say that crossing cultural boundaries is often more difficult than crossing geographical ones. For the past two years, Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and First Reformed Church in Jamaica, New York, have been involved in a Youth for Understanding project. In 2001 the youth from Trinity visited Jamaica, and the youth from Jamaica visited Trinity in 2002. I was one of the hosts, and I will never forget their visit.

We greeted them in the traditional African manner, drummers, a barbeque, dancers, and prayers. Even on the first day the kids shared cultures, our kids showing them dance steps and many of the youth of both groups drumming together. We together watched the film *Remember the Titans*, starring Denzel Washington. This is a wonderful story about the reactions of all the members of a community, especially the students, to the integration of their high school football team, the Titans.

We also went to the world famous Apollo Theater and learned about the gifted entertainers who had performed there. I will never forget when kids from Trinity and Jamaica performed onstage.

The last visit was to the World Trade Center. It was a crystal clear day, and as darkness began to seep over the city the lights of New York were illuminated, from the torch of the Statue of Liberty, through Broadway, the theater district, and to Harlem; what a magnificent view of the achievements of people, all people! One month later the Twin Towers

were destroyed, a testament that the worst weapon of mass destruction is hatred.

We need more cross-cultural interactions. In Durban, South Africa, I met members of Schenectady Reformed Church, which Robert White pastors. Terrific! I hope you, through your classis, will form such contacts with churches that are culturally and racially different. You might wish to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. day with a church not far from you. Or you might wish to share pulpits or choirs. You will find the experiences transformative.

Racial and Social Justice Action. It is quite clear that the struggle for racial justice is not completed in this society. My hope is not that we will create a bunch of antiracism-workshop junkies but that people who do attend the workshops will return to their churches and form social justice committees. My key issue is education. You might wish to do a reasonably simple study of the health of the agents of education in a community: 1) families, 2) schools, 3) churches, and 4) community-based organizations. Your committee should begin to ask hard questions: Why is the reading level three years below national norms? Why are the libraries closed on Saturdays? Why don't the churches have after-school programs? Whatever your concern, you can truly be a blessing to the community and a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

I would be truly remiss if I did not mention the Isaiah 61 project that was funded by Reformed Church World Service, under the direction of Betty Voskuil. It's a project that works with young people who have been traumatized by the events of September 11, as well as by the effects of growing up black, brown, and poor in America.

In closing, let me say that we are a great denomination. I just returned from southern Africa with Debbie Braaksma; we witnessed firsthand the utter destruction HIV/AIDS is causing there. I saw our missionaries doing wonderful work. I also saw hundreds of orphans, little ones with blank stares and empty bellies. I believe God is telling us, as he told the Israelites, "Get off the mountain. You have been there long enough."

May you study the Belhar Confession. May you use it to inspire plans of transformation and justice. May you consider it as a standard of unity for our church. The Regional Synod of New York has already recommended passing the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. May God continue to shower you with his blessings.

THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The Rev. Gretel Van Wieren

Mr. President, moderators and members of commissions, delegates, guests, and staff of this gathering, it is an honor and privilege for me to be addressing you today about the theological import of the Belhar Confession for our church and the church worldwide. It is a deeply moving and beautifully written confession, and I personally feel grateful for coming into contact with it as a member of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity and a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches task force on economic globalization and ecological destruction.

I have been asked to speak about the theological implications of Belhar. Before I do this, however, I would like to make a couple of general comments about the reasons we are considering Belhar in the life of our church in the first place. Why are we spending time here to learn more about it, and what makes this confession so special?

We are spending time to learn about Belhar at this gathering because its content is of fun-

damental importance to our faith. Like the three standards of unity (Heidelberg Confession, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort), Belhar arose during a time of social, political, and ecclesiastical ferment—in its case, apartheid—and was issued as a cry of faith in order to preserve the heart of what it meant to follow and be the body of Christ. Belhar, though, lifts up several biblical-theological principles that the classical confessions do not: namely, the unity of the church, reconciliation of peoples in Christ, and God's justice and care for the suffering and poor. Belhar is worth looking at because it lifts up fundamental biblical principles that lie at the core of Reformed faith.

Belhar is special for many reasons. The one I would like to highlight here is that it is the only confession issued from Africa and the entire Southern Hemisphere. Our classical confessions all were founded in Western Europe. Belhar comes to us and the global church as a gift from our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world. As one Uniting Church of Southern Africa congregation expressed it, "We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone." So Belhar is worth looking at because its content is fundamental to our faith, and it is special because it is the only confession the global church has from Africa and the Southern hemisphere.

