

# **“A gift from heaven”<sup>1</sup> – the reception of the Belhar Confession in the period 1982-2000 and its ecumenical significance today**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article comprises of two parts. In part one reception is explained conceptual as a process that consists of three phases, namely explication, recognition and common confession. It is then applied to the reception of the Belhar Confession between the concept of 1982 and the year 2000. In part two the theological relevance of Belhar is explained in view of a few significant recent ecumenical developments. The article finds that although the formal reception process was subjected to specific ecclesiological restrictions and is making progress slowly, the ecumenical echo of Belhar without doubt is of great significance. Belhar speaks far beyond its context and time and is a source of theological insight for the church in ecumenical context.

Just over twenty years have passed since the Confession of Belhar<sup>2</sup> was accepted in draft form by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1982. In this paper, I attempt first to report on the reception of the confession in- and outside South Africa, and then to link the main themes of the confession to current concerns in the Ecumenical Movement. The implicit aim is to demonstrate both the complexity of the reception process and the contemporary ecumenical resonance of the faith confessed in Belhar.

## **1. THE RECEPTION OF BELHAR 1982-2000**

“Ecumenical reception includes all phases and aspects of an ongoing process by which a Church under guidance of the Holy Spirit makes the results of a bilateral or multilateral conversation a part of its faith and life because the results are seen to be in conformity with the teachings of Christ and of the apostolic community, that is, the gospel as witnessed to in Scripture.”

This definition does not fully fit the reception process of a confession, but we can nevertheless draw on some important aspects and lesson learnt from ecumenical dialogue: It might be useful to

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1 A translation of “Een geschenk uit de hemel”, coined by Marc Loos on the acceptance of Belhar by the Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België. It is the title of his introductory remarks to *De belijdenis van Belhar en haar betekenis voor ons* (VPBK 2001:5). I gratefully acknowledge the critical comments by the reviewers before publication of this article.

2 For the text of the confession and discussion, see Cloete & Smit 1984; for a lay introduction and narrative of the confession's origin, see Botha & Naudé 1998.

3 See the discussion of this quotation in Rusch 1988:13ff. For an analysis of reception's technical meaning as implied here, a discussion in relation to South Africa, and an elaborate bibliography covering the period up to 1998, see Naude & Smit 2000.

link “all phases of an ongoing process” to the process whereby a confession accepted or drafted by one church is handed down to other churches with the view to a (common) explication, followed by a reciprocal recognition and ultimately a common confession of the apostolic faith as formulated in the original or adapted formulation. This last phase of “full reception” would refer to the Rusch’s idea of making results of conversation “part of faith and life” because the Holy Spirit convinces others that such confession is “... in conformity with the teachings of Christ and of the apostolic community ...” In the case of a confession, **full reception** would normally include a juridical act whereby the receptor church includes such confession as part of its orders, accompanied by wider use in catechetical and liturgical settings exactly to make the confession “part of faith and life”.

But “reception” may not proceed the full way and remain at the level of **recognition**. This is still a testimony to the unity in faith as “recognised” in the confession, although it lacks the ecclesial authority and confessional status as in a full reception. The weaker and first phase of “reception” is an independent or (preferably) common **explication** where the text is taken seriously, circulated and studied. This is an intrinsic part of the reception process as it implies a hermeneutical “judging of the Spirit” that may in the long run serve a stronger sense of reception via recognition and final acceptance.

Before we take stock of Belhar’s reception thus far, a note of clarification is necessary: **The ecumenical church consists of many for whom the full reception of any text as confessional text would at this stage in principle be impossible.**

This includes the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Orthodox family of churches where only certain Ecumenical Councils would be accepted as normative, or where the authority to express the truth is limited to a specific view of the ministry in the church. It also includes the Lutheran churches where the particular confessions stemming from the time of the Protestant Reformation (eg Augsburg Confession, Luther’s Small Catechism) are seen as adequate expression of the faith. Whilst further truth statements or ecumenical treaties are needed and supported (eg the Barmen Declaration, Leuenberger Concordie, Charta Oecumenica and others), the notion of confession is both temporally and ecclesially restricted by Lutherans and is thus not extended to any such further documents.

Then there are the large group of non-confessional churches (eg Methodists, Mennonites, the World Evangelical Fellowship, African Independent Churches) where the issue of confession as such is not part of the churches’ heritage. However, where such churches are part of the ecumenical movement as represented by the WCC, they would not actively resist a common expression of faith as is found in for example the creeds of the early church. Lastly one may refer to charismatic and Pentecostalist church groupings that might even be anti-creedal as they consider creeds or confessions as unnecessary bindings on the free work of the Spirit.

