

Belhar Report from the Black and Reformed Conference

The Black Planning Committee is the leadership team of the Black and Urban Region of Christian Reformed Home Missions. This committee sponsored the Tenth Annual Black and Reformed Conference in Grand Rapids, MI, at Sherman Street CRC on April 23-25, 2009. Seventy-five people came from Grand Rapids, West Michigan, Chicago, Cleveland, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Canada. The conference was a workshop to study the Belhar from a Black and Reformed perspective. This report is written to announce publicly our zealous support of the Belhar as a fourth confession, and to urge word and deed praxis of Belhar principles in the CRCNA. We don't want the Belhar to stagnate as mere reflection upon reflection. We call for praxis: reciprocating reflection and action that applies Belhar principles in the CRCNA.

This report has seven parts. First, assumptions are articulated from a Black and Reformed worldview. Next, the sections of the Belhar are addressed with contextualized reflections: Trinity, unity, reconciliation, justice, and commitment. Lastly, the report closes with recommendations for word and deed application of Belhar principles.

Understanding the Black and Reformed *Weltanschauung*

1. We anchor our world-and-life-view in the Reformed understanding of Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation. The uniqueness of our position is the interpretation of *redemption* as a collective experience. The covenant people were enslaved; and God redeemed them collectively from Egypt. This is very different from the evangelical notion of God redeeming individuals. The sociology of redemption is pivotal from the Black and Reformed perspective. Indeed, the covenant people of God were enslaved. Hermeneutically, this poses a problem for oppressors that interpreted themselves as covenant folk (God is with *us*), and rationalized slavery and apartheid because blacks were not considered fully human anyway. We know that Calvinists see themselves as *special*; perhaps that is why some bristle when *special* is used in the Belhar referring to blacks and coloreds. We believe that we are special too! While "special" Reformed folk profited from the Slave Trade and apartheid, God loved the oppressed slaves as special people too. Indeed, God included black gentiles in His *berakah* blessing in Genesis 12:1-3 of success, prosperity, long life, and fruitfulness (*Barak* Obama means "blessed one").

2. Contrary to stereotype and myth, black people are not cursed. In Genesis 9:20-27, it is Noah who curses Canaan, not God. Noah turned to farming and made wine from his vineyard. He drank too much one night and woke up with a hangover cursing Ham because he saw his nakedness. Noah cursed Ham. God did not curse Ham. Furthermore, race is a social construction of reality that was invented for economic reasons to justify cheap labor at the expense of the oppressed. The issue then is race and class. Those considered cursed served as cheap labor slaves for the oppressor. It becomes insidious when the myths of inferiority are perpetuated by blacks against other blacks. Booker T. Washington gave his famous Atlanta Exposition Speech on September 18, 1895. He scolded blacks for wanting to vote, run for political office, or go to an opera; instead, he used scripture to remind them of their inferior status and "cast down your buckets where you are because you are hewers of wood and drawers of water." Booker T. Washington

was a moderate. He was at odds with W.E.B. DuBois, the civil rights activist. Of course, the white establishment preferred Washington who never spoke out against lynching or the Ku Klux Klan, while raising lots of money for Tuskegee Institute. In a speech honoring Dr. DuBois, King said: “Washington’s error was that he underestimated the structures of evil; as a consequence his philosophy of pressureless persuasion only served as a springboard for racist Southerners to dive into deeper and more ruthless oppression of the Negro. By way of contrast, DuBois was concerned with the use of coercive power to relieve oppression and to achieve liberation and social justice for all black people.” We stand with DuBois for his civil rights contribution as well as his pan-African work that encouraged African leaders to persist in their struggle with European colonizers.

3. The Black Planning Committee that sponsored the Black and Reformed Conference does not purpose to speak for all blacks in the denomination. However, we do voice a collective response to the Belhar. There may be moderate blacks and people of color in the CRC who support the individualistic philosophy of the moderates like Booker T. Washington. In contrast, we affirm collective voice in the civil rights tradition. We notoriously seek to raise-consciousness about the Belhar and the wonderful opportunity we have in the CRC to dialogue about 21st century mutations of race and class. We strongly urge the denomination to listen to, take seriously, and try to understand the voices of culturally different collectives in order to build genuine consensus and community.