Having made these general comments, I will now turn to the three main biblical-theological principles of Belhar. I will discuss them in the order they appear in the confession itself.

Unity

Belhar begins by lifting up the principle of the unity of the church based on our reconciliation and peace in Christ envisioned in Ephesians (2:11-22). It makes two points about our unity as the community of believers in Christ. First, unity in the church is a gift from God brought about by the life and work of Jesus Christ. It is through the cross, Paul says in Ephesians, that hostility has been put to death (2:16). Christ is our peace, Christ is the one who has broken down the dividing wall (2:14). Second, unity is the hope and vision of the church. As the church is the presence of Christ on earth today, the unity we know in Christ must be visibly manifest and active. Unity is alive, states Belhar, in a variety of ways, including when we love another, in community, when we give of ourselves joyfully to bless others, in baptism and communion, when we know and bear one another's burdens and build-up one another, when we pray together, and when we together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity. Unity in Christ is a gift from God that characterizes the life and activity of the church.

Reconciliation

The second biblical-theological theme highlighted in Belhar is the gift of reconciliation in God through Jesus Christ. We, all of creation, in fact, have been reconciled to and made new in Christ, and because of this, we have been entrusted with the gift of reconciliation—to bring and be the message of reconciliation for others. A true mark of the church, using the language of the Belgic Confession, then, is the presence of the ministry of reconciliation. To this end, the church is salt and light, peacemaker, and witness to the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells, cites Belhar from Matthew (5:13-16; 5:9) and Revelation (21-22). Consequently, when the church intentionally or unintentionally turns its head from, or even legitimates, separation, hatred, enmity, prejudice, or fear, the experience and ministry of reconciliation is weakened and obstructed.

I would like to make one additional comment about Belhar's message regarding reconciliation in Christ. That is, Belhar in itself is an act of reconciliation within the church. Belhar provides an opportunity for us as brothers and sisters in Christ to turn toward one another, in the liturgical action of confession, and say, "Yes, despite, or in the midst of, the separation and enmity that has taken place between people of different races and ethnicities, we

still are, and always will be, reconciled by and in God.” Using another image, Belhar provides an opening for us to turn and walk toward one another based on our shared reconciliation in Christ.

Justice

The final biblical-theological theme that Belhar affirms is God’s justice and special care for the poor and oppressed. Citing Deuteronomy (32:4), the prophets (Isaiah 1:16-17), and the gospels (John 14:27; Luke 7:22, 16:19-31), Belhar presents a fundamental thrust of biblical faith: that God brings justice to the oppressed, gives bread to the hungry, frees the prisoner, and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, and helps orphans and the widows in their suffering. We are called as God’s people, the church, to follow and stand with God alongside those who suffer. The church, affirms Belhar, must witness against and oppose any form of injustice so that, in the words of Amos (5), justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

This principle, God’s and the church’s justice and care for the poor and suffering, is one of the most spiritually significant and theologically compelling contributions of Belhar for our Reformed faith. It fills a glaring gap in the standing confessions. The classical confessions make no mention of the central biblical principle of God’s justice and special care for the poor and suffering. This omission does not stem from an oversight on the church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; on the contrary, God’s, the community’s and the churches’ care for the poor was assumed and practiced, and simply was not a major issue of faith at stake. Belhar recovers and lifts up this fundamental trajectory of biblical faith for the Reformed church.

In conclusion, Belhar follows in the Reformed tradition of expressing core beliefs through confession. The theological contributions of Belhar—unity, reconciliation and justice—are solidly biblical and affirm fundamental aspects of Reformed faith. Belhar is special in that it has been issued as a cry of faith from brothers and sisters in Christ—who have suffered immeasurable oppression and pain—on the other side of the world. Because of its solid theological content and special geographical and social context, Belhar represents a profound and unprecedented gift to the broader church. I will end and open the way for Oliver’s presentation with these closing words from Belhar:

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

Thank you, and may the Holy Spirit center us on God, each other, and those who suffer on the earth as we continue our work.

* * * * *

Guiding the Study of the Belhar Confession

The 2002 General Synod voted:

That General Synod instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to continue guiding the study of the Belhar Confession by the RCA, and to report its progress to General Synod 2003 (*MGS 2002*, R-35, p. 175).

