

Congregational pastoral care through the lens of the Belhar Confession

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Abstract

The Confession of Belhar, adopted in 1986 in response to the brutal and traumatic impacts of apartheid and the ensuing faith crisis of the church, demonstrates a deep sense of care for the other. It calls believers to stand with and act on behalf of those in need. Its call to stand with and as God with the downtrodden and marginalized is a call for collective and collaborative care in service of God and His creation. Through its development and content, the confession's theology offers a potential framework for a community-oriented congregational pastoral care ministry. In this article, the author explores the development process and the content of the Confession of Belhar and argues that, as a statement of faith, the confession guides in terms of both the essence and process of a congregational pastoral care ministry.

Keywords

Confession of Belhar; congregational pastoral care unity; justice; reconciliation

Introduction

When reflecting on the Confession of Belhar¹ concerning pastoral care, one is struck by the deep concern for the “other” as expressed in the three articles, namely unity, reconciliation, and justice, thoroughly grounded in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The essence of the confession, in so many ways, reflects that of pastoral care as we have come to understand it.

1 “The Belhar Confession,” drafted in 1982 and accepted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), is one of the four core confessional statements of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, formed in 1994 through the unification of the DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA).

The underlying theology of the confession not only puts God, as a deeply loving carer, at the centre of our human suffering but also provides the basis for the conviction that Christians (the Church?) should find themselves, present and actively caring, in collective response to the suffering of our communities (Boesak 2008; Koopman 2008*a & b*; Plaatjies van Huffel 2013; 2014; Baron 2017; Beukes 2017; Modise 2017; 2020). As such the confession demands “a broader and more open view of community” (MacMaster 2017:273). However, one often finds that congregations struggle with this, either as a matter of spirituality or as a matter of practicality. In one of the congregations that I served, we initially found it challenging to mobilize the congregation to direct its ministry to the world outside of its boundaries. It emerged that this may have had to do with the following: (1) the need for deeper reflection – theologically, on the identity and calling of the church concerning the world and the needs of people in our communities, (2) the fact that many had their challenges in life and were at times simply overwhelmed by the needs around them, and (3) even where there was an awareness of and willingness to respond to the needs in the community, it was not always obvious how to respond.

This article deals with the question of how the Confession of Belhar can serve as a theological lens for a congregational pastoral care ministry with a community-directed focus. Whereas many scholars reflect on the three articles on unity, reconciliation, and justice, not much is made of the history of the development of the confession in guiding the Church’s response to contemporary social challenges. Here the author contends that the development process of the Confession of Belhar may also offer valuable insights regarding the nature of a congregational pastoral care ministry. Hence, this article first offers a brief discussion and reflection on the development of the confession and the relevance thereof for the pastoral care ministry of the church, before relating this to the “content” of the confession. The article aims to demonstrate how both the development and the content of the Confession of Belhar provide a theological lens and framework for the conceptualization of a community-directed congregational pastoral care ministry.

The Confession of Belhar

The Confession of Belhar, adopted in 1986 in response to the brutal and traumatic impacts of apartheid and the ensuing faith crisis of the church (Boesak 2008; Koopman 2008a; Plaatjies van Huffel 2013; 2014; Modise 2020; Beukes 2021; Kgatla 2023), demonstrates a deep sense of care of the other. As a statement of faith, it implores the church to speak out on behalf of and care for those in need. The three articles on unity, reconciliation, and justice, reflect both the heart of a caring God and the heart and essence of being a church, providing an important lens through which the identity and calling of the church may be understood. In this article, these will be explored.

A “confessional approach” to understanding pastoral care has its limitations and may even be viewed exclusively within denominational dogmatic confines. However, by focussing on the broad themes of the three articles of the Confession of Belhar, it is hoped that the insight from this article will have meaning beyond denominational and other boundaries. Furthermore, the Confession of Belhar not only affirms our identity as a confessional faith community, but also as a (continuously) confessing faith community, and therein we may find its broader significance.

