

THE RELEVANCE OF UNITY TO THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Outsiders to South Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), when reading the title of this article, may rightly ask: "But what are the reasons for the necessity of the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa (DRC-family) to become one church? Why can't they exist separately as so many other churches exist separately in South Africa? Is there any necessity why this family of churches should become one church?" In this article I therefore intend to give some of the reasons for this necessity and will elaborate on the following two propositions that I consider as basic to the unity of the DRC-family. Firstly, the unity of the DRC-family can only be brought about by a restoration of the original unity of the DRC in the Cape in the 19th century and not through a process of unification of the different churches that were constituted by the DRC. Secondly, the relevancy of the DRC in the South African society is totally dependent on the unity of the DRC-family. In conclusion I will look at the developments (changes) in the DRC that will be needed in order to accommodate the unity of the DRC-family.

1. Restoration of unity instead of unification of churches

As it gradually became politically evident that there was no peaceful existence for the inhabitants of South Africa possible without a democratic co-existence, it has now also become ecclesiastically evident that there can be no relevant existence of the DRC without a united co-existence with the DRC-family. Realising this, the DRC-family has since 1994 started discussions on the unification of the Dutch Reformed Church (Whites), the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (Blacks and Coloureds), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Blacks) and the Reformed Church (Indians). Some *words* and *concepts* being used and the *procedures* being followed at present about the unification¹, however, need to be clarified. These words, concepts and procedures are at the outset of the discussion of importance.

First of all the word *Konvent* being used for the present discussions on the unification of the DRC-family. This word (concept), I believe, was introduced by the white DRC for these discussions. I looked for the word in the *Verklarende Woordeboek vir die Afrikaanse Taal (HAT)*,² but couldn't find it there. I also couldn't find an English equivalent for it in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.³ What is known is that the word was used in the history of the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands and Germany more than a century ago. That

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1. In this article I will use the concept "restoration" of the unity of the DRC-family of churches instead of the "unification" of these churches. An explanation of using "restoration" instead of "unification" will be provided in the development of the theme.
 2. Verklarende Handboek van die Afrikaanse Taal (HAT), Odendaal FF (Hoofredakteur), Eerste Uitgawe, negende druk, 1979. Johannesburg: Perskor.
 3. The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Tenth Edition, Oxford Press, 1999.

the word should now be revived and transplanted onto African soil is rather a dubious matter. It could have been named a *Kerkeberaad* (Church summit) or a *Kerkkonsultasie* (Church Consultation) or even simply a *Kerkekonferensie* (Church Conference) that would have been clearly understood by all people in South Africa.

It may be asked: *But what's in a name?* In Africa names reveal much more than the ear can hear and the eye can see. The introduction of the word *Konvent* by the DRC reveals something of a hidden paradigm of power that still prevails in the DRC. It may be that this name for the discussions was discussed with the leaders of the other churches involved, and even accepted by them. But even if it had been discussed and agreed upon by the other church leaders, it remains a strange word to the African context and therefore unclear in its meaning to African people. Why should the DRC decide on a matter like this and why should the previously called daughter churches be willing to accept what the previously called mother church wanted to call these discussions, even though strange to the “daughters”? If the leaders of the other churches have accepted it, it may be an indication of a still colonised mind that is willing to accept what the “mother” suggests.

Secondly, the concept church unification (*kerkvereniging*), generally used for the process of uniting the DRC-family, is questionable. The question arises whether it should be a unification of churches or a restoration of the original unity of the DRC as before the synod of the DRC in 1857 where the DRC for the first time decided officially that people of the colour⁴ had to gather in separate buildings for their *kerklike voorregte* (privileges as members of the church). My contention with this question is that the decision of the synod of 1857 was in contradiction to the Christian faith (therefore sinful), also contradicting the doctrinal creeds of the DRC (therefore heretic). The decision should therefore not be considered as a contentious decision that shouldn't have been taken by the synod and least of all as an instruction to constitute separate churches along ethnic divisions of the members of the church. Let us therefore look more closely at the decision of the synod of 1857.

The decision of the synod of 1857 reconsidered

It is usually accepted that the decision of the synod of 1857⁵ regarding persons of colour in the church, paved the way towards constituting separate churches along ethnic lines. It is argued by some researchers⁶ that the decision already had in mind the constituting of separate churches for what was considered the non-European⁷ members of the church. This assumption, however, is a mistake. Many other researches has pointed out very clearly that the synod didn't have separate churches in mind. People of colour, as they were called, *could*, and not *must*, gather in separate buildings but they continued belonging to the same congregation (church). The doors of the church were still open to those who wanted or preferred to attend worship services of the whites.

4. I use the term “people of colour” for all non-Europeans who were baptized by the DRC in that time and accordingly were accepted as equals of the Europeans in the church.

5. For a thorough discussion on the decision taken by this synod, see Borchardt, Carl 1986. Die “swakheid van sommige” en die Sending, in *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, edited by Johann Kinghorn (editor) et al. 1986. Johannesburg: McMillan, South Africa.

6. See Van der Walt, IJ 1960. Eiesoortige kerkvorming as missiologiese problem met besondere verwysing na Suid-Afrika. Potchefstroom, p. 474.

7. Although the synod of 1857 used the term “persons of colour”, the usual term used in society at that time was non-European. Giliome and Elphick prefer the terms European and non-European as the word European seems to have embraced all three criteria that was used to distinguish between the people in the Cape society, namely “appearance, origin and culture”. Elphick, Richard and Giliomee, Hermann. *The Shaping of South African Society*, p. 359.