That General Synod encourage other parts of the church to use the Belhar Confession as they do their work, especially as it relates to dealing with racism and strengthening

ecumenical commitment, and to explore the implications of its endorsement by the RCA for life and ministry in the RCA (*MGS 2002*, R-36, p. 175).

Background

The 2000 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the RCA commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13 amended, p. 100).

The 2001 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to report its progress on the study guide on the Belhar Confession to General Synod 2002 (*MGS 2001*, R-26, p. 93).

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982, later became one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). In light of the Belhar Confession's emphasis on Christian unity, CCU placed on its agenda a study of the Belhar Confession, which has come to have significance far beyond the church in South Africa (*MGS 1998*, p. 248).

Historically, CCU has been a participant in the long-term relationship the RCA has enjoyed with the members of URCSA. The 1995 General Synod voted:

To request the Commission on Christian Unity to consult with the appropriate offices of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), with the input of the African-American Council, to develop a plan for correspondence and continuing relationships between the respective assemblies and congregations of the RCA and the URCSA (*MGS 1995*, R-1, p. 405).

The 1996 General Synod stated:

In light of R-1 and in concurrence with similar actions and recommendations adopted in Mission Services, a delegation of RCA representatives traveled to South Africa from February 26, 1996, to March 6, 1996, to meet with URCSA representatives (*MGS 1996*, p. 180).

...If one were to ask each member of the RCA delegation to give a summary of its task there would be concurrence on the following:

...The relationship of the RCA and the URCSA must be in parity. There must be a posture of equality and openness to sharing and learning from each other, both in support of each other when in agreement and in support of each other through critical dialogue (*MGS 1996*, p. 182).

In the spring of 1997 Dr. Oliver Patterson and the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell represented the RCA at the General Synod meeting of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. The RCA representatives, with other ecumenical partners of the URCSA in attendance at that meeting, helped draft a document titled "URCSA Partnership Guidelines for Parish, Presbytery, and Synod." The guidelines provide policies and procedures for mission and program partnerships with the various assemblies and congregations of the URCSA. They

were adopted by the URCSA General Synod and forwarded to the URCSA's ecumenical partners. The RCA has utilized the guidelines since 1997 in the development of its mission and program relationships with the Uniting Reformed Church.

On March 7, 1998, an URCSA delegation arrived in the United States for meetings with various RCA groups, including the faculty of New Brunswick and Western Theological Seminaries, RCA program staff, unit directors, and the general secretary. The delegation worshiped with RCA African-American congregations and had conversations with representatives from the Christian Reformed Church.

As a result of the conversations, the following points of agreement were reached:

1. Co-drafting of a basic document establishing the principles of the joint relationship between the URCSA and the RCA.
2. The mutual sharing of information about the government and programmatic structures of the URCSA and the RCA, along with areas of staff responsibilities for each denomination.
3. Connections between the component parts of the RCA and the URCSA will be explored, especially in the following areas: urban ministries, theological exchange, stewardship, Christian education, the Children and Worship program, and youth exchange programs.
4. The RCA will continue to monitor the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) regarding the "Proposed Joint Resolution" between WARC and the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK—the white Dutch Reformed Church), in light of the failed attempt toward church union between the URCSA and the NGK.
5. Discussion and possible cooperation focusing on the issues of religion in public life, a major initiative of the URCSA.
6. Continued cooperation in the development and implementation of the partnership on diaconal work initiated by Mission Services; Christ Memorial Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan; and offices within the Christian Reformed Church (*MGS 1998*, p. 247).

The Rev. Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe, ecumenical representative from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), addressed the 2002 General Synod. He indicated the structure and content of the confession and summarized the gift that the Belhar Confession is to the church.

The confession was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church under the leadership of Dr. Allan Boesak and was finally adopted in 1986, after engaging for so many years with the "mother church" that did not want to listen. The church thought it necessary to take a confessional stance on this matter of great urgency.

The draft confession addresses the following three issues:

1. The unity of the church.
2. Reconciliation.
3. The justice of God.

This unity is a gift and an obligation for the church—through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force. It must be pursued and sought—the people of God must con-

tinually be built to attain it. Furthermore, this unity must become visible so that the world may believe. Separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups is sin. Anything which threatens this unity has no place in the church and must be resisted. This unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways.

God has entrusted to His church a message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. The church is called to be salt of the earth and the light of world. The church must be a peacemaker. It must witness by both word and deeds. Any doctrine which sanctions—in the name of the gospel or of the will of God—the forced separation of people, is rejected.