4. The most virulent strains of racism originate in the church. Led by Dr. Daniel Malan, a former minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, apartheid was the political platform of the Nationalist party in 1948. Apartheid imbibed Nazi white supremacist ideology as the warp and woof of their world-and-life-view. Furthermore, apartheid (mis)used Kuyper’s political philosophy to structure races as “separate but equal” spheres sanctioned by de jure laws and policy. The three spheres were hierarchically separate: whites (saints), coloreds (caints), and the blacks (aints). In cahoots, the Dutch Reformed Church was complicit and supported first de jure segregation during apartheid, and defacto segregation today.

Likewise, white supremacy was the foundation of ante-bellum theology. Many Ku Klux Klan (KKK) considered themselves Christians ordained by God to protect the cultural hegemony and status quo that esteemed them as the “chosen people.” Like apartheid policies, the goal was to “keep the niggers in their place” and establish the white race as the “boss man.” Indeed, the KKK was not a southern phenomenon. The KKK spread north after the epic film “Birth of a Nation” by D.W. Griffith in 1915. The film was based on *The Clansman*, a novel by a racist minister named Thomas R. Dixon of New York City. The film sympathized with the KKK showing life among whites in South Carolina where blacks outnumbered whites 4 to 1 and held political office. The first version of the film had a gang rape scene where several white men in “blackface” assaulted a white woman. The film ignited fear of blacks moving north and many riots resulted. The NAACP forced them to alter the film content, but the phobias quickly spread north. Indiana became the largest haven for KKK in the US. Seventy-five blacks were lynched in Chicago over a ten year period 1915-1925. So, we blacks know very

well how race hatred and religious theology meld to form white supremacist ideologies. Epistemologically, race ideology and hegemony often trump the biblical values and principles, especially when it comes to change, and relinquishing power and control. The Reformed world-and-life-view affirms that every square inch belongs to God, yet there is a tendency to withdraw in social and cultural isolation; “in isolation is our strength” may still be the slogan for some in the CRC. Isolation can function as “apartheid”, especially in the context of defacto segregation.

5. We believe that quiescence is not consent. That is, silence does not mean consent. It often means that cultural hegemony has manufactured consent. Or, fear and intimidation results in silence based on coercion. Voluntary institutions like the Christian Reformed Church should be leery of decisions that do not allow for vigorous dialogue in true democratic tradition. The polity of the CRC can be a “stumbling block” to those ethnic groups that come from oral verbal traditions. We need time to talk and dialogue and reach consensus through oral verbal affirmation. We are concerned that the decision to adopt the Belhar will be dominated by those with cultural hegemony in the CRC, thus not allowing blacks and people of color time and space to adequately reflect on the Belhar before they vote at Synod 2009. We evoke 1 Corinthians 11:17ff and “dissing” of the “have nots” at communion. Paul challenged the church in 1 Corinthians 11:33 to “wait for one another.” Remember: the “haves” did not wait for Chloe’s people to get off work after 12 hour shifts. They went ahead and served the meal and drink resulting in division in the body. Therefore, the Belhar process needs to slow down and “wait” for others to have input and come to the table. To be clear: Blacks, Native-Americans, Hispanics, Koreans, and Southeast Asians need time to develop consensus for or against the Belhar. Do not assume that if their voices are not heard at Synod 2009, that their silence means consent or indifference. Besides, the Gamaliel principle applies here: “If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God.” (Acts 5: 38,39).