Baron (2017:185–186), drawing on the work of Dirkie Smit, discussed the various aspects of the purpose of confessions. Baron asserts that confessions:

- “Provide the church with a language to proclaim God’s praise, both in liturgy and ordinary life.
- Become hermeneutical lenses by which to read the Scriptures.
- Express identity and thereby contribute to the sense of belonging.
- Assist in instructing and forming new believers.
- Help the church to distinguish truth from falsehood.
- Serve as forms of public witness to Jesus Christ the Lord as the gospel”.

According to Kgatla (2023:4, citing Wolf 1968), a confession can be described as:

... a text in which the biblical witness is summarised and focused upon a particular challenge in the life of the church. Confessing is a basic way of defining the daily tasks in the lives of all Christians. It has to do with how our faith bears on a multitude of issues – social, personal, economic, political, and cultural – that affect our daily lives and our relationship with God and his mission to the poor, oppressed, and underclass. The confessing church will be able to read and understand the anguish of the poor, while seeing the agenda of the rich who protect their interests by controlling, for example, how knowledge, economy, and politics should be protected for their interests.

One could also argue that expressing our beliefs about God and our identity as church, inevitably also provides clarity regarding the calling of the church. As a documented record of what people believe, it, therefore, helps believers to discern their identity and calling in light of their own confessed understanding of the triune God and the praxis of this God in everyday earthly life, in the context of their relationships within the faith community, and broader society. One could say it is “about discerning the identity, nature and calling of the local congregation as a confessional community” (Mouton 2022:104).

For this article, it may be argued that the relevance of the Confession of Belhar for reflecting on pastoral care lies on at least two levels: (1) its development, and (2) its content and theology.

Development of the Confession of Belhar

With regards to the development of the Confession, the discussion following here relies heavily on the reflection of the historical context of its development presented by Plaatjies van Huffel (2014). It is often the case that only the content (articles) thereof is considered when relating the identity and the calling of the church to the theology of the Confession of Belhar. Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s contextual reflection offers insights into the development process of the Confession and already helps us as we continue to better understand the essence and purpose of the pastoral care ministry of the church. At least three broad ideas emerge from her reflections:

1. The development of the confession was necessitated and took shape in real contexts of oppression, hardship, dehumanization, and a systemic “infringement of human dignity” (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:311), and in traumatic and disruptive realities for communities (MacMaster 2017:278–281). It was indeed “borne out of the hearts of the faithful, and into a situation of deep despair and uncertainty, of trial and tribulation, of crisis and testing, a time in which the fundamental tenets of the gospel and the heart of our faith were under so severe a threat.” (Boesak 2008:2). Just as the classical confessions of the Reformed tradition were borne from real historical contexts – the lived realities of people – so too the Confession of Belhar evolved as a faith response to the lived realities of people in Apartheid South Africa (Boesak 2008:2; Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:303–304). This was not only a response against intentional separation and animosity (p.309), but also out of a collective concern for social justice issues arising from the moral justification of the dehumanization and traumatization of entire communities (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:311). The development of the Confession of Belhar hence took shape in the real contexts of South African communities and their lived realities.
2. It is also clear that the development of the confession could only materialize due to the collective conviction, discourse, and action of, and pressure from the broader ecumenical movement at the time (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:303, 312–314). It was through the collective and inclusive discourse and processes of the ecumenical community that the confession saw the light of day. The collective empathy for and solidarity with each other as well as the defiance of the Biblically unjustifiable system and atrocities of apartheid provided the context for such a collective response. The development of the confession can therefore be described as one characterized by a collective and communal empathy, a “seeing of the other,” a collective and communal discourse, and finally a participatory, collective, and communal response of resistance; a resistance that finds its foundation in Scripture and the identity of the church of Christ. The process can thus be seen as a form of faith-led activism and resistance, i.e. activism borne from faith in and grounded in

an understanding of the triune God who chose to stand with those wronged by the powerful.