God has revealed Himself as one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men. He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged. He blocks the path of the ungodly. The church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering; and as God's possession the church must stand where God stands.

In all three articles of the Belhar Confession the positive statements are followed by a rejection of false doctrine. No explicit mention is made of apartheid, except in an explanatory footnote on the motivation for the drafting of the confession. (*MGS 2002*, p. 170)

Its Gift to the Larger Church

The Reformed churches, not only of South Africa, but of the world, would be significantly poorer without Belhar and what Belhar professes. The implications of Belhar are far wider than its original context. Our wish is that the Reformed family would recognize this and not see it as only South African.

The traditional Reformed confessions that date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite their value and significance for the faith of the church, are inadequate to express the fullness of the Reformed faith. The main themes of the Belhar—the unity of the church and the reconciliation between people's and God's justice vis-à-vis the poor and the destitute—are not addressed in these confessions. Very little is said about the unity of the church. Reconciliation and justice for the poor are completely absent. Belhar is not only meant for South Africa.

So we have a wonderful document—a confession of outstanding quality. (*MGS 2002*, p. 171)

THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The Belhar Confession is one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the new Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. Belhar has significance and influence well beyond the church in South Africa. As one member of the Uniting Church expressed it, "We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone." This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the Belhar Confession.

1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects, and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He 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;

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;

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;

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;

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;

that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation 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 whilst 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 to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the Church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the Church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

that God by his life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God, by his life-giving Word and Spirit will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

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 colour 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 men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this;

that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows, and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right;

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 He 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.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

* * * * *

The CCU is implementing the direction of General Synod by using a process for the study of the Belhar Confession that will address the history (as was presented in 2002), theological principles, and practical implications of the Belhar Confession for the RCA. Thus, the confession is being introduced and commended to the church through the General Synod between 2002 and 2004 with a study document for General Synod endorsement and congregational use anticipated in 2005. The other parts of the church are encouraged to use the Belhar Confession as they do their work, especially as it relates to dealing with racism and strengthening ecumenical commitment, and to explore the implications of its endorsement by the RCA for life and ministry in the RCA, as decided by General Synod 2002 (*MGS 2002*, R-36, p. 175).

The history of the Belhar Confession and its role in the life of the URCSA and the RCA was presented to General Synod 2002 through the ecumenical breakfast (voices of the RCA) and the ecumenical presentation to General Synod (visitor from South Africa).

The theological principles of the Belhar Confession will be presented to General Synod 2003 by a panel of General Synod professors, for focused discussion by the delegates, as a way of framing the parameters of the study guide. Resource persons will be invited to both the plenary session and General Synod ecumenical breakfast in order to engage the delegates on the theological implications of the Belhar Confession.

The practical implications of the Belhar Confession, both for the URCSA and the RCA, will be explored by delegates for General Synod 2004 through discernment, presentation, experience, and discussion. This will be done with a view toward expanding the RCA's understanding and appreciation of and dialogue on the Belhar Confession and will do so through making the study guide accessible for congregations by using an action/reflection educational process.

The CCU has also begun to write a six-week study guide on the Belhar Confession to help educate the church as a whole. One of the members of the commission, Susan Damon, took on the assignment to write the committee drafts. After a second review, the CCU will solicit response to the study guide by persons in the other councils by September 2003 in order to conclude its writing by the end of the year. It is the intent of the CCU to present the study guide to the 2004 General Synod with recommendation to present it to the church in 2005.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-45

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to continue guiding the RCA's study of the Belhar Confession, and to report its progress to General Synod 2004; and further,

to encourage other parts of the church to use the Belhar Confession as they do their work, especially as it relates to dealing with racism and strengthening ecumenical commitment, and to explore the implications of its endorsement by the RCA for life and ministry. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

This fulfills the mandate given to the Commission on Christian Unity by General Synod 2001 and General Synod 2002.

Greater Unity with the CRC

The 2002 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to enter into dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), exploring ways of moving toward greater unity between the CRC and the RCA in their ministry and mission, beginning with a discussion of the orderly exchange of ministers, and to report to the 2003 General Synod; and further,

to encourage the agencies of the RCA to continue to expand their cooperative efforts with their CRC counterparts (*MGS 2002*, R-38, p. 179).