6. Beware of the *ad hominem* fallacy. This is the propaganda technique that focuses on the person that wrote the document over against the document itself. The goal of *ad hominem* argument is to divert attention away from the content of the argument onto the negative aspect of the opponent. For instance, Martin Luther King was slandered as a communist because he was photographed at a conference at the Highlander Folk School led by Miles Horton. A picture of King sitting in a workshop was used to depict King as a communist. This is *ad hominem* guilt by association. King had a brilliant colleague who was openly homosexual named Bayard Rustin (organizer of the 1963 march on Washington). Another King photograph was circulated showing Rustin standing at the bathroom door while King sat in the tub bathing. This photo was used to suggest King and Rustin had a homosexual relationship: *ad hominem* propaganda. By analogy, beware of propaganda tactics to detract from the content of the Belhar. Should the Belhar be discredited because of positions taken by Boesak on homosexuality? Boesak was one of the framers of the Belhar, and he is a sinner as we all are. But questions of his past and his recent positions taken on homosexuality should not be associated with the Belhar. The fallacy propagandizes like this: Boesak is tainted; he is the chief framer of the Belhar;

therefore, the Belhar is toxic, radioactive, and it should be thrown out. Boesak's character and position on homosexuality should not demonize or contradict the Belhar and its principles. As black and Reformed leaders in the CRC, we affirm the denominational policy regarding homosexuality. So, we distance ourselves from Boesak as an advocate for gay rights, while holding fast to the Belhar as a possible fourth confession and inspiration for fresh dialogue and action on race relations in the CRCNA.

7. We celebrate blacks as "Bible believers." Blacks take the Bible very seriously. As black and Reformed Bible-believers, we are attracted to the CRC because of our common convictions on the Bible as the word of God. Dutch-American subculture and polity aside, we find our common ground in Scripture. Meanwhile, the minefield is hermeneutics. The *sitz im leben* (setting in life) of black folks suggests that contextualization and interpretation is based on contexts that often conflict. For instance, Calvin taught that wealth and riches was a sign of God's blessing. Calvin did not balance that teaching with a social ethic that would caution Dutch mariners against profiting from the Middle Passage and the slave trade. Trafficking in the transatlantic slave trade reveals the philosophy of getting rich "by any means necessary." Calvin also taught that poverty was a sign of the curse. Those that were poor were lazy and did not want to work hard. Tragically, slaves were forced to do backbreaking hard work for little or nothing, while their masters (boss man) lived the life of leisure and reflection in the name of progress. Bottom line: experience as a source of theological reflection will be an issue in the Belhar debates. The experience of slavery and oppression must be taken seriously. Ethnocentrically, Dutch-American dominant culture is accustomed to pivoting around their culture and interpretation as authoritative, eclipsing all other worldviews as inferior. So, when there is a discussion and "special" is brought up, some dominant culture folk hit the "mute button" because it is not grounded in the life experience of privileged and powerful. It could be interpreted that the poor are the new "special ones" discounting all that those who hold to capitalism and the republic values dearly; after all, the Centurion ruler was saved with all his wealth and power. The Calvinistic assumption that rich are blessed (and better), and the poor are cursed must be addressed. Jesus proclaimed the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1-3 as his call to ministry. Is Jesus talking symbolic poor, or *real* poor people? We need to learn *empathy* in order to feel our way the life experience of others. Empathy is vital to appreciate the Belhar; we need to walk in the shoes of others. Is Reformed theology an imperial bourgeoisie worldview? Is Reformed and poor an oxymoron? If Reformed theology purposes to bourgeoisify the poor and oppressed, and not take seriously the life experience of the poor and oppressed, then we should not be surprised if the Advocate (John 14:26), the Holy Spirit flies away like a dove, and hovers over another denomination that is committed to *ex nihilo* ministry among the poor and oppressed. We want to see the race discussion include race and class so that a critique of Reformed theology can bring to the surface tacit assumptions about wealth and poverty.