A sinful decision

Whatever the reasons or intensions of synod could be pointed out,⁸ fact of the matter was, however, that white church members didn't like the presence of people of colour in their churches, especially not at the Holy Communion table. The synod itself admitted the fact by motivating its decision as taken *ten gevolge van de zwakheid van sommigen* (because of the weakness of some)⁹ who were prejudiced against people of colour. In essence the decision was thus allowing racists attitudes to find legitimacy in the church and therefore sinful. It was contradicting the teachings of the Bible as understood by the synod itself. This was pointed out very clearly by Rev. PDM Huet who was a lonely voice of protest against the decision. In 1860 he wrote a booklet, *Een Kudde en Een Herder*, in which he called upon the DRC to rebuke the decision and to follow the way of no separation in the church.¹⁰

A heretic decision

The unconditional acceptance of baptized persons into the Christian community was also in accordance with the basic doctrines of the Synod of Dordt (1618/19)¹¹ that laid down the Biblical guidelines for the DRC and stipulated clearly that those who had been baptized ought to enjoy equal rights of liberty with the other Christians and thus be allowed full membership of the church.¹² Heresy, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is a "belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religious (especially Christian) doctrine", or "opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted". Both these descriptions are applicable to the decision taken by the synod. It seems that the synod of 1857, probably as a result of a strong Evangelical spirit that entered the DRC since the end of the 18th century, was not very concerned about the Doctrinal Standards as upheld by the Reformed churches at that time. The Evangelical spirituality was more concerned about peace in the church than acting according to Doctrinal Standards.

The influence of Calvinism on the decision of the synod

It has already been pointed out by researchers on the early history of society in the Cape that since the early European settlement, it was accepted that when any person, European or non-European, had been baptized, the person was immediately accepted as a member of the Christian community and allowed access to the Christian church.¹³ This was, as already pointed out above, in accordance with the decisions taken by the synod of Dordt. It was, nevertheless accepted by the Dutch colonialists, as by all European colonialists at that time,

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8. See for these reasons, Borchardt, Carl, Die "swakheid van sommige" en die Sending, in Kinghorn, Johann (redakteur), *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, 70.
 9. For a thorough discussion of the decision taken by the synod of 1857, see H Gilomee in *Scriptura* 83 (2003) 212-244.
 10. Huet, PDM 1860. *Een Kudde en Een Herder*. Verhandeling over de toebrenging van heidenen tot de Christelike kerkgemeenskap. Kaapstad: NH Marais, No. 133.
 11. See Cruse, HP 1947. *Die opheffing van die Kleurlingbevolking: Aanvangsjare, 1652 – 1795*, Stellenbosch.
 12. Some researchers like Du Plessis and MacCrone interpreted the decision by the synod of Dort as that as soon as a slave was baptised, he/she was fully accepted as a member of the Christian community and thus of the church. Others again doubt whether it was the intension of the synod of Dort that baptised slaves should have been accepted in the church as full members. See Elphick, R & Shell, R 1979, Intergroup relations: Khoikhoi, settlers, slaves and free blacks 1652 –1795, in Elphick, R & Giliomee, H (eds.), *The Shaping of the South African Society 1652-1820*. Cape Town: Longman Penguin, 119-112.
 13. See MacCrone, ID, *Race Attitudes in South Africa: Historical, Experimental and Psychological Studies*. Johannesburg, 1937.

that being a Christian European, they were *ipso facto* superior to members of any other race.

According to Charles Boxer this view was inevitably strongest amongst Calvinists, who, consciously or subconsciously, were bound to believe that they were “the Elect of the Lord and the salt of the earth”.¹⁴ Such a belief fostered the idea that Calvinists had a special calling in the ordering of attitudes and relationships in society. The Dutch colonialists together with the French Huguenots, both groups being staunch Calvinists, fostered the development of an attitude amongst the earliest settlers that caused a society to develop in which they were the superiors – those having a call to order society and those who were to be ordered. In this way Calvinism contributed at a very early stage of the South African society, the development of superior/inferior division of society that ended up in a white/non-white division of society.¹⁵

It also needs to be added that Calvinism in general lacked missionary zeal. The DRC therefore didn't cultivate a Christian community in the Cape that transcended divisions of colour and culture and thus fostered a more pluralistic and flexible society. In this regard the Roman Catholic Church did much more, for instance in the Iberian colonies, to draw the indigenous people into the church.¹⁶ When eventually towards the end of the eighteenth century Evangelical influences entered the DRC and more zeal towards mission was practised, more people of colour became members of the church and were attending DRC worship services in spite of the fact that most members of the church had not yet accepted the equality of people of colour through baptism. The DRC, however, never thought of officially separating people in the church before 1857.

It needs to be once again that although the 1857 synod decided to separate Europeans and people of the colour in the church, the decision was clearly not intended to create different churches for different peoples. The understanding was that although people of the colour were gathering separately for their church privileges they still belonged to the same church and fell under the jurisdiction of the same church bodies – presbyteries and synods. It was only at the synod of 1880 decided that a separate church must be constituted for what was then known as *die Kleurlinge* (the Coloureds). This decision was implemented in 1881 when the *NG Sendingkerk* (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) was constituted. The same pattern was followed with the constituting of separate churches for Africans and Indians.

What is of importance about the constituting of these different churches, is that it never had been a request from the members of these churches to be constituted in a separate church. It can be accepted that some of the white missionaries who served in the congregations that came into existence as a result of mission work done by the DRC, were cooperating closely with the DRC in constituting these churches. They were financially

14. See Boxer, CR 1965. *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*, London, as quoted by Giliomee, Hermann and Elphick, Richard, The structure of European domination at the Cape, 1652-1820, in Elphick, Richard and Giliomee, Hermann, 1979. *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, Cape Town: Longman Penguin Southern Africa, 360-390.

