

## UNITY IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY? THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON AN ONGOING CHALLENGE IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

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### Abstract

*The paper acknowledges that today is not a time for discourses and programmes concerned with unity, whether in the world, South African society or the church, including ecumenism and the DRC family (1). Some of the cause of this widespread lack of concern with issues of unity is to be found in contemporary globalisation, also impacting on South African society (2). It is argued that theological and ecclesiological reflection should challenge this lack of interest, since notions of belonging, sharing and community are central to the gospel (3). It is important, therefore, to have some clarity on the rich and complex notion of unity promised and called for by the gospel, an approach already underlined by the South African Confession of Belhar (4). Such a rich and complex understanding of unity opens up a variety of imaginative practical ways of pursuing forms of life in unity in church and society today (5).*

### 1. Ongoing?

The question mark in the theme given to me is intriguing. Unity in church and society? The question mark obviously implies something like: Is unity *necessary* in church and society? Or, is unity *possible* in church and society? The word “ongoing” seems to suggest that there might have been a time – in church and society – when unity presented a real challenge, when it was regarded, at least by some, as both necessary and possible, and the question is therefore whether this is still the case. Does unity in church and society still present us with a challenge, is it still necessary, and is it possible? These are not mere rhetorical questions. They are honest, real and very serious questions – and many, if not most people in church and society would probably answer “no” – no, unity is no longer necessary and no, unity is not really possible. *We do not live in a time of unity.*

This is certainly applicable to the *world* in which we live. It is often described as a time of radical individualism and pluralism, of far-reaching diversity, even of fragmentation. Philosophies and cultural discourse that have recently grown in popularity both as heuristic descriptions and as moral and ideological prescriptions are those that emphasize difference and otherness and that are critical of languages of unity and grand narratives.

It is also applicable to our *South African society*. In broad strokes it is perhaps possible to argue that we moved rapidly through successive phases – precisely during the decade which is the focus of this Conference – where the public discourse, with its energy and enthusiasm, was about freedom (before 1992), then unity (leading to the new Constitution, establishing a common vision for a new, unifying rainbow-nation), then reconciliation (the Mandela-era), then justice (the early Mbeki-period, of two nations still separated by major economic inequalities and other injustices) to development (the reconstruction of South, Southern and African societies). However, whether this is accurate or not, there can be no

doubt that the earlier rhetoric about strong forms of unity, about nation-building, about finding and strengthening one common identity and calling has been replaced by other public discourses, probably more appealing to our ears today (see e.g. Mandela 1995; Mbeki 1998; Mbeki 2002).

It is even applicable to the way many people today experience themselves and their own identities, or rather, their lack of *personal unity* and identity. The strong sense of being an individual – literally: an undivided identity, mostly given with our universal, rational capacities to think – has been replaced in many late modern Western societies with a deep loss of any sense of own, personal identity. Many social commentators in the Western world have recently described these developments. People live with “patchwork-identities,” like children playing with toys they construct their own lives by using available pieces and parts, only to deconstruct it tomorrow, and perhaps to reconstruct someone new again. *Legio is my naam*, is the way Dutch ethicist Frits de Lange depicts this cultural experience, for we are many, I am many – and therefore no one, a person without unity (De Lange 1995). In fact, the identity of a new generation of children in the Netherlands is “an identity of fragmentation,” of “not-having-an-identity,” according to Gerben Heitink, the leading Dutch practical theologian. Looking in the mirror he sees no one, is the way Andy Warhol describes this spirit of our time.

No, we do not live in a time of unity, whether in the world, in societies or in the lives of people – and it is therefore not a time for unity in *the church* either. This becomes obvious when one considers the *Ecumenical Movement*. The earlier enthusiasm is gone. The vision is lost. Some talk about “paradigm shifts” and “challenges,” others talk about “crises,” “stagnation” and “standstill” – but they all refer to the same reality, the loss of the classical vision of visible ecumenical unity.

The same is true of *ecumenism in South Africa*. Again, some who still remember the earlier enthusiasm and endeavors bemoan this loss, but many others simply have other, more important tasks on their ecclesiastical, denominational and congregational agendas than even to think about the ecumenical form of the church and its possible calling and role in our society.