The conclusion is a sobering one: **Belhar’s full reception as defined above is limited to churches of Reformed convictions that make up a small, though significant, part of Christianity in the world.** However, its reception at the first two levels of explication and recognition are wide open to the *ecumene* and, as I argue below, need to be actively pursued, based on an already existing consonance.

Let us briefly investigate Belhar’s reception history in the period 1982-2002:

1.1 The **full reception** of Belhar has so far been achieved in four different settings:

(i) After the draft confession was accepted at the Synod of October 1982, the confession was distributed to every congregation in the DRMC to study and discuss with a report back four years later. At the Synod of 1986 the confession was formally adopted as the fourth *Bekennntnisschrift* of the DRMC alongside the Reformation-era Belgic Confession, Heidelberger Catechism, and Canones of Dordt.

(ii) As part of the ongoing dialogue within the Dutch Reformed Church family (DRC), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) accepted Belhar at its General Synod of July 1991, though this was later part of the legal dispute that arose in the church over its reunification efforts with the DRMC.

(iii) In the reunification process of the DRMC and the DRCA to form the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA) in April 1994, Belhar was brought into the process by the DRMC and accepted as part of the confessional base of the newly formed church.

(iv) The fourth full reception was concluded outside South Africa in Belgium. The Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België (VPKB), formed as a union of Protestant Churches in Belgium in 1979, was involved in partnerships with the *Belydende Kring* since 1988, and with the URCSA since its formation in 1994. Via the process of explication and recognition, it describes the confession as “a gift from heaven” (see VPKB 2001:5) and finally adopted the Belhar Confession (translated into Dutch and French) at its Synod at Paturages in 1998.

1.2 The **recognition** of Belhar as confessing the same faith as handed down in Scripture and tradition has occurred in the context of the Dutch Reformed Church, although in reluctant terms:

The DRC only took an official stance on Belhar at its Synod of 1990 via a report of its executive committee. This process and decision area analysed in detail elsewhere (Naudé & Botha 1998:77-89; Naudé 1997), and I here merely restate the fact that the DRC judged “that the Confession of Belhar is, taken by itself,<sup>4</sup> not in contradiction to the Three Formulae of Unity, and that it needs not bring separation between the churches” (point 5 of decision, my translation). Although the DRC did not in fact declare in actual words that Belhar is testifying to the same apostolic faith or “the gospel as witnessed to in Scripture” (Rusch), its decision in a somewhat ambiguous way implies this, despite the decision’s reference later “that certain expressions could have been formulated differently” and that its own document *Kerk en Samelewing* reflects the biblical views on God’s relation to the poor and oppressed clearer (*suiwerder*) than in Belhar (point 8 of decision, my translation).

The logic behind an argument that the DRC implicitly recognised Belhar in the technical sense is as follows: The DRC as **Reformed** church stands on the *quia* relation between confession and Scripture. If a new confession, despite some textual disagreements, is judged not to contradict the earlier confessions, and they themselves are true to Scripture, the later confession must then also be in line with Scripture, and therefore expressing the true faith for our time. Although at that stage reluctantly (and for some unknowingly?), the DRC has thus recognised Belhar and will, as part of the reunification process in the family, again have to deal with the confessional status of Belhar in a newly formed church.

The ultimate power to change the confessional foundation of the DRC only lies with the General Synod after a due consultative process. None of the regional synods has so far made a positive recommendation in this regard. At the level of congregations the situation is one of division: Whereas some congregations and even circuits have fully endorsed Belhar (obviously without juridical status for the institutional church as such), others have rejected the confession not only as confession but also its content (and thereby accepting less than the implication of the

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4 The phrase “taken by itself” is significant. Positively, it means that the text of the confession is taken by itself, that is speaking independently. Negatively, it means that the DRC had serious misgivings at that stage about the historical context from which the *status confessionis* and Belhar grew, and tried to read the text “in isolation” from its origin.

General Synod of 1990). At least one can testify to the wide debate and explication of Belhar in many places all over the country and via *Die Kerkbode*, official newspaper of the DRC.