Background

In 1995 an overture from the Classis of North Grand Rapids to effect full programmatic and organizational union with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the RCA by June 2000 (*MGS 1995*, p. 187) resulted in the following recommendation from the 1995 General Synod:

To encourage agencies of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America as well as the Commission on Christian Unity to maintain regular correspondence with the Christian Reformed Church in North America and its Inter-Church Relations Committee; and further,

to explore avenues of reconciliation between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America for additional programmatic cooperation (*MGS 1995*, R-5, p. 189).

In its continuing response to R-5, CCU met with the Inter-Church Relations Committee of the CRC at its February 28-29, 2000 meeting. (The two groups were also scheduled to meet in late September 2001, but that meeting was canceled because of the September 11 attacks.) In June 2002 the RCA General Synod instructed this commission and the Christian Reformed Church General Synod instructed its Inter-Church Relations Committee to explore a closer relationship between the two denominations.

The Commission on Christian Unity met with the Christian Reformed Church Inter-Church Relations Committee on December 11, 2002, at the ELCA offices in Chicago. Its discussion included 1) the respective mandates, 2) the respective ecumenical charters, 3) current (or recent) cooperative efforts between agencies or congregations of the CRC and the RCA, 4) exchange of clergy, and 5) the Belhar Confession and its relationship to both denominations.

Each group reported on the mandate given by the respective synods to engage in dialogue so that the ministry and mission of both the RCA and the CRC can be strengthened by greater cooperation. Shared ministry already in effect includes food cupboards and other neighborhood services, pulpit exchanges, small community union churches, and campus ministries. It became important to clarify where the two have comparable agencies to facilitate a move toward greater cooperation.

As a way of beginning the discussion of orderly exchange of clergy, the group reviewed the framework and experience of the Formula of Agreement between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the RCA. The Formula of Agreement partners began their discussion by looking at what it was that the four denominations held in common, and then surveyed

the benefits of being able to expand the spread of the gospel when they worked together. Clergy exchange is always a matter of invitation and not through personal initiative. A similar exchange of pastors could be possible between the CRC and RCA because of our experience with the union churches. A greater exchange could be the next logical step.

An additional opportunity offered by the *Formula* is increased interaction among the Formula churches through appointments to some of the others' boards, commissions, and General Synod governing bodies. There was further discussion on the need of both denominations to involve the Canadian churches in this conversation.

The two commissions also discussed the possibility of joint work on the Belhar Confession; detailing areas of cooperation and articulating new possibilities, especially in missions; identifying current and historic obstacles; reviewing common budget concerns such as pension and benefits; and greater communication for the involvement of both constituencies.

The group concluded that a sub-group should be formed to continue the conversation with one or two of the above items as the focus and to assign top priority to further discussion on pastor exchange (including current cooperation and obstacles experienced). Tentative plans are for the sub-group to include four members from each denomination plus two staff members; resource persons or experts will be added as the discussion warrants. By February 2003 each group will have decided 1) who the members of the sub-group will be, 2) how often and where they will meet (three or four times a year?), 3) denominational steps each group needs to take toward possible pastor exchange, 4) what cooperation is required, 5) communication channels for respective synods, and 6) about preparing reports for the respective synods.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-46

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to continue in dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), exploring ways of moving toward greater unity between the CRC and the RCA in their ministry and mission and continuing the discussion related to the orderly exchange of ministers, with report to General Synod 2004; and further,

**to encourage the congregations and agencies of the RCA to expand their cooperative efforts with their CRC counterparts.
(ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. The RCA and the CRC share the same confessions, a common tradition and history, and a shared mission to reach the world in the name of Jesus Christ.
2. The mission of the church of Jesus Christ would be better served by a greater unity of the two churches.
3. Providing for the orderly exchange of ministers of Word and sacrament would allow for more flexibility and more effective use of our churches' ordained leaders.

Decision of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

The 2001 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to report to General Synod 2002 the decision of the National Association of Evangelicals regarding the RCA's application to become a member church of the association (*MGS 2001*, R-27, p. 94).

As of the writing of this report the NAE has not indicated that a decision has been reached concerning the membership of the RCA.

Membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Council

The 2001 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to explore membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Council and to report its recommendation to the 2002 General Synod (*MGS 2001*, R-30 amended, p. 102).

The 2002 General Synod voted:

That General Synod instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to continue its exploration of membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Council and report its recommendation to the 2004 General Synod (*MGS 2002*, R-37, p. 178).

The CCU expects to have a report ready in 2004.

CONCLUSION

This concludes the report of the Commission on Christian Unity. The commission will next meet in November 2003 in concurrent sessions with other RCA commissions and the General Synod Council in Zion, Illinois.