It is therefore only understandable that this spirit of our time is also present and widespread in the *Dutch Reformed Church family*. The vision of visible church unity to which many had been committed and which many feared and opposed so strongly during the apartheid years has lost its appeal and power, for many. They have other, more urgent tasks to attend to. They no longer regard this as an important issue, high on their agenda.

It is important to be aware of these changes that have taken place, and of the implications of these developments. This means that unity is *not an “ongoing” challenge* in the sense that it is still the same challenge which we faced a decade and more ago. The debate has changed. The supporters and the opponents have changed. In fact, there are far less opponents of church unity today, and probably very few who would still oppose it with the same racist, ideological arguments camouflaged as a form of respectable, natural *volksteologie*. The few who still hold these opinions have probably left the Dutch Reformed Church already. There are, however, many who have lost all interest in the question, who could not care less, who regard this as a struggle from a time that is dead and gone, a debate that should not be pursued any longer, because there are much more important concerns and challenges for the church today. The few staunch supporters of church unity who themselves do not see that the issue at stake has changed radically and who still attack the same fronts with the same arguments and the same reproaches of the past, are not serving the cause of unity either.

Unity in church and society? This is not a rhetorical question, but a very realistic and serious one. We do not live in a time of unity. Anyone who wishes to argue that unity in church and society is indeed still an ongoing challenge in South Africa today should be fully aware that the burden of proof has shifted. They have to convince people – including many who were enthusiastic about church unity and ecumenism themselves a decade ago – who honestly *do not really care*.

## 2. Today?

*Why* is this the case? What has happened, worldwide, but also in South Africa, in the ecumenical movement, but also in the Dutch Reformed Church family? *What has changed?* How should we understand and describe this “today” that we are thinking and talking about? Why are people no longer concerned with unity in church and society – whether unity of societies, of large institutions, of the church, even of their own identities?

At least a part of the answer may be that many of our contemporaries have already succumbed to a new unity, providing them with a different sense of belonging, of fellowship, of sharing, of community, of identity, without their conscious awareness that this is happening to them. Some of the words and descriptions used earlier – like: our times, the world in which we live, the spirit of our time, world-wide changes, late modern societies – already implicitly suggest such a possible answer. We live in a new kind of world today, in the world of *globalisation*. The term is ambiguous and controversial and the processes it refers to even more complicated and fiercely debated, but at heart it carries a simple and almost undeniable claim, namely that we live in a new kind of world. Over the last decade, on which we focus, the world has become one – and this one world in which we live has become a new kind of world living within many of us and of our contemporaries, and it has deeply affected our views of unity in church and society. The influential, albeit controversial ethicist Peter Singer makes this simple point the thesis of his recent book on globalisation, *One world. The ethics of globalization* (2002). Everything, he says, depends on how we respond to the idea that we live in one world. Whether we see unity in church and society as necessary and possible, as an ongoing challenge or not, also depends to a very large extent on this response.

There are, of course, many ways of describing and understanding globalisation. In his several authoritative studies, for example, David Held distinguishes between three main characteristics of our globalising society, of the ways in which this increasingly one world impacts on us, namely through the globalisation of culture, of the economy, and of political power (see e.g. Held 2000). In all three ways globalisation impacts severely on our smaller communities, societies, and spheres of belonging and identity. Our local cultures are radically challenged and changed. Our local, national and regional economies are radically affected. Our national governments lose much of their influence and power as it shifts in the direction of global governance and influence. In short, the one world is impacting on our smaller life-worlds, we become increasingly part of this one new world-community, and in the process other communities, other societies, other spheres of life – whether cultural, economic, or political – lose their orientating and life-giving influence in our lives. Many of us increasingly live, think, and feel like citizens of the world, and we have less need for the supporting surroundings of smaller networks, life-worlds, communities and societies that earlier constituted our whole world. According to another authoritative social analyst, Anthony Giddens, we increasingly experience this new one world as *A Runaway World*, “we are propelled into a global order that no one fully understands, but which is making its effects felt upon all of us” (1999). One of these effects is that *many earlier*