1.3 A serious **explication** of Belhar might have occurred in many settings around the world of which I might not be aware. I do not have an “informal reading” in mind, but some form of official process whereby the confession is taken seriously within church structures. I note two examples:

One example is the Reformierten Bund and Lippische Landeskirche in collaboration with the Evangelisch Reformierte Kirche in Germany. They commenced a study and explication process in May 1998 in Detmold, Germany and are particularly interested in the relation between Barmen (1934) and Belhar, as well as the enduring significance of Belhar for their context today. This is still an ongoing process, the beginning of which is reflected in a publication by the Reformierten Bund, *Das Bekenntnis von Belhar und seine Bedeutung fuer die reformierten Kirche in Deutschland* (see Niemoller 1998).

A second example is the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) that was (at its meeting of 1988 in Harare) requested by the DRMC to accept Belhar as confession. A process of reception – in the sense of official explication – followed amongst member churches. But by the time of the next meeting in Athens (1992) the DRMC had withdrawn from the REC with the consequence that the reception process stalled at the first level of explication.

**In summary:** The discussion above hopefully clarifies the notion of reception, notes the progress and difficulties with the reception of Belhar, and clarifies the complexities involved in reception of confessional texts. The discussion below will now follow a slightly different approach and pursue not so much formal processes of (non-)reception, but rather whether the content and witness of Belhar echoes in the wider church. It is Belhar’s own intention that what is confessed is important and should be given practical effect: Yes, “the Church is called to confess **and do all these things** ... (art 5, my emphasis).

Let us follow up on this with reference to recent events in the wider church community.

## 2. THE CURRENT ECUMENICAL ECHOES OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION

Before some of the ecumenical documents are discussed below, it might be wise to remind readers that Belhar is structured in five articles. Article 1 is a confession of the Trinity who gathers and protects the church, whereas the three middle articles deal in a coherent interrelatedness with the unity of the church (art 2), reconciliation in church and society (art 3) and justice (art 4). The confession closes in article 5 with a call to obedience to Christ, the Lord, and a doxology to the triune God. For the sake of easy reference<sup>5</sup> the three middle articles’ paragraphs are numbered, following the “that” statements in each case (eg 2.1 starts with, “We believe that Christ’s work ...” and 3.1 with, “We believe that God has entrusted ...”). The rejection clauses of article 2 are also numbered and referred to as “rejection 2.1” through to “rejection 2.4”.

In this section, attention is drawn to how the three middle articles on unity, reconciliation and justice are related to recent or current efforts in the ecumenical church to witness to the same faith confessed in Belhar. **This serves to show how Belhar – like any true prophetic word – spoke for its time and locality, but also continue to speak beyond itself in both space and time.**

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5 In my work with Belhar in an international context the need for such reference system became obvious. The one suggested here has proven itself in practice, but is obviously not an official one.

## 2.1 Unity

The visible unity of the church is for Belhar of utmost importance and forms the structural base of the three middle articles that should be read as reciprocally implicating one another. After confessing faith in the Trinity in the first article, it follows the Nicene and Apostolicum formulation at the beginning of article 2, “We believe in **one**, holy, universal Christian Church, the community of saints called from the entire human family” (my emphasis), followed later in 2.3 by, (“We believe) that this unity must become visible **so that the world may believe ...**” This formulation is directly related to the By-Laws of Faith and Order and the constitution of the WCC which states that the churches are called to “the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, **in order that the world may believe**” (my emphases; see Jn 17:21). The DRMC was itself borne as a separate church from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1881 and know the pain of so-called spiritual unity without an outward visible form. This is the backdrop to the strong confessional “no!” expressed in the rejection clause of article 2, “Therefore we reject any doctrine which denies that a refusal to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin” (rejection 2.3).

The modern ecumenical movement brought together Faith and Order (1927) and Life and Work (1925) to form the WCC (1948) that was in turn joined in 1961 and 1971 by the International Missionary Council (founded in 1910) and World Council of Christian Education respectively. The movement was from the beginning built on the assumption of the unity of the church “in one common faith and one eucharistic fellowship”. After many efforts the WCC today has just over 140 member churches<sup>6</sup> all over the world, and at least in some way symbolises a form of organisational unity, though the ideal of true ecclesial (eg eucharistic) unity is still a long way off. Building trust and unity is a painfully slow and sensitive process, and to retain a vision for unity is not easy. No wonder some refer to a loss of this urge for unity and the entering of a post-ecumenical phase (De Gruchy 1998). Others mention the fear of both expertise and of conflict, the view of the ecumenical movement by Orthodox churches as another variation of Western imperialism, and the feeling “that the churches had assembled (in Harare) because they were scheduled to do so, not because they were mutually committed ... to making God’s gift of unity visible for the sake of the world God loves” (Kinnamon 1999:39, 41).