Trinity

The Belhar begins with the triune God as the model for community. Ideally, all human institutions should mirror the image of God as unity in diversity, diversity in unity. The framers of the Belhar evoke the Trinity as the template for community in

contradistinction to apartness and segregation that thwarts the communion of saints. We recite the Nicene Creed in our churches. But the version we profess is not the actual creed written at Nicea in 325, not the second version in 381. We hold to the version written in the late 6th century that contains the *filioque* phrase (and the Son). What do we mean: “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*?” This phrase was not in the first two versions of the Nicene Creed. And the phrase is not in the Bible. John 15:26 teaches “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father” period. The difference in the original versions and the versions that include the *filioque* can suggest different understandings of the economy of the Godhead with implications for social constructions of reality, e.g., apartheid. For example, the phrase “and the Son” can suggest a low view of the Holy Spirit as the “third” or lesser person of the Trinity. Or it could be rationalized that there is a hierarchy in the Trinity with the Father over the Son and the Son over the Spirit. Perhaps, hierarchical structures like apartheid mirror a “pecking order” in the Trinity. The Eastern Orthodox teach the original version of the Nicene Creed that the Father has two hands sent *missio dei* to redeem the world (Galatians 4:4-7). This image better promotes equality in the Godhead with the two hands of God at work in creation and redemption. The phrase “and the Son” can be interpreted as linear. Also, the Eastern Orthodox mystically speak of the Trinity as a “divine dance.” The three persons spin around and around and go faster, faster, faster, so that oneness is all that you see; but inside the circle dance the partners see their unique diversity and difference. Blacks that have experienced hierarchal and paternalistic structures are sensitive to correlation of Trinitarian theology and social constructions of community in the real world.

Another dimension of Trinity is *perichoresis* or the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the vision of community and society in *Exclusion and Embrace* by Miraslov Volv. Apartheid and segregation is collective sin that estranges races and classes of people for whom Christ died, and wants to include in the covenant community. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to articulate the egoistic reality that ethnic groups develop power structures that include their own (*onze volks*) at the expense of the stranger or different. Jesus died for the sins of collectives. A recent example is the Hitler regime and the genocide of Jews (their property and valuables were plundered as well). Jesus died for the sins of Nazi white bigots that esteemed themselves as the supreme race. It was in the context of Hitler’s egotistical rise to power that Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke out against Hitler as a leader that misleads the German people. He became the underground leader of a seminary that formed the “confessing church” and eventually joined the resistance movement that attempted to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Watch the film “Valkyrie” to get the context of the confessing church. Bonhoeffer called for true discipleship and real life together. We believe the communion of saints means a *symbiotic* relationship or sharing life together. In Galatians 4:19, Paul uses the female image of pregnancy and labor pains to describe his symbiotic relationship with the Gentiles in Galatia: “I am in travail until Christ is formed in you.” We are grieved that there are Dutch Reformed Churches that refuse to take communion with coloreds and blacks; they forsake the assembling together with blacks and coloreds. In Hebrews 10:24-25, we are challenged to “provoke” others to love and good works, especially when it comes to assembling together. “Provoking” is like the agitator in the washing machine. To get the clothes clean they must be agitated.

The same is true of power structures. They need to be agitated and provoked to clean things up. You can't get clothes (or institutions) clean by letting them soak in the washing machine. We believe Jesus wants us to agitate for the Belhar to bring about unity and oneness in the image of God as Trinity.

Unity

We affirm the statements regarding unity in the Belhar Confession. Again, we support the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The time is now for the church and America to deal with those things that keep us separated and not united. In John 17:21, Jesus prays, "that all may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." The Belhar breathes the spirit of Ephesians, especially chapters 2 and 4.

We believe that Christ is our unity. He has made us one new person. He binds us together by His Spirit. We believe that when we all draw closer to Christ that we draw closer to one another. We believe that when we draw closer to one another that we do so authentically only when we do so in Christ. We believe that the Belhar Confession holds up Christ before us as the author and agent of our relations as "the new person."

The stories of blacks and people of color who are loyal members of the CRCNA need to be heard within the context of our discussion about adopting the Belhar confession. In many instances, blacks and people of color have experienced discrimination, racism, and injustice in our denomination. Often the agencies of the CRCNA have practiced institutional racism. Blacks and people of color have been hurt and embittered by these experiences, but have elected to stay as members of the CRCNA in obedience to God's calling to our denomination.

Now more than ever before, the CRCNA needs to have serious conversation about unity. The adoption of the Belhar confession can help us mobilize the church to begin these conversations and live with the heart of Christ.