3. On the one hand the confession was borne from an understanding of who God is, who the (Reformed) church of Christ is, and how these understandings related to the socio-political realities of the day. This in itself provided the imperative for a *status confessionis* that led to the development of the confession. On the other hand, the confession then compels the church of Christ to respond, theologically and socially, to those realities that led to its development in the first place. The Confession of Belhar was thus on the one hand an expression of faith in response to the plight of God's people and on the other hand, it implores God's people to respond to the pain of all people; moving from an expression of faith to an act of faith in response to injustice and oppression, hence it being regarded as a "gift to the world" (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:316).

The broad and collective ecumenical discourse and broad ecclesiastical activism that marked the process of the development of the Confession of Belhar involved every sector of the faith communities involved – society, church, and academia. Although the wording of the confession was crafted by academics through scholarly theological reflection, debated and accepted by the church (DRMC), it was from the furnaces of a burning society that it emerged. In a way, this reflects David Tracy's understanding of practical theology, of which pastoral care is regarded as a sub-discipline, namely that practical theology finds its identity and impetus in three domains, i.e. the church, academy, and society (Tracy 1981:5). These are the domains where practical theology may be practised, the "contexts" from which transformative action emerges, and the spaces where transformation takes shape and is experienced," engaging the broader issues of society that affect communities and their well-being, implying an undeniable concern for social justice (Mouton 2022:102).

Content and theology of the Confession of Belhar – on justice, reconciliation, and unity

Nico Koopman, in his article, *The Confession of Belhar 1986: A Guide for Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity (2008a)*, presents the Confession of Belhar as an expression of a call for compassion through proximity to the other that

enables the caring embrace of this other. All this, Koopman argues, stands in service of hope to a world in need. For Koopman (2008a:28–29) the story and theology of the Confession of Belhar is about redeeming the stories of people and the people of the stories; transforming stories of injustice, brokenness, and separation, into “new stories of justice, reconciliation, and unity” (p.29). As such the Confession of Belhar witnesses to a protesting faith that in itself “testifies to and bears witness to God, and to the reality that He desires and brings” (p.29). The Confession not only calls out the sin of injustice and division but proclaims justice, healing, restoration, and unity as the will of God, of which the church is obliged to be a witness and agent.

The articles on unity (Article 2), reconciliation (Article 3) and justice (Article 4) call the church, as believers gathered by the triune God (Article 1), to embody compassion, embrace and proximity to the other in obedience to Christ, the Head of the church (Article 5). The concepts of unity, reconciliation and justice as espoused in the Confession of Belhar have significance for how one could understand the pastoral care ministry of congregations to the world around them.

Koopman (2008a:36) refers to the unity confessed in the Confession of Belhar as “unity in proximity”. In other words, it is a unity that is cultivated and that finds expression in closeness with the other. One may argue that this refers to physical proximity, but also to a “move-to-closeness” of our narratives, our ideas, our spiritualities, compassion, solidarity, and the sharing of our pain and joy, without giving up one’s personhood and identity. This unity evolves from a deliberate move towards the other to see the other, hear the other, and feel the other. Such “[u]nity in proximity enables Christians to develop sympathy, empathy, and interpathy” (Koopman 2008a:36).

Only in proximity can embrace be possible. This embrace, according to Koopman (2008a:34), becomes the expression and embodiment of the call for reconciliation in the Confession of Belhar. It implies the removal of conditions enabling separation, “opposing injustice,” and the restoration of harmony (p.34). In this, the work of the Holy Spirit who “lays hold of, transforms, and unifies incompatible domains of life” (p.34) is

indispensable. This is in the first place the work of God who reconciles humanity with himself and with each other.