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss or evaluate the present state of the WCC who tried at the Harare meeting to do some introspection with a report, *Our Ecumenical Vision*, prepared for the meeting. The ecumenical church is obviously much wider than the WCC, but it remains an important council as it expresses a fellowship of churches on the way towards full koinonia. That some results have indeed been achieved with respect to unity emerges from two processes steered by the Council. The unity “in one eucharist fellowship” relates to the BEM process (see 2.1.1 below), and unity “in one common faith” to the Common Confession project (see 2.1.2).

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6 Michael Kinnamon of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and well known in ecumenical circles, makes an interesting observation about “the narrowness of the ecumenical tent”. As neither the RCC nor the fastest growing sectors of Christianity (African Independent Churches/Pentecostal) are part of the WCC, he states that “... within twenty-five years the member churches of the **World Council of Churches** will represent little more than ten percent of the followers of Christ. To put it bluntly, an ecumenical movement whose primary strength is in the churches of the European Reformation will be increasingly irrelevant – and hardly ecumenical!” (Kinnamon 1999:38, his emphasis). Even if this is the case, I would argue for sustained efforts toward greater unity based on the Christological reality that **we are one in Christ** and need to make this already existing reality visible (a point supported by Kinnamon on p 36 of his article).

### 2.1.1 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry

The unity in “one eucharistic fellowship” started in 1982 and reached its fulfilment in 1990 when the so-called BEM report and accompanying liturgy were accepted by member churches (see WCC 1990). Although stumbling blocks and disagreements on baptism, fellowship in the eucharist, and the authority of ministries remain and although new threats to even these agreements constantly lurk below the surface, the process itself, and the outcome, remains an ecumenical gift of the Spirit to the church in the latter half of the 20th century, and is undoubtedly a testimony to a greater sense of unity.

Belhar’s own history and confession relate specifically to the sacramental issues in the BEM process. The division at the table of the Lord twice emerged “officially” as painful sign of sin and disunity: When converts from indigenous peoples were in some instances served the Lords’ Supper separately, the Cape Synod of 1857 opened the possibility to sanction this practice which in turn contributed to the founding of a separate “Mission Church” in 1881. And 1982 at the WARC meeting in Ottawa, the delegation of the then DRMC did not see its way open to share the table with those who were supporting doctrinal views just declared a *status confessionis*. Although the division pertaining to the Holy Communion in the DRC family is not at the same level as those amongst the main church traditions, it has served as both painful sign of separation and at many local occasions as joyful sign of growth related to the vision emerging later from the BEM process, and which, needless to say, remains a continual gift and task to the church.

### 2.1.2 Confessing the one faith

The search for some consensus amongst churches on the apostolic faith was outlined in a three-stage study initiated at the Faith and Order Lima Commission meeting in 1982 under the title “Towards the common expression of the apostolic faith today”. The three interdependent goals were: (1) a recognition of the Nicene Creed (without the *filioque*) as **the** ecumenical creed of the church; (2) an explanation of the creed for the sake of contemporary understanding, and (3) finding ways to an expression of the common faith today. The sixth assembly of the WCC in Vancouver (1983) affirmed the study project which included contemporary expressions of faith, as well as a focus on the Nicene creed as most striking model of unity in the early church, representing part of a *consensio antiquitatis et universitatis* (Sieben 1979:515). The possibility of Nicea as expression of the common apostolic faith was pursued at a number of theological consultations (see Limouris 1991:108-110) which led to the publication of a draft document *Confessing the one faith* (Faith and Order paper 140, 1987) approved by the Standing Commission of Faith and Order in Madrid (1987). After considerable reactions and further deliberations around the world, the new revised version was approved in Dunblane, Scotland (1990) and published by the WCC as Faith and Order Paper 153 in 1991 under the title: *Confessing the one faith. An ecumenical explication of the Apostolic faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (381).

My interpretation of the common confession project<sup>7</sup> is that it has retained a bifocal vision of both recognition and explanation of the Nicene Creed and promoting “... new confessions of faith as they are provoked today by situations of persecution, of church union negotiations, or of urgent socio-economic, political or ideological threats”. Such modern confessions “could enrich the variety of creedal expressions and ought to be communicated within the ecumenical community as concrete evidence that we are ‘listening to what the Spirit has to say to the churches’” (Houtepen 1991:197). In stead of considering such new expressions of faith as purely contextualist

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7 For a critical discussion of the project, and perhaps missing the ecumenical spirit, see Naudé 2002.

reactions to specific circumstances,<sup>8</sup> it should be part and parcel of our theological task to show the coherence between “universally received” symbols (like Nicea or the Apostolicum) and such modern expressions (like Belhar), in order to continually confirm our one apostolic faith.