15. This viewpoint is mainly held by Patterson, Sheila 1975. *Some speculations on the Status and Role of the Free People of Colour in the Western Cape*. Studies in Fortes, M and Patterson, S (eds.) 1975. *Studies in African Social Anthropology*. London. Researchers like Elphick and Giliomee have serious problems with Patterson's viewpoint on Calvinism. According to them “no one has yet shown what aspects of Calvinist doctrine permeated what regions and classes at the Cape, in what forms, and in what areas. It has not been shown that Calvinism was influential at all”. Giliomee, Hermann & Elphick, Richard. The structure of European domination at the Cape, 1652-1820, in *The shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, 363.

16. Eugene D Genovese 1975. He points this out very clearly in his: *Role, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves made*. London. See also Degler, Carl N1971. *Neither Black nor White: Slavery Relations in Brazil and the United States*. New York.

totally dependant on the DRC and wanted the so-called daughter churches to stay as close to and under the jurisdiction of the DRC. Some missionaries also saw in the constituting of a separate church being close to the “mother church” would heighten their status as missionaries as they were still having a lower status than DRC ministers and were called *eerwaarde* and not *dominee* as the pastors of the DRC were called. Whatever their attitudes were, there never was any resistance documented from their side to have the congregations they were serving, constituted into a separate church. They fully cooperated in constituting these churches.

Time to rebuke the 1857 decision

For almost a hundred and fifty years the decision of the synod of 1857 had never been officially questioned by the DRC. On the contrary, the church continued until 1990 to justify the decision of its 1857 synod and to execute this dubious decision. After the DRC had officially confessed that apartheid was a sin and a heresy, it should certainly have rejected the decision taken by the synod of 1857, declared it null and void and express its willingness to return to the unity of the church as it existed before 1857. It would be no shame for any church to confess “the sins of the fathers” and to restore the damage that had been done to people through the fathers’ sinful decisions.

In essence the decision of the synod in 1857 was the beginning of apartheid in the DRC and it was already an indication of racism that had been tolerated and eventually gained permanence in the church. This “fatal” decision in terms of the future of the South African society and which the synod itself declared not to have been in accordance with the Bible opened the door for the DRC to follow and implement total segregation (apartheid) in the church. The result was that one after the other ethnic church was constituted. And the constitution of these churches was not because of the choice of the members of these churches. It was the DRC, with the cooperation of the white missionaries, who decided they must be constituted.¹⁷ In fact, these churches were declared to be independent but in practice treated as completely under the jurisdiction of the “mother church”.¹⁸

Looking back at the instituting of these churches, one could say that they should never have been constituted. Some may argue, as with apartheid, that these churches brought about many positive developments to the members of these churches. Personally, I have not found any documentation of these churches saying that their separation from the “mother church” was to their benefit. It was only in 1975 that the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (black) declared that their existence as a church was not in accordance to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith and that they should therefore be re-united with the “mother church”.

17. Already at the synod of 1857 it was admitted that sending people of colour away from the worship services for whites, was unbiblical and against the doctrinal Creeds of the DRC. Strong voices were raised against the decision. The little booklet written by Ds. PDM Huet, *Een Herder, een Kudde*, is to be mentioned in particular. In his book, Ds. Huet pointed out very convincingly why the decision of the 1857 was not in accordance with the Bible and that it was a sign of racial prejudice amongst the members of the DRC. See PDM Huet, *Eén Kudde en Een Herder*. Verhandeling over de toebrenging van heidenen tot de Christelijke kerkgemeenschap. NH Marais, No. 133, Long Street, Cape Town, 1860.

18. I was Mission Secretary of the DRC in the Northern Transvaal when the Actuarius of the synod of the DRC, Dr. FE O’Brian Geldenhuys, and I had to convey the message to the synod of the black NG Sendingkerk in the Transvaal, held in Pretoria in 1963, that the black *sendingkerke* (mission churches) had to be united into one church – and so the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) came into existence. I remember how many of the delegates of the synod complained about the decision that they had to be constituted into a separate independent church. They considered it as an indication that the DRC wanted to get rid of them, like the homelands under the apartheid government.

A moratorium on discussions about church unification needed

Returning to the concept of the unification of the DRC-family of churches, I would like to argue that a *moratorium* on the discussions should be called for. The problems concerning the restoration of the unity of the DRC are not experienced by any of the other churches of the family. Those problems are purely problems experienced by the DRC alone.

These problems were clearly indicated by the General Synod of the DRC in October 2002. The decision of the synod was that, according to the secular law, a two thirds majority vote of the members in favour of unification is needed from the church councils, presbyteries, regional synods and the General Synod of the DRC before unification could take place. If this is the case, then, why waste so much time on discussions about the unification before compiling with the requirements of secular law to get a two third majority vote from its members in favour of the unification of the churches? Is the DRC honest with the other churches of its family by negotiating unification with them while the church knows very well that the members of the church may turn down such unification?

What is much more vital than the question of the procedure to be followed in a process of unification, is the procedure to be followed in bringing about the restoration of the unity of the DRC. The present discussions between the different churches can be considered as still the remnants of the apartheid ideology in the DRC. The leaders of the churches of the DRC-family are now, more than ever before, recognised as leaders of fully independent churches and called together (by the DRC!) for discussions on church unification.