Reconciliation

We believe there is a need to understand that we must be individually reconciled to God as a result of the damaging effects of racism. Then we can be effective ministers of reconciliation. At the point of truly being reconciled to God we hear his heart and realize we need each other.

As ministers of reconciliation, we need to apply the word in a practical way to our efforts. We must intentionally move out of our comfort zones. One way that this can happen is to intentionally arrange cross-cultural worship services and fellowship with folks of different ethnic groups. Another way is to deliberately interact with folk who are not of our own ethnic group in our homes. When we make commitments to one another in this regard, we can demonstrate that we are intentional about building long-term, transforming relationships. As these churches come together and relationships are being established, each church should be given information and prompting to study and

implement as much of the Belhar Confession as possible. With the Belhar as a confession, we have a faith statement that compels us to continue on the journey toward “deep reconciliation.”

Every church should be challenged to practice Belhar principles right in their locales with churches that worship differently so there will be positive results to report to the larger body as to how God blesses their efforts of obedience. We should look for opportunities to be reconciled with people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Another opportunity for reconciliation is youth. Applying the Belhar to the problem of “generational reconciliation” is vital for the perpetuation of leadership for the CRCNA. A very positive outcome exposing young people to the Belhar is that youth will be impacted positively by seeing that their elders are willing to embrace issues that are relevant to them, and begin to realize the power of the Holy Spirit, reconciling us to God and one another across the “generation gap.”

Justice

We believe that the Belhar was and is being used by the Holy Spirit to point us all back to biblical truth. We believe that justice should be addressed from a biblical perspective rather than an emotional perspective (although the Bible does speak to the entire person including our emotions). As “Bible-believers”, we want the word of God to drive our understanding of justice. Justice is revealed in Scripture as “righteousness.” Indeed, we hold to the Reformed understanding that we are justified by grace through faith (Hab. 2:4). But the Black and Reformed worldview understands “faith” differently from those with a western worldview. The eastern worldview of the ancient Hebrews is closer to the black perspective. Western culture has come to identify “faith” as belief which can mean many things to different people and can assume an ideology or an intellectual understanding of an idea. But, the eastern culture holds this word “faith” to mean “trust”, something that can hold our weight. Western culture has been taught to rationalize intellectually an idea before we believe we can practice it in our lives. Though this may be safe for us, is it scripturally relevant when it comes to biblical faith? The eastern culture believes that when God’s word speaks to a matter we must trust it to be true and respond by yielding to the Holy Spirit’s “sanctifying power” to produce the fruit of obedience in a believer’s life. We believe that the Belhar has a strong biblical basis, and that we can put our weight on it as we stand firm in the faith.

Justice has a vertical and horizontal dimension in the eastern world view. First, we must stand before God who declares us righteousness by faith alone (five solas). But we must also take a stand for justice horizontally. Micah 6:8 says, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” The Hebrew worldview measured understanding of justice by action and application of the concept in real life. This is very different from the western notion of demonstrating intellectual understanding. We believe that one must demonstrate understanding by really *doing* justice, and really *loving* mercy, and really *walking humbly with God* as demonstrated by xenophilic love for the stranger (Lev. 19:18). We demonstrate love when we serve as

“good Samaritans.” The Belhar is calling us to receive the righteousness of God so that we can act with the social action and politics of Jesus.

Most black Americans can trace their ancestry to slavery. We were reminded by a black Canadian that attended our conference to use inclusive language so that blacks in Canada can embrace the Belhar discussion. There are major black communities in Canada that came during Slavery thanks to the Underground Railroad. They were able to escape the dehumanizing effects of Slavery, especially the “rote thinking” that was drilled into slaves offering “heaven” as their reward in exchange for hard work and obedient service. Hear these words from Langston Hughes in his poem “Luck.” “Sometimes a crumb falls from the tables of joy. Sometimes a bone is flung. To some people love is given. To others only heaven.” We abhor rote thinking. We believe that justice requires both/and thinking that engages the now and not yet at the same time. Justice calls for critical thinking.