Naudé has elsewhere extensively argued for a theological consonance between Nicea and Belhar (see Naudé 2002a). In the context of this paper the point is, however, that in the Nicene Creed the churches related to the WCC have reached **a considerable ecumenical consensus on a post-canonical expression of the apostolic faith**, shared by all confessional churches, and at least not resisted by non-creedal churches. This is – without doubt – a sign of how important the issue of “apostolic faith” is for a unity established in truth, and not merely a unity based on tactical grounds.

## 2.2 Reconciliation

Belhar’s third article centres on reconciliation which is witnessed to by the church in its own being and action, “We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ ... that the Church is witness both by word and deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells ... that any teaching which ... denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine” (Belhar art 3.1; 3.4). That the task of reconciliation in- and outside the church is an enduring one does not need extensive argumentation. To illustrate this, reference is made to two recent ecumenical initiatives, the common declaration on justification between Lutherans and Catholics (Oct 1999), and the declaration of a decade to overcome violence (Dec 1999):

### 2.2.1 Interecclesial reconciliation:” *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*”

The numerous efforts at bi- and multilateral consultations between churches of various traditions have become almost a hallmark of the modern ecumenical movement, both within and beyond the boundaries and auspices of the WCC. Since the middle 1960s reports on such consultations have been an ongoing project of Faith and Order, published in *The Ecumenical Review* at regular intervals (eg Oct 1984, Oct 1986, Apr 1989, Jan 1992, Jan 1995, Apr 1997, and most recently in Jan 2000, see vol 52:3ff).

Of particular significance in recent years has been the *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*, a consensus declaration signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on 31 October 1999 in Augsburg (a very appropriate date and place!).

Why I include this common declaration under the rubric of reconciliation (and not church unity) is because of the particular depth of ecclesial and political schism stemming from the time of the Reformation, and the limitations of the declaration in establishing full communion. The schism between the Catholic and Lutheran churches led to the Schmalkaldischer Krieg (1546-1547) and later to the vicious Thirty Year War (1618-1648) that ended with the Peace of Westphalia. The strong condemnations by Lutherans of what they saw as Catholic heterodoxy, and the doctrinal condemnations (*Lehrverurteilungen*) by the RCC at the Council of Trent (1871), strengthened the theological rift between the churches, despite an evolving political peace. The issue of justification is “the first and main article” of the Lutheran faith (Schmalkaldic Article II,1)

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8 In his overview of confessions as communicative acts, Edmund Arens (1989) moves from *Lehrendes Bekennen* in the Councils and *Bekennnisschriften* in the Reformation to what he calls *Situatives Bekennen* to depict twentieth century documents like Barmen (and by implication Belhar). The latter creates the unfortunate impression that the early creeds and confessions were “universal” (in the sense of a-contextual) and not in fact also situation-bound.



and is a crucial part of Luther's Small Catechism and the *Confessio Augustana*.<sup>9</sup> This issue is obviously for Lutherans a non-negotiable expression of the heart of the gospel, whilst both Lutherans and Catholics have grown in their understanding of each other's position since Vaticanum II.

The issue of justification was therefore included in official Lutheran-RCC dialogue from the start. Between 1972 and 1994 extensive study and bilateral consultations<sup>10</sup> resulted in sufficient consensus on core issues related to the doctrine of justification. This includes very important matters like the biblical witnesses to justification, the nature of grace, the relation between grace and justification, the surety of salvation, and good works. In short, "Sie (the common declaration) will zeigen, dass aufgrund des Dialogs die unterzeichnenden lutherischen Kirchen und die Römisch-Katholische Kirche nunmehr imstande sind, ein gemeinsames Verständnis unserer Rechtfertigung durch Gottes Gnade im Glauben an Christus zu vertreten" (Declaration, par 5). The declaration ends with a prayer of thanks to the Lord for such a significant step in overcoming church division, and, "Wir bitten den Heiligen Geist, uns zu jener sichtbaren Einheit weiterzuführen, die der Wille Christi ist" (par 44).