This happens under the pretension that these churches were legally constituted (like the Independent homelands!) and their leaders are now asked to cooperate in bringing about a unification of the churches. In the meantime, however, the DRC has already decided on what procedure will have to be followed. An equivalent of this type of action would have been for the present ANC government to have recognised the independent homelands that were created by the apartheid regime and to have started negotiations with them on how they could cooperate to be re-incorporated into a united democratic South Africa.

It is clear that the DRC did not discern the signs of the times in 1994. That should have been the time when the DRC should have said that the existence of the churches the DRC had created, had come to an end and the original unity of the DRC had to be restored. If such an attitude had been in the minds of the DRC leaders, the unity of the DRC would have become a reality in 1994 already. Strange that the DRC followed and supported the government of the country when it was still “our people” who were in government. What a witness it would have been if the DRC had also been willing in 1994 to finally step down from any vestiges of apartheid to start a totally new dispensation in the history of the DRC.

The way towards the restoration of unity

What then is the procedure to be followed in order to bring about the restoration of the unity of the DRC? I believe the DRC will first have to resolve all the problems it experiences with the restoration of the unity. In this regard, the church will have to start educating its members to understand and accept the restoration of the unity. Instead of having all the so-called *Konvente* with the others churches of the family, the DRC should rather have such meetings with its own members. When the church has thus reached the point where they can say that they want to restore the unity unconditionally, then the synods of the other family churches can be invited to a uniting synod where the unity can be restored. From there on the one church can start working out the way the united church will be functioning and sort out the problems a united church may, and certainly will, encounter on the way as a united church.

Having spelled out what the unity of the DRC implies, it is now necessary to look at the relevancy, and thus necessity, of the restoration of the unity of the DRC-family of churches.

2. The relevance of unity to the DRC

Having spelled out how the unity of the DRC-family has to be restored, it is now necessary to look at the relevance of such unity for the DRC and what developments will be needed within the DRC when united with the other churches of the DRC-family. First of all it is necessary to look at the meaning of the relevance of the church in general.

What the relevance of the church implies

When is the church relevant to its context? What is required of the church to be relevant? According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the word “relevance” derives from the Latin *relevans* from *relevare* – “to raise up”. A relevant matter is thus a matter that rises up in importance concerning a specific matter in a certain context and at a certain time. Such a matter is considered to be of importance because of its *meaningfulness* to people in a certain situation. And what is meaningful to people is again determined by their personal needs and interests. What people consider as meaningful to their lives in a certain situation, becomes relevant to them.

Different times bring about different conceptualisations of meaningfulness. Because of changing circumstances, the conceptual framework of personal needs and interests changes. The rising importance (relevance) of these interests and needs is at all times - to experience life meaningfully. The personal experience by people of their interests and needs thus determines what is relevant to them.

The same applies for experiencing the Christian faith as meaningful in different contexts, times and circumstances. Not every aspect of the Christian faith will be equally relevant to every age. Theologians and the church thus have to “re-focus”¹⁹ the Christian message to every age in order to make it meaningful to the demands of life in that age. Only in that way will the church be able to present the Christian faith in every age as of rising importance and thus relevant to every human need and interest at all times.

At present the unity of the DRC has become of utmost relevance to the DRC-family. Let us therefore look at the way the DRC evaluated the unity of the church since apartheid in the church and State became the official policy of the DRC.

Irrelevance of unity in the historical context of the DRC

After World War II the unity of the Christian church was raised up to the most important (relevant) issue in the existence of the Christian church in the world at large. For many years the discussions at the meetings of the World Council of Churches (WCC) centralised around the unity of the church. The historical framework of that time compelled the churches to look at their divisions as to find answers on the reality of a divided humanity. The churches in the West realized that unless they could demonstrate to humankind that co-existence in justice and peace was possible, it would be impossible for the Christian church to call for justice and peace amongst the nations.

The DRC had not been part of these discussions as two of the provincial DRC's, the DRCs in the Orange Free State and Natal, didn't belong to the WCC and the two other churches, the DRCs in the Cape and the Transvaal were members but had to withdraw as a result of the decisions taken by the Cottesloe Consultation that was arranged by the WCC

19. The term is from Gregory Baum: *The credibility of the Church Today* (New York 1968), 152.

and the its member churches in South Africa. As then the DRC was since then isolated from the rest of the Christian church it continued on its own way, following apartheid in the church. The quest for unity thus never became relevant to the DRC.

Relevance of the unity of the DRC in its cultural context

Conceptual frameworks about the unity of the church, not only change as a result of historical shifts in emphasis regarding different aspects of the existence of the church, but also because of various cultural contexts in which the church exists. So, for instance, African interests and needs differ in many ways from Western interests and needs. The African churches and theologians tend to concentrate far more on people's concrete material interests and needs while Western theologians and churches concentrate more on people's rational and spiritual concerns. Contextual relevance, addressing the "burning issues of the day", is therefore vital to the church in Africa. Few of the present burning issues in Western theology, such as the debate on the historical Jesus, for instance, is thus reflected in African theology at present.

That was probably the reason for the Christian church in Africa not to be so much concerned about the unity of the church but to be much more concerned about the context in which the church exists and its response to its context. In this regard the DRC, having been isolated from the African church by apartheid, experienced very little of the "burning issues of the day" that the African churches were experiencing. The context of the DRC was purely Western and the church was much more concerned about the spiritual needs of its members than the material needs of people. The importance (relevance) of unity with the other churches of the DRC-family was thus no burning issue within the DRC. In the cultural context as a context of superiority and power, there was actually no need for the DRC to have a desire for unity with the other churches of the DRC-family. Unity of the church had a totally different conceptual framework in the DRC and therefore there was no real desire or attempt to be united with the other churches of the DRC-family.