The point was made in a discussion group by a Grand Rapids resident that there are no black males working in the CRCNA denominational building. This justice issue calls for reflection and action. Maybe there is a black male working at 2850, and the comment should be retracted if the informant did not see the person working. Perhaps there are black males working at menial tasks. Regardless, the denomination should be aware that this can be interpreted as discriminatory policy for the CRCNA.

We believe that the Belhar is a “kairos” moment for the CRC and RCA denominations. God hears the cries for help and decides to come down. He sends His Spirit across racial and cultural barriers to Advocate for the poor and oppressed. God hears the cries of the unloved and unwanted and comes down just at the right time breaking into time and space to redeem us. For example, Genesis 29: 31-35 says Leah was unloved. God gave her seven children, but the names of the first four demonstrate how God responds to the cries of those estranged in apartheid alienation: Reuben – I have seen your affliction; Simeon – I have heard you (primal) cries for help; Levi – I am coming down and attach myself to you; then came Judah – Praise the Lord! The transcendent God heard the cries of the unloved Leah and came down to help her. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. Praise the Lord that God sent his Son through the tribe of Judah. Jesus was not the descendant of the beauty queen Rachel, but the great grandchild of unloved Leah. God hears the cries from the oppressed and suffering under defacto apartheid in South Africa. We believe God will send The Holy Spirit into time and space in “kairos” fashion to take action. It is our prayer that God will send His Spirit into the CRCNA and RCA as well.

Commitment

We stand with Esther when she counts the cost in Esther 4:16: “If I perish, I perish.” We believe that God is calling us to stand with the Uniting Reformed Church and colleagues in the RCA against “apartness” in our denominations. We believe that God wants us to put our dog in the fight, especially as it relates to reflection and action (praxis) in the application of Belhar principles in the CRCNA!

Furthermore, we advance the vision of the Calvinist Johannes Althusius as an alternative to the apartness models of civil society alive and well in South Africa, and sadly in our denominations today. Althusius wrote *Politics – Methodically Digested, Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples* in 1603. He advocated a federalist and popular sovereignty approach that described “a community of communities” or “an association of associations.” Martin Marty in *The One and the Many* describes the Althusius model as a “community of porcupines.” This community of porcupines is a community of equals, and we must respect the spheres of others. Yet, not too close lest we prick one another. Althusius describes communities as *symbiotes* that share life together as equals, not segregation or apartness and inequality. We believe in this Reformed understanding of spheres of influence and civil society.

We are concerned about our youth. How do they view race and class in the 21st century? Since de jure segregation is over and there are no signs, how do they read race and class in defacto segregation? We will convene the 8th Annual Urban Youth Convention in Grand Rapids on August 6-9, 2009. We will use themes from the Belhar to discuss racism (if they even see it) and class. It is our job as leaders to protect our young people as they matriculate a violent world periled by structures that perpetuate race and class.

Have you seen “The Battle of Kruger Park” on YouTube? It is a great example of how we can learn from the Cape buffalo the importance of organizing community to protect our young people. It is only eight minutes long and worth watching. It is one of the most watched videos on YouTube. The video taken of a safari captures an actual attack of a baby cape buffalo by lions. The video starts with two adult and two baby buffalo strolling toward two lions crouching waiting to attack. Eventually, the lead Cape buffalo spots the two lions, and the chase was on. The two lions catch one of the babies and begin to maul it. The baby Cape buffalo struggles to get to the river where she can swim. She makes it to the water and is almost wiggles free only to have two crocodiles swim up for the kill. Now the lions have it by the head and shoulders and a crocodile has the baby buffalo by a hind leg. A tug of war ensues with the now six lions pulling from the bank of the river and the crocodile pulling from the other end. The six lions won the tug of war. The baby buffalo was pulled out of the water and positioned for the kill. Suddenly, the cameraman gave the panoramic view of the kill site. Enter mother Cape buffalo with one hundred Cape buffalo to redeem her baby! The dark brown buffalos collectively went after the six lions. When the lions realized they were outnumbered, three of them ran off. A fourth was gored by the mother buffalo; she threw that lion in the air with her horn. The last two lions cowered in fear of the herd of Cape buffalo. By the way, the baby was not killed, and walked back into the herd (yeah). The mother had pathos for her baby that was snatched by the six lions. She did not give up. She went back and organized the community to use the force of numbers to overpower the lions and crocodiles and rescued her baby.