This is but one example of a significant interecclesial reconciliation, although the common declaration points to the many differences that still remain (see point 5, and specifically par 43).<sup>11</sup> When the *ecumene* is viewed in its entire breadth, the issue of interecclesial reconciliation – so forcefully witnessed to by Belhar – is probably an eschatological reality to which we should – in the light of Christ's work – commit our continued ecumenical energy as amply demonstrated in this carefully crafted joint declaration.

### 2.2.2 Extra-ecclesial reconciliation: "Ecumenical Decade to overcome Violence 2001-2010"

Belhar is clear: The church, having been entrusted the ministry of reconciliation, "... is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world" (3.1) and, "... 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" (3.2). Opening new possibilities of life for the world where death, irreconciliation, hatred and bitterness hold sway, is the task of the church that is "called blessed because it is a peacemaker" (3.1).

The Eighth Assembly of the WCC in Harare (Dec 1988) decided to declare an *Ecumenical Decade to overcome Violence 2001-2010. Churches for Peace and Reconciliation*.<sup>12</sup> Many factors inspired this decision:

- The discussion in Harare of the preceding decade on *Churches in Solidarity with Women* focused on the issue of continued violence against women and children that needs to be taken further.
- The very innovative *Peace to the City* project in the 1990s included seven cities that were engaged in practical peace efforts and from which much could be learned as new cities were added to the list (see Plou 1998).

9 For the texts of these confessions, see the two volumes edited by Mau (1997): Augsburg Bd I:31-97; Schmalkaldische Artikel Bd I:313-340; Die Kleine Katechismus Bd II: 13-38.

10 See extensive literature in the footnotes of the Declaration and its addenda.

11 For further critical reflection, see Sauter's incisive article (Sauter 1999) and volume 38 of the *Journal for Ecumenical Studies* (2000/1) with contributions from a variety of confessional perspectives.

12 See Wilkens 1999:268 for the Council's decision, and Enns 1999, 2001, 2002 as well as OR 48, 1999/2, for a discussion.



- One should also note the long peace-seeking tradition in the WCC itself (see Kässmann 1998:1-24; Raiser 2000:15-19) *inter alia* illustrated by the ground-breaking decision in the context of the conciliar process for JPIC in Dresden (1989) that the option for violence-free action be seen as the *Grundorientierung* in any context where peace is threatened.
- Lastly, the UN declared an *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World 2001-2010* that obviously allows for some convergence of theme and efforts.

At its meeting in September 1999, the Central Committee of the WCC accepted a framework document and formulated a message that echoes the very confessional phrase in Belhar, namely "... that the churches are called to give a clear witness to the world of peace, reconciliation and non-violence grounded in justice" (OR 49, 2000/4:471, my translation). The explicitly formulated aims of the Decade to overcome Violence (OR 49, 2000/4:474-475) include a specific call to churches to a "renewed confirmation of a spirituality of reconciliation and active non-violence" (WCC). Although Belhar does not historically rise for the peace-church tradition, the confessing movement called for prayer (see eg 1985) and sanctions as non-violent methods to end unjust rule. Its vision for the church as reconciled and reconciling body is clearly aimed to overcome irreconciliation and violence so as "... to open new possibilities of life for society and the world" (Belhar 3.2).

## 2.3 Justice

"We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men ..." and "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" (Belhar art 4.1; 4.2).

In Sjollema's judgment, one of the most successful campaigns launched by the WCC has been the Program to Combat Racism from 1969 to the early 1990s with its focus on racial justice and specific attention to the situation in South Africa at that time – though not restricted to South Africa (see Sjollema 1991). One could show the historical and theological links between many ecumenical efforts to witness for justice and the events that lead to the acceptance of a *status confessionis* and the formulation of Belhar in 1982 (see Naudé 2002b). But the issue of justice has in the mean time acquired a much wider meaning than only racism. This is evident from at least three further ecumenical initiatives. Let us note each of these very briefly:

### 2.3.1 "Charta Oecumenica" 2001

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) consisting of most Orthodox, Reformed, Anglican, Free Church and Ancient Catholic Churches in Europe and the Roman Catholic European Bishops' Conference, signed a *Charta Oecumenica*<sup>13</sup> on 22 April 2001. Its subtitle reads, "Guidelines for the growing cooperation amongst the churches in Europe" (my translation) and is clearly aimed at making this practical in a number of ways referred to below. It is again the structure of the document that is of interest here, as well as its relevance for the issue of justice. The former shows remarkable correspondence to the Belhar confession – almost as if Belhar's