Both justice and reconciliation “stand in service of the dawning of embrace” (Koopman 2008a:35). While reconciliation offers the opportunity for reparation, justice opens the space for compassion and healing. Indeed, justice in the spirit of the Confession of Belhar must be a compassionate justice. Koopman explains that the justice called for and witnessed in the Confession of Belhar is at the same time sacrificial and forensic (p.32). It is sacrificial because it is through the sacrifice of Christ that justice may be imagined and experienced. Yet, it also requires a sacrifice for the other in the pursuit of healing and restoration, and particularly so because it is not out of our own doing that we are declared just, but because “God declares us just [t]hrough the work of redemption of Jesus Christ” (p.32). The justice that flows from this realization is restored through acts of compassion in response to individual and social pain (restorative, compassionate, and social). This is a justice that works towards the transformation of structures and practices of injustice into vehicles and beacons of justice and hope as “concern and compassion for the most vulnerable people in society” (Koopman 2008a:34).

Mouton (2022), reflecting on some aspects of the reformed formulae of unity and the confession of Belhar, asserts the following:

At the core of the identity of the church lies the grace and authority of God, but also the affirmation that the church exists in and through God’s love through Jesus Christ. This has implications for the calling of the church as well as her relationship with and response to the structures governing life in our communities and is particularly so in the view of God’s stance on issues of justice, healing, and restoration in this world (p.106).

As “the gathering together of believers, all together and each individually, ... members of the one body of Christ; blessed with particular gifts, [we are] willing to serve each other in love and peace, to the benefit and salvation of one another and the glory of God”. The “composition” of and gifts endowed upon the church is thus in service of the well-being and unity of the faith community, yet it cannot be removed from who God is and hence must also be in

service, in word and concrete action, of the gospel of redemption to those finding themselves outside of the faith community. “[It] places a considerable responsibility on the church to care for one another [and others] pastorally, to admonish one another [and others] and to lift one another [and others] up to the glory of God” (p.106).

The Confession of Belhar asserts “[t]hat God has always stood, and still stands, against injustice, exploitation, and oppression, as preached throughout the whole Bible. He is the God who reveals Himself as the One who wants to bring about justice and peace among all people. In a world full of injustice, oppression, exploitation, division and impoverishment, God stands indisputably with those who are suffering” ... This is evident in both the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament Jesus, whom the church follows in obedience (Confession of Belhar 1986), gives testimony to his preferential option and compassion for the marginalized, the hopeless, the poor, and generally for those in need (cf. Lk 18–19, Mt 5:20–26) (p.107).

We claim, through the Confession of Belhar that God stands with the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the suffering and the victims of injustice, violence, and oppression – structural and otherwise (Koopman 2007; 2008a; Boesak 2008). We further confess that “the God of justice who identifies especially with the suffering, the poor, and the wronged” (Koopman 2008a:30; see also Boesak 2008:17; Koopman 2007) calls us to do the same. Yet, when we are called to stand where God stands with justice, it is not merely about “where” God stands but also “as” God stands (Boesak 2008:18), i.e. “not just in front of the poor in protection of them, but alongside in solidarity with their struggle. Not just in sympathy with, but in empathetic identification with them” (Boesak 2008:18), affirming dignity and value to those we stand with (Koopman 2007:163). Modise (2017:211) echoes this and highlights that this “standing with” and “standing as” God transcends divisive categories such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, creed, and many more, reaching beyond categories of “us” and “them.” Standing with and as God means that we actively seek out those in need – orphans, widows, the oppressed, the poor, the so-called divergent populations in society, the stranger, the lonely, the sick and the imprisoned, to name some. Yet, more than seeking out it means that we commit, in and through the

grace of God, to actively work for transformation, healing and deliverance; being on the move with God to establish justice, reconciliation, unity, hope and transformation.