We must be like the Cape buffalo and organize communities that protect our future leaders from the lions and crocodiles of race and class. How can the Belhar be used to prepare the future generation? Is the Belhar a dialogue for the baby boomers? Fronse Smith has written an article that raises the question of generational perspectives on race.

The article is “What Now?: Reflections on the life changes from Malcolm, Martin, Mandela to Obama” published in Johannesburg in *Afropolitan Magazine* Feb/Mar 2009 issue.

Recommendations

1. That the Synod 2009 vote to give additional time to ensure adequate discussion of the Belhar. After all, the Synod of Dordt began November 13, 1618 and ended May 6, 1619. There were 154 meetings during that 6 month period. Surely the Belhar deserves more time. We believe racism should be taken just as seriously as Arminianism. The Gamaliel principle means we should not rush to judgment in the case of the Belhar.
2. That the discussion of the Belhar point one on Trinity not be assumed, especially the role of the Holy Spirit in community. We should not gloss over the Trinity discussion and assume we are all on the same page. We know about Kuyper’s book on the Holy Spirit. But there needs to be deeper discussion about how the powerful view the Spirit over against the view from below. How we understand Trinity as community dictates how we understand “order.” In apartheid, the goal was to “keep the niggers in their place.” The penchant for decency and order has horizontal implications for social order.
3. That race and class, as well as generational differences be incorporated into the Belhar dialogues to ensure relevant contextualization.
4. That the hiring policy be reviewed to ensure that African-Americans, especially males are not overlooked. Is it true that there are no black men working in the denominational building? Certainly we hope that all people of color will be fairly hired in the CRC; but there is a concern that black males are being discriminated against.
5. That the small churches in high needs communities not be left alone to sink or swim. Given the shortage of denominational funds, how will ministries in high needs communities be addressed? Will churches that focus on reaching the poor in high needs communities be left to fend for themselves, e.g. survival of the fittest? We believe that God wants churches in “every square inch” (Kuyperian notion) reflecting the diversity of race and class.
6. That we commend and thank Rev. Dr. Peter Borgdorff and the IRC members for their excellent work on the Belhar; that a person(s) be hired to continue the excellent work of Dr. Borgdorff to ensure that all classes and churches in the CRCNA adequately dialogue on the Belhar in preparation of the vote in Synod 2012; and that sufficient budget be provided to cover costs of salary, travel, administrative support, etc.
7. Finally, that we thank all those who participated in our tenth Annual Black and Reformed Conference, especially those that led discussion groups and contributed to the writing of this report. The conference was a great encouragement and gave us signs of hope that change “gone” come. We close with the lyrics of the song that inspired the civil rights movement in the 1960’s. It is “Change Gone Come” (Ebonics intended) by

Sam Cooke. This is was the favorite of Martin Luther King, and the song Obama played at his inauguration.

I was born by the river in a little tent
And just like the river I've been running ever since.
It's been a long time coming
And I know, a change gone come.
Oh, yes it will.

It's been too hard living
But I'm afraid to die.
Cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky.
It's been a long time coming
And I know a change gone come
Oh! Yes it will.

I go to the movies
And I go downtown.
Someone keep telling me don't hang around.
It been a long, long time coming
And I know, change gone come.
Oh! Yes it will.

Then I go to my brother
And I say brother help me please.
But he winds up knockin me
Back down on my knees

There's been times when I thought
I wouldn't last for long.
But now I think I'm able to carry on.
And it's been a long, long time coming
And I know a change gone come
Oh! Yes it will.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dr. Robert J. Price Jr. and the Black Planning Committee
May 25, 2009