

Attachment 1

Belhar Pastoral Letter

Dear brothers and sisters in the PC(USA),

We write to you as the fifteen members of the Belhar Confession Special Committee commissioned by the 218th General Assembly (2008) and subsequently appointed by the moderator together with the two previous assembly moderators. The Belhar Confession was originally produced in the 1980's by the South African Dutch Reformed Mission Church to protest the longstanding evil of apartheid in that country. We were asked by the Assembly to study this Confession and to decide whether or not it should be commended to the PC(USA) for inclusion in *The Book of Confessions (BOC): The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, (USA)*, Part One. *The Book of Order*, **G-18.0201**, spells out an exacting process that must be followed for any amendment to the *BOC* to be accepted. In short, after the initial approval by a G.A. for a special committee to study the viability of such an amendment, a proposed amendment to the *BOC* requires approval by the General Assembly, followed by a vote of approval of at least two-thirds of all our presbyteries before the final approval of its inclusion in the *BOC* by the ensuing General Assembly can take place.

We believe that the PC(USA) is in urgent need of being claimed and transformed by the gospel it professes to believe, to serve, and to proclaim to the world. Our American Presbyterian story is inextricably intertwined with our nation's story. The American Declaration of Independence nurtured an inspiring vision of freedom, equality, and justice for all of our citizens. However, when the American Constitution was drafted in 1789, the founding authors in large measure betrayed the Declaration's vision by reckoning a slave as three-fifths of a person for apportioning representation in the newly created House of Representatives.

Throughout the nineteenth century, efforts to maintain the political unity of north and south in the midst of the scourge of slavery ultimately failed, and our nation suffered the division and violence of the Civil War. In his Second Inaugural Address, President Abraham Lincoln lamented that both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God and believed that God was on their side. Presbyterians fought on both sides, deeply divided over the issues of race, biblical interpretation, and God's will. Not only was our nation split down the middle, but our Presbyterian denomination became divided between "northern" and "southern" churches. This legacy of America's racism and struggle to overcome it continues to inhabit the soul of both nation and church.

During the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, our nation has become progressively multi-racial and multi-cultural. In God's providence, the world has been brought to our doorstep. Yet the mission of our church has not, by and large, been successful in embracing the new immigrants that have come to us from every nation. The vast majority of our congregations are still predominantly Euro-American, aging, and enjoying an economic level above most of the rest of the nation. Our membership numbers and adult baptisms continue to decline. Our cities continue to be segregated by ethnicity and social class. Cultural differences based upon language, gender, and wealth as well as ancient forms of 'tribalism' fueled by racism and ethnic chauvinisms continue to confront us with major challenges to the well-being of the church as we strive to witness to a fallen culture and a secular way of living.

In the face of these conflicts, the cry for schism is heard in several mainline Protestant churches. Together with other faith communions, we as Presbyterians are being compelled to rethink our biblical and confessional tradition and to ask what it means for us to be **"one holy catholic and apostolic Church"** (*Nicene Creed, BOC, 1.3*). If ever there were a time in which we need to know, to believe, to embrace, and to live our confession, it is now. According to *The Book of Order*,

"The PC (USA) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world

Who and what it is,

What it believes,

What it resolves to do." (BO, G-2.0100)

The Belhar Confession has been helping many Reformed churches around the world to understand their call to the unity of Christ's Church and their call to mission. We note that some partner churches in the Caribbean Africa and Europe (including the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany, the Protestant United Church in Belgium, and the Reformed Church in the Dominican Republic) have already adopted Belhar as a confessional standard. As a part of the world Reformed family, we believe that American Presbyterians also need to be in conversation with the Belhar Confession. The church's witness would be strengthened by a *Book of Confessions* that includes this document from the earth's Global South, where the mission of the church is expanding so rapidly. We have much to learn from those churches' struggles for unity, reconciliation, and justice. Their modeling of God's grace in their rejection of injustice and embracing of forgiveness is a humbling reminder of our own need for renewal, even as it provides a beacon of light for the entire Reformed family. We understand that the Reformed Church in America and The Christian Reformed Church in North America are already engaged in a time of prayerful and theological discernment about whether to add Belhar to their own confessional standards. We enthusiastically urge the Presbyterian Church (USA) to move forward in its own process of discernment.

Our committee also believes that the Belhar Confession joins the chorus of witnesses to God's story of salvation embodied in our *Book of Confessions*. This gospel story reveals the eternal purpose, plan, and will of God who "created the heavens and the earth." From before the foundation of the world God willed "to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9-10). For the sake of the new creation, the one Triune God, the Holy One of Israel, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. In his life, death, and resurrection God acted in human history to make peace, to break down dividing walls of hostility, and to reconcile the cosmos and humanity to God's Self and us as human beings to each other. Through the blood of Jesus' cross, God's mercy and grace rescued creation and human history from a hopeless bondage to the powers of sin and death. Through the amazing grace of God and by the faith which comes through God's love revealed in Christ, Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, sophisticated and barbarian, slave and free, male and female, all were joined together for the purpose of becoming one family of God, fellow citizens of the reign of God, and a holy temple of the Lord, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. This salvation is of God and from God, God's gift from beginning to end (2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Galatians 3:23-4:7; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 1:13-23; 3:1-17).

As a new humanity we are called to live this gift of grace, to actualize who we are in Christ: the one, reconciled, just people of God. The citizens of the Kingdom of God, united in Christ, baptized into Christ, welcomed at the one Table of the Lord, are to be a light to the nations of God's peace and justice. The visible unity of the people of God and the transformed character of this people are to witness to God's salvation in a still broken, violent, and divided world. Through the fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ is to be built up in the love of God for the sake of God's mission in the world (Ephesians 4:1-32). As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciling peace, justice, and love. To the degree that the church has failed to be God's people and to live into the reality of God's will, we are called to repent and to work for the transformation of our life together.

As we think again of our church and our relation to the more recent history of racial division in the United States, we think especially of what Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote at the conclusion of his *Letter From A Birmingham Jail* in 1963 that continues to beam the hope of the American dream:

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

The Belhar Confession is a courageous proclamation of the gospel from our brothers and sisters in the South African Uniting Reformed Church. It emerged out of the context of the sinful, unjust realities of South Africa and in part reflects its conversation with the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* that was hammered out in a similar context of evil. Belhar is a cry for the true biblical gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to be proclaimed and lived in the church and world. It reflects a Christian community that is truly prepared "to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ" (G-3.0400, *Book of Order*).

The Special Committee to study the Belhar Confession believes that this Confession from South Africa has a profoundly important message for our church and will continue to speak to every new generation. Its biblical roots and Reformed theological perspective will strengthen our confessional tradition by guiding us in our study of the Bible, in our theological reflection, liturgical practice, evangelistic outreach, making of disciples, works of social justice, and our mission of peacemaking to the world.

Therefore, we the Special Committee to study the Belhar Confession, are convinced that the Belhar Confession should be included as one of our confessional standards. We prayerfully commend the Belhar Confession to the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) for inclusion in our *Book of Confessions*. To that end, we recommend further the excellent study guide for the church by Eunice T. McGarahan, *Study of The Belhar Confession and Its Accompanying Letter*, published by the Office of Theology and Worship and available online at (domain address here). The Belhar Special Committee would urge that the PC(USA) use this publication in every presbytery and congregation for study and reflection for the period 2010 through 2012. [Note: If the GA votes for inclusion, presbyteries will have completed voting by Spring 2011]. It is our hope that the larger church will see, hear, and embrace the good news to which the Belhar Confession bears such strong witness.

Grace and Peace