*spheres and circles of community in our lives increasingly lose their role in our lives – including church and society.*

To a very large extent, this process is a form of one way traffic. “The emerging global culture is indeed *heavily American* in origin and content,” acknowledges sociologist and analyst Peter Berger, writing with the celebrated Samuel Huntington on *Many Globalizations. Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (2002). They carefully describe many of the vehicles carrying this process all over the world, both cultural and economic, both elite and popular, from the English language to evangelical Protestantism, especially in its Pentecostal version, and point out:

“If there is one theme that all different sectors of cultural globalization have in common, it is *individuation*: all sectors of the emerging global culture enhance the independence of the individual over against tradition and collectivity. Individuation must be seen as a social and psychological process, manifested empirically in the behavior and consciousness of people regardless of the ideas they may hold about this” (2002:8-9).

“This insight is useful because it helps explain why the new global culture is so widely attractive. It has been understood for a long time that modernization *undermines the taken-for-granted authority of tradition and collectivity* and, therefore, by default, makes the individual more self-reliant ... (T)he new global culture has a built-in affinity with the modernization process; indeed, in many parts of the world today it is identical with it” (2002:8-9).

“This picture also suggests that *globalization is a continuation, albeit in an intensified and accelerated form, of the perduring challenge of modernization*. On the cultural level, this has been the great challenge of pluralism: the breakdown of taken-for-granted traditions and the opening up of multiple options for beliefs, values, and lifestyles. It is not a distortion to say that this amounts to the great challenge of enhanced freedom for both individuals and collectivities” (2002:16).

In *South Africa*, the social, cultural, economic and political changes of the first decade of transformation in any way had the dramatic effect of radically institutionalizing modernity almost overnight. For the enormous impact on the church and on believers’ ways of thought and behavior, one only has to read Jaap Durand’s instructive little study, *Ontluisterde wêreld* (2002). His book offers in itself therefore a fascinating exploration of the question why our society and time is no longer one of unity and one interested in issues of unity, social cohesion and community, and therefore one where believers are concerned with questions of belonging and visible unity, but rather a time of plurality and fragmentation, where believers are concerned with questions of personal fulfillment and expression. This happened precisely at the same time that globalisation spread “in an intensified and accelerated form” these challenges of modernity almost around the globe, and also impacted heavily on the South African society and experience. Suddenly becoming a modern – secular, plural, democratic, fragmented – society we would probably not have cared much about unity in any case. In addition, we simultaneously became part of a new, one world – in which the influential others do not care about unity either. It is only to be expected that many South Africans, including Christians, will feel that unity in church and society is not necessary, not even important – and that to be honest they have not wasted a moment for quite some time now still thinking if and how such unity could be possible.

### 3. Theological reflections?

On all levels mentioned – societies; ecumenism; the Dutch Reformed family – theological reflection has already responded to these crises. In a fascinating, wide ranging and very informative study of modern societies and their challenges concerning meaningful and sustainable forms of life in community, *Gemeinschaft aus kommunikativer Freiheit. Sozialer Zusammenhalt in der modernen Gesellschaft. Ein theologischer Beitrag* (1999), German social ethicist Heinrich Bedford-Strohm for example suggests the notion of “communicative freedom” – drawn from philosopher Michael Theunissen and theologian-bishop Wolfgang Huber – as resource for meaningful responses. He is convinced that the Christian tradition, including the tradition of theological and ethical reflection, but also the tradition of celebrating community in liturgy and worship, has a valuable contribution indeed to make in order to strengthen forms of reciprocity in *public life*. He in fact develops concrete proposals for such life in community in civil society and democratic structures (Smit 2003a).

The *Ecumenical Movement* has been dramatically challenged by these forces of globalisation. The responses from the side of the Ecumenical Movement have been controversial and even internally divisive. These ecumenical experiences may be instructive for reflection on challenges concerning unity in South African churches also. Traditionally, of course, there have been different concerns in the Ecumenical Movement regarding unity. The focus of Faith and Order has been more on ecclesiological questions, the focus of Life and Work has been more on ethical challenges and the focus of Mission and Witness more on the task of the church to witness to the gospel.