Modise (2020) argues that the identity and calling of the church as espoused in the Confession of Belhar resonates especially well with the heart of traditional African views regarding communities and collective care. Referring to the concepts of community, *Ubuntu*, and *Ujamaa*, Modise highlights the communal and collective nature of African communities and identity, including the structuring of community life that embodies togetherness, shared responsibility for each other, care, and compassion, and argues that this is the kind of community – also in the local church – we should strive to be in light of both the Belhar Confession and our African rootedness. Thesnaar (2022) also relates the “seeing of the other” that the Confession of Belhar presupposes to our African heritage and culture, using the example of the Zulu word *sawubona*, implying that one truly exists only when one sees the other, affirming the humanity and dignity of the other. Only when one sees and affirms the other can the radical inclusiveness of God’s grace confessed in the Belhar Confession (Conradie 2017:158) be possible.

Implications for congregational pastoral care ministry

The nature and character of pastoral care, as described by McClure (2012:270), is that of “an intentional enacting and embodying of a theology of presence, particularly in response to suffering or need, as a way to increase among people the love of God and neighbour”. At its core, pastoral care seeks to promote “healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciliation, nurture, liberating, empowering, and interpreting, amongst others” (Mouton 2022:16), taking seriously and responding to personal, social, cultural, political, economic, and personal realities (Louw 1999:3; 2008:17). It is an endeavour that always finds its true meaning and impact in relationships – between human beings, and between human beings and their social and natural environments, as well as in relationships with and in the presence of God. However, it is not merely a human endeavour in the presence of God, instead it is the human participation in the caring ministry of the Triune God. After all and as Louw (2011) asserts, we are

moved by God's *ta splanchnic* love – a love of and from the intestines that cannot but respond to our human pain and suffering with care. This is the love we so gratefully encounter in the person, ministry, and compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ. This love, so we believe and confess, moves us to embrace our calling as active co-workers in the caring ministry of God. Pastoral care, as a ministry, is not merely directed at the individual and is so much more than just counselling or therapeutic interventions. Instead, it is a truly communal endeavour directed at the whole of our beings, both individually and collectively, taking seriously the spiritual, emotional, physical, and other forms of our being and existence (Mouton 2014:96).

Practical theology, and pastoral care, “seeks to engage with contextually relevant information in service of discernment that culminates in improved insights, and the realization of norms in ministry and academics that ultimately evolve into appropriate actions for change and transformation” (Mouton 2022:101). In its truest form, a congregational pastoral care ministry approach will always be inclusive, collective, and directed to the community and especially to those in need, working with the community to collectively find new meaning, transformation, justice, reconciliation, liberation, and healing (Patton 1993; Lartey 2003; Janse van Rensburg & Breed 2011; Magezi 2016; Klaasen 2018). This, as Louw (2085:17) asserts, entails reflecting on and dealing with “the praxis of God as related to the praxis of faith within a vivid social, cultural and contextual encounter between God and human beings”. This forms the core of the heart of pastoral care, i.e. this is what moves the church. This is what it would mean to stand with and as God with those in need as confessed through the Confession of Belhar.

The brief description here aligns the essence of pastoral care with the heart and soul of the Confession of Belhar. This is not only evident from the theology of the confession but also from the processes through which it evolved. This alignment is affirmed, amongst others, in the centrality of the triune God in the justification, restoration, and healing of human beings.

From the process and theology of the development of the Confession of Belhar, we learn that congregational pastoral care must embrace the centrality of the triune God and the Biblical truths about justice and equality as it seeks to journey with communities to find meaning amidst

real challenges and pain, without excluding those who may believe differently. It must take seriously the lived realities of our communities in contexts of inequality, oppression, hardship, trauma, violence, uncertainty, hopelessness, disenfranchisement, dehumanisation and systemic stripping of dignity. Responding to the needs of our communities through a congregational pastoral care ministry approach requires that we facilitate collective conviction, discourse, and action, moved by collective and communal (shared) empathy for and solidarity with each other. Although the notion of a congregational pastoral care ministry approach may be understood as one that pertains only to a specific congregation and only involves members of such congregation, the development process of the Confession of Belhar teaches us that it should rather be seen as a process that includes networks, discourses and collaboration that extend beyond congregational boundaries and identities and includes the ecumenical as well as secular society. It has the character of faith-led activism and resistance, i.e. activism borne from faith in and an understanding of the triune God, yet it is always offered as a gift to others – all people – in service of the other and collaboration with the other.

