

A Summary of the First Christian Reformed Church Seattle (FCRCS) Engagement With and Adoption of the Belhar Confession

Our congregation was introduced to Belhar in 2005 during one of the early visits to South Africa by some of our members who are engaged in ministry there.¹ Evaton Noord Pastor, Swart Booysen, and other URCSA pastors shared with us their deep attachment to this confession which, although it had been extensively reviewed for years by our Denominational leadership, at that time was totally new to us.

Returning from South Africa we began a thorough study of the interface the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA), our parent denomination, has had with Belhar. We found that it had been under study for some 24 years. Repeated reports from the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC), to which it had been assigned, and repeated responses from Synod indicated their conviction that Belhar is soundly Biblically based, it is consistent with our other three confessions, and that it "...is in basic agreement with Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and with CRC decisions on race made over the past decades."² In 1997 the Pastoral Ministries Committee Report urged Synod to "increase its efforts and its commitment toward the advancement of racial reconciliation."³

In 2006 FCRCS prepared an overture to our Synod passed unanimously by Classis Pacific Northwest asking that Synod, "...proceed with all deliberate speed to outline a strategy and a process for congregations, Classes, and Synod to study and consider adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth standard of unity." The overture asked for this action by 2010. Simultaneously the IRC prepared its own report essentially calling for the same action by 2009. Synod adopted the IRC recommendation declaring thereby an affirmative response to our overture.

Meanwhile our FCRCS began its own personal journey with the Belhar Confession. Copies were printed and placed in the pews; Pastor Weidenaar preached a Lenten series on the issues of Belhar; adult education classes were conducted and in February, 2007 the church conducted a weekend seminar which was called, "A Glimpse of Heaven." The theme was Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language."

There were at least two critical components to this seminar format. First, we included as participants the members of a fledgling black church in Seattle's inner city. Second, we chose as facilitator a Vietnamese University professor who was an expert on issues of cultural diversity and as a minority in the U.S had his own set of experiences with prejudice and discrimination. The result was an incredible weekend of learning, confession, and purging where participants from each ethnic group admitted to prejudices, asked forgiveness and committed to work toward building genuine relationships with each other and with those each group tended naturally to exclude.

In mid-2007 our Council determined there were no denominational prohibitions against an individual congregation independently adopting a confession that our Synod had declared to be Biblical and consistent with our existing confessions. Congregational leaders engaged in a 40 day prayer vigil. The month of September was set aside for a series of personal family devotions written by church members focusing on the supporting texts of Belhar. As the October 14 voting date approached after-church congregational meetings were held where concerns could be expressed and questions answered. When the vote was counted the Belhar Confession had been adopted by a 94% majority.

¹ Second Table Ministries. www.secondtableministries.org

² Acts of Synod, 1990 p. 625.

³ Acts of Synod, 1997, p.686.

Since this adoption our church has continued its efforts to apply the principals of Belhar to our own ministry. We have also worked to encourage our denominational leadership to move forward and have coordinated efforts with the Belhar Implementation Team of the Reformed Church in America. As we have engaged with Belhar in our own congregation and with other Reformed believers in North America as well as in South Africa we were moved to prepare a document which we titled, "Questions Frequently Asked by Those Considering the Belhar Confession." This has been well received and we encourage its broader use within the Reformed community.

Another critical step we have encouraged is the preparation of an introduction to the Confession that in simple terms communicates the functions of confessions in our Reformed tradition and clearly focuses the principals of Belhar on our North American context. This introduction has now been approved by leaders from both denominations and will be used in their respective reports to Synod in June, 2009.

As the CRCNA Synodical vote on Belhar approaches, the Inter Church Relations Committee (IRC), the Denominational body responsible for bringing this issue to Synod, has published its recommendations which in essence call for a three year study period but asks Synod 2009 to propose adoption to the Synod of 2012. The full IRC report is available at http://www.crcna.org/site_uploads/uploads/resources/synodical/IRC_Appendix_-_Belhar_Confession_Report.pdf .

During this intimate engagement with the Belhar Confession, and we believe to a significant extent because of it, God has remarkably energized our Seattle church, providing a new passion to focus externally as never before. There is partnering with other churches in planting new churches in our area. Members are giving significantly more to missions. We have established sister church relationships with a South African black URCSA church as well as with the Seattle multi-ethnic church, Word of Truth International Ministries, (WOTIM) the inner city church that studied Belhar with us at our "Glimpse of Heaven" conference in 2007. To our delight WOTIM has voted to join our CRCNA family and its Pastor, Clarence Presley, has been ordained into our denomination. Our reach into our immediate community is taking shape. Significantly more of our members are engaged in overseas and local ministry. Excitement is in the air.

As with most change our focus shift has not come without a degree of pain and conflict. Some are not pleased with the shift from church as usual to a passionate focus on mission, outreach, justice, reconciliation and unity. Some members have gone elsewhere. Difficult economic times have complicated the church budget which is already hampered by significant long term building expansion debt. In spite of these realities, our church Council remains resolute in its commitment to Belhar and the new direction it demands from the church. We truly believe that those who connect with Belhar will be energized for Kingdom service in ways they can not now even imagine. It is our hope and our fervent prayer that God will lead others in our Reformed family to join us in this journey.