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13 For text see OR 50, 2001/4:504-514.

structure served as guideline!<sup>14</sup> The *Charta* moves from faith in the triune God to unity, reconciliation and justice in exactly that order, but obviously with different examples and not couched in confessional language. Let us examine this briefly:

Like Belhar that commences with a declaration of faith in the triune God, the superscript of the *Charta*'s introductory paragraph is "Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (my translation), taking the church's trinitarian faith as point of reference and departure. The *Charta* then has three subdivisions and I include the relevant corresponding readings from Belhar in brackets:

Part one deals with the unity of church (Belhar art 2) and starts with the Nicene Creed's formulation of faith in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (Belhar art 2, first sentence), followed by a reference to the unity passage from Ephesians 4:3-6 (Belhar 2.4), and makes clear that unity is a gift that must be made visible (Belhar 2.2).

Part two of the *Charta* deals with the practical implications of this visible unity which includes joint proclamation of the gospel, joint action, prayer and continued dialogue – all with a view that the unity declared in section one be made visible in interecclesial reconciliation; in a willingness to confess toward one another and a commitment "aufeinander zugehen" (*Charta*, part two, par 3; see Belhar art 3:1).

Part three then explains "our common responsibility in Europe" and remarkably coincides with Belhar article 3 and 4. It starts with the beatitude reference that those who make peace will be called children of God (Mt 5:9) as stated in Belhar "that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker" (3.1). Much more is said in this section than was possible in the short confessional style of Belhar, but Belhar's focus on peace and its relation to justice to the poor (art 4.1) is unambiguously present in paragraph 7-12:

In paragraph 7 reference is made to the East-West and North-South relationships and it is stated that "... each form of Eurocentrism is to be avoided and Europe's responsibility for the whole of humanity is to be strengthened, with specific reference to the poor in world" (my translation). Paragraph 8 makes it clear that social justice – the gap between rich and poor – and unemployment belongs to reconciliation. Paragraph 9 speaks of global justice in the sense of caring for creation, whereas peaceful relations with other religions (Judaism, Islam and new religious movements) are addressed in paragraph 10-12.

In a yet another remarkable correspondence, the *Charta* closes (like it begins) with a trinitarian confession akin to Belhar's article 1 and 5. The last paragraph starts (like Belhar) with a confession of the Lordship of Christ and his Headship of the church. "In his Name we will go further on a joint road in Europe." And finally closes, "We pray God for the help of His Holy Spirit," thereby completing the trinitarian structure, **leaving no doubt that the voice and concerns of Belhar are heard in the same manner and on the very same issues, albeit in a different context.**

### 2.3.2 The conciliar process of "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC)"

One of the most encompassing ecumenical endeavours in recent decades has been the well-known JPIC process. Initiated at the Vancouver assembly of the WCC in 1983 with the aim "to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation" the process expanded beyond the members of the WCC and includes civil

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14 This makes the *Charta* suitable for discussion under any one of the three articles of Belhar. Here I will focus on the issue of justice, and obviously lose some of the richer convergences between the two texts.

bodies that share the same vision. At the world convocation on JPIC in Seoul (March 1990) ten convictions were affirmed and the members entered into an act of covenanting on four practical issues: a just economic order; true security of all nations and a culture of non-violence; a nurturing of creation, and finally the eradication of all forms of discrimination on all levels, including racism (see Niles 1991:559). In this way the issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation were treated as three aspects of one reality, each enriching and qualifying the other.

Belhar's article 4 resonates in many of these formulations and its theological "direction" is confirmed time and again. To name but a few:

The second affirmation of Seoul is "God's option for the poor" (a contentious issue in the reception of Belhar art 4.1) and the third is "the equal value of all races and peoples" (see Belhar art 3.3). Belhar's article on justice is particularly, though not exclusively, concerned with economic injustice. This is borne out by the many formulations in Belhar 4.1-4.3 and the biblical references to Deuteronomy, Amos, and Isaiah (OT) and specifically the Lukan tradition in the New Testament. This has in itself in the mean time brought forth the question whether the structural injustices of a globalised economy is not a matter of confession (*processus confessionis*) for the ecumenical church.

It is further significant that "integrity of creation" is understood to refer to "the biblical vision of peace with justice" which includes ecological concerns. Although Belhar does not explicitly addresses ecological concerns,<sup>15</sup> its vision of encompassing peace and its interpretation of Jesus' ministry does place it in the ambit of cosmological concerns, as neither in the Old Testament nor in Jesus' ministry is a dualistic world view present (religion as separate life form over against other realities). This was made possible only by modernity and the technological advances of humanity enhanced by the industrial and information technology revolutions.