During the last decade, precisely as a result of the impact of global processes, voices grew stronger – from these different sides – that these diverse concerns for unity belong more integrally together. A major study project called *Ecclesiology and Ethics* for example developed these insights through a series of important consultations, on “Costly Unity,” “Costly Commitment,” and “Costly Obedience,” respectively (Best & Robra 1997).

Gradually, the conviction grew that the notion of *koinonia* – the Greek word indicating something like communion, community, sharing, fellowship, unity, participation, solidarity, but deliberately not translated in the earlier study documents – could serve as a vision integrating the different ecumenical concerns. The study paper called *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness* (Geneva: WCC 1993) introduced its work with a description of “The search for communion in a time of change” and explained: “The pilgrimage towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness takes place in an ever changing world and ecumenical situation ... Some believe that the real global revolution of our epoch is only just beginning” – followed by a detailed description of the phenomena usually characterised as globalisation (Smit 2003b).

The present ecumenical situation is complicated. On the one hand, many churches and Christians in the world could not care less about these ecumenical attempts to find some form of unity, some form of *koinonia* in faith, life and witness, and some forms of “joint ecclesial entry points” to engage with the powers of globalisation (Cartigny 2003). On the other hand, many critics – including many of the well-known earlier leaders of the Ecumenical Movement – have become almost cynical about the lack of any real visible, meaningful ecumenical unity. Many of these critics are of the opinion that the present Ecumenical Movement has given up the classical Christologically inspired and therefore Trinitarian vision of visible unity for a vague typically modern agenda of merely “managing diversity” in the name of a Pneumatology of difference, otherness and dialogue.

In an important recent initiative, to mention only one example, theologians from several traditions issued a so-called “*Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*” (2003), proposing that “the churches’ retreat from the vision of church unity (of the New Delhi assembly of the World Council on Churches, 1961) is sin,” that “the churches must now, both in their sheer obedience and for their own healing, commit themselves anew to the biblical vision articulated at New Delhi,” fully realizing that the concrete steps they propose as “a way of obedience will require of our churches disciplines of self-sacrifice which they pray the Spirit may inspire.”

It is instructive that they start with a description of the spirit of the times in which we live: “*In late modernity we fear unity*, often with good reason. We cherish our particularity – our family and ethnic heritage, our established patterns of life and thought. We look with suspicion on the political and economic forces that impose homogeneity. We celebrate diversity and pluralism, sometimes as a good in its own right, because we fear the constraints of a single set of ideals.”

Over against this spirit, however, they claim: “Christians, however, proclaim unity as a gift of God ... Visible unity is not a modern dream, but a permanent and central aspect of the Christian life ... and it continues to call us beyond the differences of theology and worship that have developed over the centuries, to a deeper unity of common prayer, common witness, shared conviction, and mutual acceptance ... Living in divided churches, Christians have become accustomed to division. We easily regard disunity as normal. But easy acceptance of Christian division is, we believe, as great a danger to the integrity of our churches as division itself. For where division is regarded as normal, is no longer perceived as scandal and wound, the gift of unity that is the ‘mystery’ of God’s will, his ‘plan for the fullness of time’ (Eph. 1:9-10), will remain hidden by human ignorance and sin. To work towards the real and concrete growth of unity among all our churches is, we believe, an imperative for the conscience of every Christian.” They then call for *a renewed commitment to visible unity*, appealing again amongst others to John 17:20-23, “in some ways the charter-text of modern ecumenism.”

Their emphasis on theological reasons for the call to visible unity – mission; truth; the mystery of the love and community of the Triune God – is extremely important. Christians committed to unity should do that *because they believe in unity*, as gift and calling, as integral part of the Christian faith itself. They should do so because they confess that the church is called to be one and that division is sin. Any other motivation for visible unity will never suffice, particularly not during times when the spirit of the time contradicts this calling. Mere expediency, more effectiveness, pragmatic, strategic, political or ideological reasons – or whatever other motive people may have – will never sustain the commitment to visible unity when times become difficult.