For many years the conceptual framework cultivated amongst members of the DRC in its specific cultural framework was that the unity of the church exists as a *spiritual and thus an invisible unity*. The relevance of the visible presence of white and black believers to be together in one church was not discerned as a necessity, especially during the time of apartheid. In this regard, De Gruchy, during the years in which apartheid was at its peak, wrote: "There is a direct connection between the unity of the church, and the social situation in South Africa... To regard the unity of the church largely in spiritual and invisible terms is to misunderstand the teaching of the New Testament, and in the end, to compromise the witness of the church as it struggles against racism and other forces that divide and separate people on the grounds of culture and ethnicity".²⁰

A re-education of the members of the church, as already mentioned, will thus have to take place. A prerequisite for accepting a new understanding of this unity is for the members to understand why the unity of the DRC family is a *sine qua non* for the DRC. People can neither believe nor disbelieve a claim they have not understood. Before members of the DRC can be asked to vote for or against the restoration of its unity, they need to understand the unity of the church and the implications of unity, clearly. As a result of the mind-set that was cultivated in the DRC on the unity of the church it consequently caused the church to support apartheid as being Biblically justifiable. This Biblical justification was in essence a justification of the conviction amongst the whites that they,

20. De Gruchy, JW 1979. *The church struggle in South Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip, 101.

their culture and religion, were superior to non-white people and their cultures and religion. The same attitude with which the first European colonisers, especially the English and the Dutch, settled in South Africa, was thus, after three hundred years, still continued in the DRC.²¹

Very little attention was therefore given to the meaning of unity in the teaching and preaching of the church. The lack of contact with people from other cultures in the church also meant that people had no experience of the meaningfulness of unity. The unity of the DRC-family of churches was thus totally irrelevant to the leaders and consequently to the members of the DRC. The church could and should have been the meeting place of people from different cultures (and languages) were church members could have experienced the meaningfulness of the Christian unity.

The unity of the DRC-family of churches will only become relevant to the members of the DRC after so many years of considering this unity as totally irrelevant, if they are convinced that such a unity is and can be meaningful and experienced as meaningful.²² The members have to understand that the demand for unity set by Christ has been raised up (become relevant) to the existence of the DRC at this stage of its history. This understanding can only be cultivated if the members can be convinced that church unity is not only a demand but can be meaningful to their Christian experience.²³

To remain relevant, the church in every age has, as already pointed out, to “re-focus” in order to be relevant to the demands of every time. Refocusing on the unity of the church in the present South Africa where divisions and separation because of colour, culture or language, has almost disappeared completely from society, is thus of vital importance to the DRC. Given what is happening in Model C schools in the country at present, it gives reason to believe that any institution can turn multi-cultural. Must the schools educate the church in this regard?

Having elaborated on the unity required and the relevancy of such unity for the DRC, it is now necessary to consider the developments needed in the DRC for the future relevancy of the church in the South African society.

3. Future developments in the DRC needed to accommodate the unity of the DRC-family

In a time of transition it is to be expected that, in adapting to its new situation, the church will have to change at different levels. Development and change is a sign of life in the church. If no development takes place, it is an indication that the church has become a fossil. All that remains the same is death. Therefore, if the church is still alive in the midst of society, it will develop and consequently change as a certain sign of life within itself. This is in particular relevant to the DRC, facing a totally new way of existence should it unite with the other churches of the DRC-family. Let us therefore look at different levels at which the DRC will have to develop and change to accommodate the unity of the DRC-family and be relevant in future.

21. Elpich, Richard & Giliomee, Hermann 1979. The structure of European domination at the Cape, 1652-1820 in Elphick & Giliomee, *The shaping of South African Society, 1652 –1820*. Cape Town: Longman Penguin Southern Africa.

22. See Gerrit Brand on the concept relevance in the context of criteria in Western Theology in his: *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost. In Search of Theological Criteria with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (Peter Lang 2002).

23. In this article I will refer to the restoration of the unity of the DRC instead of using the concept of church unification. The rationale behind this viewpoint, will be explained in the development of the theme.

Development at the socio-political level

I put the development of the church at the social-political level first because it is at this level where the real relevancy of the church will be measured. For many decades the DRC was one of the most influential socio-political institution in the South African society. As such, it had a decisive significant influence on political issues in South Africa. So for example its influence regarding the justification of apartheid from the Bible and therefore gaining support for the political system, its influence on the educational system, its influence on public issues like gambling, censure and Sunday perseverance.

This social function and political influence has gradually faded out and the DRC at present finds itself in a position where it has to redevelop and thus redefine its place and function in society. Future developments in the DRC after its unity has been restored, will thus, first of all, imply a totally new understanding of its own existence and thus of its place and function in society. The church will have to make a switch of paradigm – from a paradigm of power to a paradigm of service.

The influence of the DRC at a socio-political level will be determined by the DRC-family and not by the DRC alone. Only when the DRC-family will speak as one voice will the DRC-family become relevant again at a socio-political level. As long as the DRC still bears the stigma of a church for white Afrikaners, as it still bears in the black community, its influence will continue to diminish. If, however, the DRC will restore its unity, it could become one of the most creative institutions in the South African society as a whole. The DRC-family of churches has penetrated deeply into the white, black and coloured societies. If they become one, their mutual influence in the society can be of vital importance to South Africa as a whole.

In order to achieve to be a creative institution in society, a development at various other levels of the church's existence will also have to take place. Let us now look at some other levels.