A key aspect of the Confession of Belhar is that it affirms both the identity and calling of the church. As spaces of hope, congregations (churches), strive to offer the hope of God in Christ in the seeing of the other, and in responding to the plight of the other. This seeing of the other is, as discussed earlier, essential for understanding our own identity and calling, the embodiment of the theology of the Confession of Belhar, and the ministry of pastoral care. However, it also offers a broad perspective in terms of the practicalities of a congregational pastoral care ministry. Seeing the other inevitably demands that we see ourselves, as the theology of the confession attests. In other words, a congregational pastoral care ministry approach calls for reflective practices, individual and collective, through which the church continually seeks to understand itself through both self-reflection and the knowledge (the seeing) of the other.

Seeing the other without seeing the other in context is not truly seeing the other. We must see people through their lived realities within their real contexts. Therefore, seeing the other and the self is not just a spiritual and psychological reflective process. It also is a scientific-hermeneutical process. This resonates with Ian Nell's (2020:17) definition of practical

theology which states that it is “... the critical and theological reflection on the practices of individuals and faith communities in their interaction with the public practices of the world, with the view to prophetic (transforming) participation in God’s salvation practices in, to and for the world, through the faithful performance of the gospel drama.” Such contextual analysis would include the collection of information that helps not only to understand the needs of people and communities, but also the spiritual, social, intellectual, cultural, and material capital in such communities, and discerning how these may enhance the ministry of care. Understanding what we have as a community and how that may be deployed in service of restoration and healing is an integral part of this process. We endeavour to understand people’s lives in contexts, the dynamics within which they live their lives and how the contextual dynamics and factors affect their lives or give rise to needs experienced. In the language of Osmer (2008), we discern people’s realities to better understand what might be going on, why it might be going on, and how that may be a concern for the caring ministry of the church. Following on from this, we then collectively dream of a new reality of restoration and renewal, hope and meaning, which we work towards in faith and through pragmatic and informed processes.

This understanding of congregational pastoral care resonates with what MacMaster (2017:273–294) calls “public pastoral care”. For him (p.277) it is especially Article 4 of the confession, which deals with justice and injustice, that provides the basis for this. Using the context of the development of the Confession of Belhar and its theology, MacMaster argues for public pastoral care that “presents a holistic view of human beings in which the public and private aspects of their lives cannot be separated without distortion” (p.290). He highlights the fact that public pastoral care, in alignment with a biblical understanding of the church as a relational community, is contextual and always “functions within a communal contextual paradigm” (p.290). This strengthens the idea that pastoral care cannot be restricted to trained clergy in formal ministry, but that it is rather a ministry entrusted to all people of faith. This is the same position held by this author. The choice here for “congregation pastoral care” and not the broader “public pastoral care” has more to do with the author’s intention to place this contribution within the context of congregational ministry, despite arguing for an inclusive and collaborative approach that extends beyond the bounds of congregations.

The Confession of Belhar, both in terms of its development and inherent theology, offers us a lens and broad framework for a community-oriented congregational pastoral care ministry. As a summary, key aspects from the preceding discussion are highlighted here for consideration when embarking upon such ministry.