It is helpful to remember that the influential theological reflections in Dutch Reformed circles during the apartheid decades affirming the importance of the unity of the church always argued on such theological grounds only, with Biblical and doctrinal appeals and perspectives, and never on pragmatic or political grounds – one only has to recall milestones like Jaap Durand’s *Una sancta catholica in sendingperspektief* (1961), Willie Jonker’s *Die Sendingbepalinge van die Ned. Gereformeerde Kerk van Transvaal* (1962), Flip Theron’s *Die ekklesia as kosmies-eskatologiese teken – Die eenheid van die kerk as ‘profesie’ van die eskatologiese vrede* (1978) and Hannes Adonis’ *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou* (1982), in addition to many others.

The real question is therefore *not about the “today”* and whether it is a favorable time for unity, or not. The apartheid decades were not times of unity either, at least in the

dominant discourses of those days, albeit for different reasons than today. The spirit of the time does not determine whether the church should be one. The church is called to show visibly that it is one, that it has already received the gift of unity from the Triune God of the church. It is only when people believe this gospel that steps of obedience may follow. When people, however, no longer believe this, no appeal to unity for whatever practical, strategic, ideological or political reason will move them to set out and persevere on this extremely difficult road.

It may seem obvious that *Reformed Christians* should be deeply committed to the visible unity of the church. Historically, many Reformed people have taken the unity, the catholicity and the ecumenicity of the church extremely seriously. Systematically, that is easy to explain in terms of the deepest thrust of the Reformed faith itself, probably most aptly described in the well-known words “We do not belong to ourselves” – used by Calvin in his depiction of the Christian life; by the *Heidelberg Catechism* in its confession of our deepest comfort in life and death; by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in its Debrecen-litany in the face of global injustices and ecological destruction; by the Presbyterian Church (USA) as the summary of the content of its *Brief Statement of Faith*; by Coenie Burger as title and theme of his recent study of the Reformed faith (2001).

In a recent conversation, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church – and one for whom I have the highest respect as a fine scholar and pastor – told me that, based on his experience with young people in catechism class over the last few years, he thought it may be time to rewrite the old Reformed Confessions in language that people “today” can understand. As example he used the first question and answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism* – my comfort is that I do not belong to myself, but to Jesus Christ. No one understands the meaning of the word “belong” any longer, he said. It does not make sense any longer. It does not speak to anyone today. I must admit that this conversation caused me to reflect theologically. Could it really be true that we no longer understand what “belong” means? Is it not perhaps the case that we no longer understand what “not to myself” could mean? If that is true, it will make sense why so many people today, even in the Reformed tradition, find it almost impossible to take the unity of the church seriously, in which case it will be clear that serious theological reflection is indeed needed.

#### 4. Unity?

Precisely for those who do believe in visible unity, however, a difficult challenge remains, namely to get some form of clarity on the *nature* of this unity they seek. The *vision*, the model, the form, the nature of this visible unity is itself deeply controversial, even amongst those who agree that they are called to this unity. This, again, applies to modern societies, like South Africa, where people differ on – for example – what British political theorist Andrew Mason describes as *Community, Solidarity and Belonging, Levels of Community and their Normative Significance* (2000). This applies to ecumenism and to what Lutheran ecumenist Harding Meyer describes as *Ökumenische Zielvorstellungen* (1996). This applies also to the seemingly never-ending discussions in the Dutch Reformed Church family about the nature of the unity we are called to.

Within the Dutch Reformed Church family, the URCSA’s *Confession of Belhar* (1986) brings at least two important sets of convictions to the discussion regarding the nature of the visible unity we are called to seek. The *first* is found in the way it describes this unity itself in its first article.

“We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. We believe that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made

manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another; that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain; that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted; that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and build one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity; that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God; that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church" (Cloete & Smit 1984: 1-2; italics added).