Development at the socio-economic level

The reality of the South African society was, and to a large extent still is, that members of the DRC were economically the privileged. For many decades the DRC enjoyed the economic wealth of its members and was able to build up extensive administrative structures and fairly luxurious accommodation for the different departments of its activities. Since 1994 these privileges started to fade out and at present it seems that the DRC has to cut down its administration and activities to a survival level.

But in comparison to the other churches of the DRC-family the DRC still is a wealthy church. If the restoration of the unity would take place, a sharing of the economic burdens of the different churches will be inevitable. It is to be expected that the DRC will have to make considerable sacrifices in this regard.

Development of accommodating structures

It is to be expected that a change of structures within the church in order to accommodate the challenges of a united church, will be inevitable. Such a change of structures might even imply a radical restructuring of the church as a religious institution. So, for instance, the structuring of its worship services and liturgy will have to be radically changed in order to accommodate the pluriformity of the language and cultural diversity of a united church.

Until now the worship and liturgy in the DRC were based on a strong pietistic Calvinistic mode. In recent years enormous developments have already taken place in the DRC. Organisationally (the way church councils are in some cases functioning) and

liturgically (the way worship services have changed), the church has, in fact, become strange to many of its older members. Sadly enough, this development has taken place for the sake of its own members only and not in order to accommodate people from other cultures and languages. The danger of turning more spiritual but not becoming more flexible in order to accommodate people of all cultures can be a real hindrance on the way towards unity.

Development at the level of theological reflection

It seems as if at the theological level, there is a movement in the “dry bones” of DRC theology. For many years after the well-known Du Plessis case at the Theological Seminary (Die Kweekskool) in Stellenbosch, theology in the DRC stagnated.²⁴ No theologian dared to step out of the traditional evangelical Calvinistic mode of theology. At present there is a “rattling of the bones” to be heard amongst younger pastors and theologians. Whether these “bones” will be covered by “flesh and blood” of an African nature and the rattling of the “bones” will become a chorus of theologians starting speaking out loud in a new theological language, remains to be heard.

One of the areas in which almost no development took place in DRC theology, is its encounter with African Christian Theology. For too long in DRC theological circles, African theology was considered as theology that shouldn't be taken seriously as it was not considered to be “pure” Christian theology. DRC theology has thus to a large extent, remained “white theology”, orientated mainly on the European theological tradition.²⁵ It was theology that could have been written in any other Western context of the world. This attitude can be ascribed to the fact that Western theology was considered the only legitimate theology and that all other theologies were not important enough to take notice of. Very little of African theology has thus rubbed off on DRC theology.

Development at a spiritual level

It is especially in the spirituality of the DRC that a development seems to be taking place at present. This development is away from the staunch Reformed spirituality towards a much more vital and charismatic spirituality. One of the reasons for this development may be the fact that the hundreds, if not thousands, of DRC members flocked to the so-called Independent charismatic churches. These members became dissatisfied with the Afrikaner civil religion that gradually took hold of the DRC after the Du Plessis-case at the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch. From then on the DRC became more and more a church that supported the political and cultural desires of the Afrikaners only. Many of the DRC members, after apartheid seemed to have been an unchristian system, were thus in search of a “purely spiritual” church that would only concentrate on the spiritual needs of its members of whatever colour, culture or creed.

The development of a new spirituality in the DRC is inevitable if the unity of the DRC would be restored. Reformed spirituality in a Western context cannot be accepted as the only spirituality possible in a Reformed church. Here too cultural influences have a bearing on the way of expressing spirituality. In a church accommodating various cultures and languages new ways of liturgy and worship will have to be found. Much more study and research will have to be done on Reformed spirituality and specifically African Reformed spirituality. It will be the challenge to a united Dutch Reformed Church to find new ways of

24. See Kinghorn, Johann 1986. *Vormende Faktore in Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, edited by Johann Kinghorn. Johannesburg: MacMillan, 55-58.

25. See Gerrit Brand, *A fabulous Ghost*, 25.

spirituality for believers from different cultural backgrounds who belong to the same church.

Development at a credibility level

What does the credibility of the church imply? Jonker defines it as “the trustworthiness, the indubitable integrity of the church as messenger of the Kingdom of God”.²⁶ From this understanding of the credibility of the church, Jonker states that “more than anything else, the credibility of the church hinges on the quality of its love”. And the quality of its love is determined by its unity. Where there is love, there will and must be unity.

Gerrit Brand argues that the word “credibility” can have both epistemic and moral overtones. A moral judgement, he argues, will appear credible to the extent that it is consistent with all our other moral judgements. And our moral judgements “may appear incredible or implausible if it has implications that clash with our system of values”.²⁷ In this regard, the moral judgement of the DRC on the unity of the DRC-family is of decisive relevance. If the church feels no moral obligation to restore the unity of the church by arguing that creating separate ethnic churches was and still is morally justifiable, if the unity of the church will be determined only by a majority vote of its members without the members of the church being made aware of the moral obligation of the church to restore its unity, there is little hope that such unity will come about.

Credibility and relevance are, in fact, closely related in the existence of any church. When a church loses its credibility, its relevance vanishes. Whatever the leaders of the DRC may say and the members may believe, the fact is that especially over the past fifty years, the DRC lost its credibility as a church in the black community. The church was “simply modelled along the lines of society in general, rather than being a prophetic witness in society”.²⁸ In the minds of many black South Africans, the DRC had therefore become an institution of and for Afrikaners. And as a church it was so closely associated with the Nationalist Party government that it was, in fact, difficult to think and talk about the DRC in any other way than as a bulwark of Afrikaner culture and politics.