Let us turn to a last example of justice addressed in the context of the ecumenical church.

### 2.3.4 *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*

By only looking at the title of this Faith and Order study project one could rightly wonder where the issue of justice is "hidden". A short explanation is required:

There has always been a tension and even conflict between the issues of Faith and Order on the one hand (focusing on unity) and Life and Work on the other (focusing on witness). The WCC consequently took up the challenge to demonstrate the integration between these two concerns and initiated at its Lima meeting (1982) a study programme with the title as given above. The results of various consultations have been published as Faith and Order Paper 151 (1990) under the title *Church and world. The unity of the church and the renewal of human community*.

The theological structure of this document is – for a discussion of Belhar – of great significance. Firstly because **it confirms that ecclesiology is the theological and social locus through which renewal of human community can be achieved**. The greater part of the report thus develops themes like the church as kingdom, as mystery, as sign and as eschatological community. It is, secondly, **only in this framework that the study addresses the issues of social concern** chosen as examples of how ecclesiology and social ethics hang together, namely justice (ch 4) and the community of men and women (ch 5).

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15 A confession arises mostly from what it wishes to deny as threat to the truth. It is obvious that Belhar was not directing its attention to eg the ecological impact of an apartheid doctrine. But it is also part of the ongoing hermeneutical task to explicate creeds and confessions in new contexts, so long as one honours the theological "direction" of the original. An excellent example is the wide interpretation of the Nicene Creed in *Confessing the one faith* (WCC 1991) to include inter alia matters of ecology and secularisation.

The detail is not my concern here. The way of argumentation is. Like Belhar that confesses that God brings about reconciliation and justice in the world through the redeemed sociality of his church as exemplified in the church's unity, this Faith and Order study<sup>16</sup> places the issues of renewal of human community in the context of the unity of the church. Just as Belhar first confesses unity (based on the trinitarian faith), the study report develops renewal on the basis of unity, thereby merging the "being" and the "action" of the church into an integrated whole.

The following excerpt is a beautiful example of how ecclesiology (in this case "mystery" and "sign") and renewal of community hang together, and how the report echoes in almost exact words some of the concerns expressed in Belhar's article four on justice in society,

"As **mystery**, the church participates in the powerlessness of God revealed in the life and suffering of Jesus Christ and is thus called to be in **solidarity with all who are without power**. As prophetic **sign** the church participates in God's action to raise up the meek and lowly and is thus called to advocate a fair distribution of power, and the responsible exercise of power, within the life of the human community" (Church and World 1990:47-48, my emphases).

## CONCLUSION

From **section one** it appears that the reception of Belhar is – like most ecumenical and church (re)unification processes – a complex and slow one. Significant progress has been made, but much more is needed. The reunification of the Dutch Reformed Church family in a new church (with Belhar included in its church orders) remains the most urgent and important task of the respective South African churches' leadership in the next few years. But it is time that the wider church – that so significantly supported the confessing church during apartheid – takes Belhar more seriously and officially begin the process of reception<sup>17</sup> according to each church's own methods and procedures, and as allowed by its own view on (new) confessions.

From **section two** it emerges that the main confessional issues in Belhar currently appear and will remain as some of the most urgent items for the ecumenical church in the twenty-first century. Belhar should therefore take its rightful place amongst confessions from around the world as "account of our hope" and must find its way into a possible ecumenical book of confessions foreseen by some in the WCC (see Houtepen 1991), and into the study commissions who will find in Belhar a richness, depth and clarity on many issues facing us today.

"Belhar is a gift of God to our churches," said Willie Jonker, Reformed theologian from South Africa. "It is a gift from heaven," echoed our Belgian sisters and brothers from a different context.

The time is ripe to receive this gift into the wider ecumenical church.

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- 16 A more recent study, *The nature and purpose of the church* (WCC 1998), also link the church as koinonia (p 24-33) to life in communion (p 34-55) and service in the world (p 56-58).  
17 In a discussion of Kuyper's legacy (in association with that of Karl Barth), Russel Botman, well-known church leader in the URCSA, remarks, "Why this first Reformed confession conceived on the African soil received so little, if any, attention from Reformed churches internationally, and particularly among Kuyperian and Barthian scholars, remains a mystery" (Botman 2000:347).

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