It is clear that the unity should be visible, yes, but in a variety of ways, and then a range of Biblical allusions invite those who confess to use their imagination to think creatively about different forms in which this living unity could become visible. This unity is not to be equated with uniformity. On the contrary, it should fully practice the riches of diversity given to the one church. Believers should not be under constraint, but the unity should involve and make room for personal freedom – for Bedford-Strohm's "communicative freedom," based on the freedom of the gospel, which is not a freedom to withdraw but precisely a freedom to belong and love.

The *second* set of convictions is found in the overall structure of the *Confession*, in the way this living unity, real reconciliation (article two) and caring justice (article three) belong integrally together. There can be no visible unity without real reconciliation and caring justice, is confessed here. For any future discussions in the Dutch Reformed Church family, this link is of extreme importance. It will simply not be possible to pursue a merely structural form of visible unity while disregarding the legacies of alienation and hurt and the present realities of injustice and suffering. At least according to *Belhar* these three belong together.

## **5. Challenge?**

Given that such a search for forms of living unity – including real reconciliation and caring justice – may indeed be necessary, for reasons of faith and theology, also in the Dutch Reformed Church family today, in spite of the fact that this is not a time for unity, the question still remains whether this is also *possible*? Even in this form it is not merely a rhetorical question, but a serious one. Many, including believers and theologians fully

convinced that it is indeed necessary, will feel inclined to answer that it is sadly not possible. In a challenging study of the division of the Western church, *The End of the Church. A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (1998), Ephraim Radner, for example, argues that the divided churches can hardly still call themselves churches. The Spirit has left them. Their spiritual senses have been dulled. On their own, they no longer understand Scripture, see the holy, hear their calling, taste the communion and smell the sacrifice. He does not, however, propose any concrete steps in order to restore the unity we lost. It is beyond our capabilities. Our ecumenical attempts are merely liberal forms of managing diversity. All that remains is ecclesial penitence, to weep, to lament, to cry – and to leave everything to the Spirit, according to him. Perhaps he is making the case in exceptionally strong terms, but it could serve as a reminder that there are many who weep for the divided church, but who do not honestly consider it possible for us to do anything meaningful about our divisions.

Again, however, Reformed believers will probably feel that they *are* called to do something about the lack of visible unity, to take concrete steps to serve forms of living unity. It is characteristic of the Reformed faith that confession is followed by embodiment, what we believe and confess should be put into concrete practice, should be translated into acts of obedience, discipleship, transformation, sanctification, in short, should become Christian life. This is why Calvin added the fourth book to the *Institutes*, providing us with perhaps the first practical-theological ecclesiology ever, and why so many acts of Reformed confession were almost immediately followed by new church orders. *Belydenis roep om beliggaming*, according to the Reformed mindset (Smit 2002).

So which could be *the practical steps* to be taken to serve forms of visible, living unity in the Dutch Reformed Church family today – in spite of the fact that this is not a time of unity, and based not merely on pragmatic or political reasons but on the very heart of our faith and confession itself? What should members of this family do today who are indeed committed to visible, living unity – not uniformity, but rich, complex forms of *koinonia* in faith, life and witness, including real reconciliation and caring justice?

It is clear that it will have to start with theological reflection, with faith, with spirituality, with conviction, confession and commitment. If not, any such attempts may soon become mere bureaucratic and administrative initiatives which, even when they may be largely successful, fail to serve the living unity we need. Recent attempts to achieve structural unity between divided churches elsewhere in the world, for example in the *Samen op Weg*-process between Dutch churches, have sadly been severely criticized for these reasons. Where this vision is, however, present, everyone involved should become part of a creative and imaginative process of finding new ways together towards this unity.

Perhaps this is already happening in the Dutch Reformed Church family. Many recent reports in the church and public media on discussions and consultations, local and regional meetings and convents, encounters and initiatives between leaders of the divided churches, and even several concrete examples of achieving meaningful forms of unity between activities of our churches all seem to indicate that there is indeed some promise in the air. Whether and how the Spirit will really inject new life into our dead bones, however, remains to be seen and awaited, longingly, prayerfully, and with confession of our own failures and omissions.

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