Credibility of the DRC regarding its confession of apartheid as a sin

In confessing that apartheid was a sin and a heresy the DRC never spelled out what wrongs of apartheid they considered sinful. Did the church confess that its justification of apartheid was a sin or did it confess that apartheid as such in all its ramifications was sinful? This can be considered the reason why the DRC’s confession was considered with suspicion in the black community. The confession thus did not cancel the DRC’s lost of credibility. The admission was, rightly or wrongly, considered as a forced admission, not out of conviction but because of the heat and pressure of the change in the political development in the country. It was conspicuous that political developments forced the DRC to admit that apartheid was wrong and not a development in its own moral judgement on apartheid. This was confirmed by the critical stance the DRC took to the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation and its initial refusal to witness before this Commission.

In this regard it is necessary to point out that the credibility of the DRC was also at stake when the church confessed that apartheid was a sin, without consequently admitting that the founding of ethnic churches was a fruit of apartheid as a sin. If the confession was

26. WD Jonker, “The Credibility of the Church”, *Missionalia*, vol. 7, 3, (1979), 114.

27. Gerrit Brand, *Speaking of a fabulous Ghost*, 45.

28. WA Saayman, *Unity and Mission*, 123 (University of South Africa, Pretoria 1984).

done with the realization of its full implications, it would have implied that the existence of these churches would have immediately been brought to an end. The fact that the DRC continued to acknowledge these churches as separate churches indicates that the DRC admitted that apartheid was a sin but not its own actions committed from its support of apartheid. One may indeed ask whether the confession of the DRC was for real and not only to meet the political requirements of the coming new political dispensation. To indicate that its confession was trustworthy, the church should have immediately dealt with the fruits of its own apartheid-actions regarding the constituting of ethnic churches. It would have been at least some sort of proof of the trustworthiness of its confession.

Credibility of the DRC regarding its mission work

The DRC has also lost its credibility in its missionary work. The church continues to be strongly aware of a missionary obligation. In recent years a strong new wave of missionary enthusiasm has developed in many DRC congregations. Congregations at present have sent missionaries to at least eighteen countries outside Africa and nine countries in Africa. This new wave is "unashamedly international, with DRC missionaries now working in places that would have been inconceivable only a few years ago"²⁹ (such as Holland, Belgium, France and Portugal). But "it is a contradiction in terms to confess a strong missionary obligation and enthusiasm while not expressing at the same time an equally strong commitment to unity"³⁰.

In some cases, DRC congregations are sending missionaries to far away countries without being aware of the needs of the Uniting Reformed congregations in their own vicinity and to show any willingness to meet their needs. In the congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) to which I belong in Pretoria, there is a desperate need for a youth pastor to take care of hundreds of young blacks moving into the inner city of Pretoria. Not ten kilometres from our church is a DRC congregation that supports more than thirty missionaries in overseas countries. To them, providing a youth pastor for a URCSA congregation near to them is not exciting (romantic?) enough. The churches of the DRC-family have reason to doubt the credibility of the church's motivation for its mission work.

Credibility of the DRC's ecumenical desire

Since the church confessed that apartheid was a sin, the DRC expressed its desire to be part again of the national and international community of churches. At present it is finding its way back to the broader community of the churches. It is necessary to look at the different ecumenical bodies to which the DRC has a desire to return. I mention the following ecumenical bodies:

The South African Council of Churches (SACC)

The DRC broke its membership with the South African Council of Churches (SACC) almost fifty years ago because it accused the Council of meddling in politics. Because the SACC was opposing apartheid, the DRC considered it improper to be part of a body opposing government policy, believing that the DRC was not politically involved. This

29. See PF Smit, Saayman, WA, Kritzinger, JNJ 2002. *Riding a New Wave? A new mission awakening in the Dutch Reformed Church*. Paper read by Kritzinger at a symposium on present challenges to the DRC in the light of the past, March 2002. For an excellent overview of three waves of missionary enthusiasm in the DRC, this article provides very useful and relevant information.

30. WA Saayman, *Unity and Mission*, 124.

made the DRC an outsider in the churches' struggle for justice in South Africa. The sad story of the DRC opposing and accusing the SACC of co-operating with Communists and terrorists to bring a Christian government to a fall still has still to be written.³¹

If the SACC may decide at its next annual national conference to accept the DRC unconditionally as a full member, it will be to the detriment of the unity of the churches in the DRC-family. This might lead the DRC to consider that the restoration of its unity with the DRC-family is not of any urgency. It seems as if the churches of the SACC do not yet understand the importance of a restoration of the unity to the churches of the DRC family. When the DRC applied for observer status in the Council in 1991, some voices were raised for the Council to request the DRC to first unite with the other churches of its family and then become a member of the Council as a united church. The plea was not understood. The argument was that the Council should draw the DRC into its ranks and then put pressure on the DRC to restore its unity. Since then ten years have passed but very little has come of the pressure and the unity of the DRC has not yet been restored. The SACC is not really helpful in assisting to unite the DRC family. It will once again fail to assist the DRC in its failure to restore its unity.