- The care for people is in the first place the concern of the triune God, and the church, God's people, share this concern in obedience to Jesus Christ, Lord of the church.
- Pastoral care is a response to human crises that not only pose a risk to well-being and thriving but also to the faith and hope of people. Yet, it also endeavours to preserve the well-being of people and communities.
- Pastoral care is a faith response, characterised by a collective concern for and solidarity with others, out of love for God and his people and creation.
- Pastoral care is faith-led activism in resistance (ecclesiastical activism and resistance) to that which takes away meaning and well-being.
- The context and lived realities (social and other) of people provide the space from where a congregational pastoral care ministry approach evolves and finds its expression. Not only does it open one's eye for the other-in-context, but such contextual sensitivity also illuminates the potential of the other-in-context.
- Congregational pastoral care in Africa must take seriously the cultural and traditional African values, practices, and worldviews of our context.
- Pastoral care as a process requires collective and inclusive discourse and processes and is characterized by collective empathy for and solidarity with each other.
- Congregational pastoral care ministry finds its essence and self-understanding in the identity of the triune God and that of his people. It is a self-understanding that emanates from the seeing of an affirmation of the other. This, together with the love of God and Scripture, lays upon the church the imperative for caring, healing, restoration, and transformation. The church is compelled to

respond to the needs of others – it is a theological, ethical, and moral imperative.

- As praxis of God’s love, pastoral care cannot be restricted to only those who look, speak, act or believe like me. The Confession of Belhar, both in terms of its development process and theology, challenges the church to an inclusive and affirming ministry of care, even beyond faith boundaries.
- Pastoral care, understood as a collective and inclusive ministry of the faith community, should incorporate, and be reflected in, all aspects of congregational life, including its liturgy and other faith practices.

The Confession of Belhar calls the church, the body of Christ to unity, manifested in connectedness and mutual care. As such the faith community is called to be a space for care, healing, restoration, and transformation. Unity then implies that we accept each other, we see each other, we share joys, sorrows, and responsibility, and we work towards a mutuality and a sense of belonging that strengthens us. However, this unity is also a unity with God and his creation and can therefore not exclude the “others” outside the faith community or the created world around us. Such unity may find expression in collective and community-centred care, inclusive and shared practices, language, worship, and other communal activities.

When the confession affirms our call as agents of reconciliation, it affirms our individual and collective brokenness as well as the call to work towards wholeness and the healing of various forms of brokenness and divides. This may be achieved through an intentional presence, pastoral listening, and constructive and restorative engagements. In this, the narrative of the other takes preference, while also allowing for our shared narratives to strengthen and heal us through greater empathy and understanding. Our collective worship and sacramental practices may further offer opportunities for encouraging healing and reconciliation. The Confession of Belhar certainly has significant implications for both pastoral care and the liturgical aspects of congregational life. Both liturgy and pastoral care have the potential to strengthen each other, while also creating space and opportunity for the embodiment of the theology of the confession, a theme that will be explored in detail in a later contribution.

The call for justice in pastoral care is a call of resistance to and witness against injustice. It is a call for congregational pastoral care to stand up against, and advocate and work for the transformation of systems and structures that continue to support and facilitate injustice. Working for social justice and empowering the disempowered and disenfranchised then forms a key part of a congregational pastoral care ministry. We may achieve this by harnessing our community insights and resources, continual education, training, and mobilisation on issues of social justice and restoration, and through prophetic advocacy. In the end, a collective pastoral response to the plight of people is not merely the task of clergy but involves all people of faith.

Conclusion

The Confession of Belhar is much more than a denominational statement of faith. Its development and theology communicate a deep sense of care for those in need, irrespective of race, colour, gender, class, or creed. A closer study of the confession offers perspectives that help understand why congregational pastoral care is an inclusive, affirming, collaborative ministry, flowing from God's love for his creation and offered as both a gift and obligation to his church. Further, the confession developed amongst Africans on African soil, and it is therefore not surprising that it aligns with the African notions of community and collective care. Pastoral care from the perspective of the Confession of Belhar goes beyond individuality, narrow classification, and polarizing categorisations. The inseparability of unity, reconciliation, and justice witnesses to the heart of God, offering us a framework for hope. Integrated into a congregational pastoral care ministry, these aspects guide the congregation in its commitment to caring for the body of Christ and broader society as it joins God in his redemptive work of justification, healing, restoration, justice, and wholeness. Both the development process and theology of the confession illuminate the essence and scope of pastoral care and provide us with a framework for conceptualizing a congregational pastoral care ministry.

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