The World Council of Churches (WCC)

The desire of the DRC to become a member of the (WCC) again after it broke its relationship with the Council as a result of the outcome of the Cottesloe Consultation in 1960, is an indication that the DRC considers its return to the Ecumenical arena as important. Nowhere, however, have I read any confession by the DRC of how it scolded the WCC the same way it did the SACC. And yet, without any confession, the DRC has requested a return to the WCC. One needs to be thankful that the trend in the DRC has changed in such a way that it again desires to be part of the world community of churches. How the DRC justifies its desire to return to the ecumenical fold without first being united with its own family churches is difficult to understand. Unless the WCC makes it a prerequisite that the DRC first has to restore its unity before it can be accepted as a full member of the WCC again, there will be no urgency for restoring its unity. The realisation of the unity of the DRC- family can thus be further delayed.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)

The WARC has already restored the DRC's membership after it left the Alliance in 1982. As far as I know, the matter of the unity of the DRC family of churches was not discussed at the meeting of WARC where the DRC was re-admitted. The unity of the DRC family of churches was probably not taken into consideration when the decision was taken to re-admit the church. It seems as if the issue of the DRC unity that was of crucial importance to the WARC twenty years ago, has lost its importance. It may be that a new generation of church leaders in the WARC, as well as in the other ecumenical bodies, accept that the change to a democracy in South Africa is of such importance that they need not be concerned about the DRC unity anymore. Is the DRC thus using and benefiting from the political change in South Africa that came about without the cooperation of the DRC?

The reality of the present DRC family of churches is that it still is a divided family. How strange that the DRC desires to restore its unity with the churches inside and outside

31. JW De Gruchy gave an excellent overview of this struggle in his *The church struggle in South Africa* (1979). The full story on the role of the DRC during the years of the struggle, especially during the 1980s, still needs to be written.

South Africa but still seems hesitant to restore the unity within its own family ranks. Perhaps it is necessary to say to the DRC: Unity begins at home!

Relevance of unity for the DRC at present

After we have looked at the developments that will need to take place at different levels of the DRC's existence, it is now necessary to look at the relevancy of the unity of the DRC-family for its presence in a new democratic South Africa. This relevance is determined by the question whether the DRC has really become part of the new democratic dispensation. As it is at present, the DRC has remained part of the old colonialist-racist South Africa. As long as the DRC-family of churches is still divided along ethnic lines, there is no reason whatsoever to claim that the DRC has rejected apartheid. The restoration of its unity continues to be the acid test of the church's stand on apartheid. As long as the unity of the DRC had not yet been restored, the credibility of the DRC will continue to be in jeopardy.

The churches of the DRC-family will not be able to solve this problem for the DRC. The DRC will have to sort it out on its own. I thus repeat my conviction that the member churches should therefore not be involved in finding a way with these problems. It may only delay and complicate the process of restoring the original unity. The probability that the four churches involved in the present attempts to unify the churches, seems very dull. I'm therefore convinced that when the DRC has solved the problems regarding the restoration of its unity in its own ranks, it can approach the other churches of the DRC-family and ask them to return to the DRC from which they were excluded for almost one and a half century. For the sake of their own integrity these churches should then be willing to return to the DRC-fold. After the unity had thus been restored, the churches, being one church again, will have to sort out the problems that may occur in their existence as one church.

What should have happened after 1994 was that from all institutions, including the churches, it should have been expected to purify their structures from any remnants of apartheid, just as it was expected from and accepted by schools, universities, sports clubs, hospitals and other institutions to be open to all peoples of the country. The same expectation should also have been expected from the churches. I see no reason why churches accepted that they could still continue as before and to repair the apartheid structure in their own time. The restoration of the unity amongst the ethnic churches should thus have been implemented as indication that also the DRC has accepted the new dispensation and was willing to officially do away with any separation of people in the DRC-family. This would have sent out an enormous message to all people in the country.

The South African society had been invested with racism since its earliest history. Colonization was nothing other than brutal racism implemented in a way that will forever be regarded as a disgrace in the history of the Western world. Whatever reasons could be produced to justify colonialism, today we know that it was a shame, just as slavery was.

Our attitude to the wrongs of our past can and never must be that we had no part in it and therefore we feel no guilt over what our ancestors did. We, as their descendents, have to mourn the fact that there was such a time in history and to thank God that such a time has passed and will (hopefully) never return or be repeated. Mourning our own history will make us much more humble as Westerners in South Africa. And if we become humble, we will become instruments to root out all the remaining vestiges of racism in the church and in our society.

4. Conclusion

In a Research Report by the Institute For Justice and Reconciliation, published in June 2001, on the conceptual framework of the different ethnic groups in South Africa on reconciliation, it was found that most South Africans are hopeful about the future. The Report states in conclusion: "Important issues face the country, and many of these issues divide South Africans by race. But at the end of the day, most seem committed to a multi-racial South Africa, and many hold attitudes compatible with a harmonious future for the country. Few would have predicted such findings a decade ago."³²

If this conclusion seems to be the scenario for the immediate future of South Africa, there is indeed hope for the country and all its inhabitants. The question is whether the DRC will be part of this "harmonious future" and what contribution will it make towards such a future. As long as the DRC will be dragging its feet towards the restoration of its unity, it will remain on the sideline of rebuilding a new non-racial democratic South Africa. By restoring its original unity the DRC can and will make an enormous contribution, not only to the South African society but even more important, towards restoring its credibility after so many years of having been a shame to the Christian church as a whole.

South Africa is still in the throes of a fierce struggle for a new identity. The majority (77 percent) belong to Christianity. If the DRC wants the Christian faith to be imbedded into a new identity, it will have to make this faith credible. Credibility of the church is linked with its faithfulness to the Gospel, even when its message may offend to many of its members and go against the grain of their natural being. It is indeed disgusting when the church preaches a Gospel that does not inflict wounds on anybody. The temptation of being acceptable to its members often causes the church to compromise some of the essential requirements of the Gospel. This is the challenge presently facing the DRC on its way towards restoring its unity.

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32. Gibson, James L, and MacDonald, Helen 2001. "Truth – Yes, Reconciliation – Maybe: South Africans Judge the Truth and Reconciliation Process." Research Report, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Rondebosch.

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