

**THE ROAD OF UNITY IN THE FAMILY OF
DUTCH REFORMED CHURCHES IN
SOUTH AFRICA SINCE 1994:
A DUTCH REFORMED PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This paper is about the view of the Dutch Reformed Church on the ground covered in the process of unity between the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches from 1994 to January 2003. Most probably some of the other churches will have different views on some of the matters mentioned in this paper. The paper is an attempt to describe the road travelled from official documents of the DRC, much of which was also brought before councils of the other churches for their approval. Some of the information also comes from official documents of the other churches. Other information comes from personal knowledge through official involvement in the process since 1994 and also from the interpretation that some other people gave of the relationship between the members of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches. May this attempt to draw a map of the ground covered help us to chart the route for tomorrow and the days after.

1. The Road since 1994

- 1.1 In April 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. However not all the congregations of the DRCA went along with this unification. This would prove to be a major stumbling block for the realisation of church unity.
- 1.2 In August 1994 the executive committees of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church reaffirmed their commitment to visible Church unity as soon as possible and that a suitable structure for this unity must be found. They confirmed that both churches had the three Formulas of Unity as Confessional basis and that the URCSA had a fourth confession of faith namely the Belhar Confession. The Dutch Reformed Church was asked to consider the possibility of accepting the Belhar Confession in principle. They also affirmed their intention that a Church Order based on Scriptural Principles must be written for the envisaged new denomination taking the two existing Church orders as point of departure.
- 1.3 At its meeting in October 1994 the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (1994) noted with pleasure the recent developments in the unity discussions and expressed its earnest desire to work together with the other members of the Dutch Reformed family in the forming of one denomination on the basis of an approved Church Order. Synod also expressed its desire to co-operate in the appointment of a joint commission between the churches to start working on a draft Church Order for the new denomination. Synod asked the joint commission to pay attention to

amongst other, the following matters: the standards of faith, liturgical formulas and practices, hymn books and the order of worship services, pastoral needs of the members, practical implications and functioning of the denomination, transition regulations, property, administrative and financial arrangements, the constitution of a founding synod, synodical regulations and other matters that may be referred to it. The Dutch Reformed Church also undertook to consult with its members on at least three occasions with regard to the proposed Church Order before the General Synod will finally decide on becoming part of the new denomination (Handelinge Algemene Sinode, 1994).

- 1.4 In November 1994 the first meeting of delegates from the three churches, the DRC, the URCSA and the RCA took place where they agreed to the forming of a Joint Committee (JC) in which the three churches would cooperate in the writing of a draft Church Order for the one denomination of Dutch Reformed Churches.
- 1.5 On 7 March 1995 the first meeting of the Joint Commission was held in Pretoria. The Rev Appolos from the URCSA asked that the Committee achieve clarity on a few principle issues before subcommissions start working on the Church Order. From the side of the DRC it was argued that it must be borne in mind that all three the Churches are Reformed Churches and as such already have a basis of agreement, therefore work on a draft Church Order can start. All issues will surface as work on the Church Order progresses. Some issues will be easier to solve, others will be more difficult. At this meeting it was decided that Subcommission One must attend to the name, basis and extent of the new denomination. In its first rapport it must pay attention to especially three issues (i) All available material on the model for a new denomination must be brought together and assessed; (ii) the views of all three the churches on the confession of Belhar must be gathered and assessed and (iii) the Laudium-declaration of the RCA must be made available to the members and assessed (Minutes of the first meeting of the Joint Commission, Pretoria, 7 March 1995).
- 1.6 On 26 March 1996 a second meeting of the Joint Commission was held at Belhar on the Cape Flats. Sub commission one gave rapport on a possible model/structure and confessional basis for the new denomination. With regard to local congregations the commission proposed: (I) If they chose so local congregations could remain as they are with the following provisos (a) that their worship services and membership are open; (b) that local congregations come together on a regular base to give visibility to their unity; (c) that mutual service be rendered to one another and that responsibility for one another be accepted across the boundaries of congregations and (d) that the congregations will do their organised service and witness in and for the world in which they live together and in unity. With regard to presbyteries the sub commission proposed that (a) neighbouring congregations be grouped into presbyteries; (b) that the grouping be done in consultation with the congregations and (c) ministry requirements and language can (must) be taken into account for the grouping of the congregations. Where congregations so choose they can, on these grounds, ask to be grouped with another presbytery. No proposals were made with regard to synods since the committee could not reach agreement.

On the Confession of Belhar the URCSA undertook to make available a document on the background of the Belhar Confession to the other two churches for distribution together with the request that it be accepted as part of the confessional base of the proposed united church. As point of departure sub commission one proposed that the Confession of Belhar (1986) be part of the confessional corpus of the new church but that it not be enforced on members. Some members of the Joint Commission had reservations with regard to this decision (Minutes of the Joint Commission, 26 March 1996, Belhar).

- 1.7 In October 1996 a decision by the General Synodical Commission of the URCSA on the unity process was taken and presented in a letter to the Dutch Reformed Church on 25 October. 1. The General Synodical Commission of the URCSA confirms that structural unity is of cardinal importance. On grounds of the Holy Scripture the General Synodical Committee is of opinion that this unity must be so visible that the world can see and believe that Christ is the Lord to whom His followers are obedient. All the negotiations up to now therefore confirm the seriousness of the URCSA for church unity.” 2. “The General Synodical Committee is of opinion that the current negotiations on Church unity has come to a standstill with regard to the Confession of Belhar. It is therefore necessary to once again confirm that the Confession of Belhar is non-negotiable as a confessional standard for the united church.” 3. “The General Synodical Commission views the unconditional acceptance of the Confession of Belhar by the Dutch Reformed Church as a non-negotiable condition for any further discussion on church unity. The URCSA looks forward yearningly for the DRC to accept this Scripturally based confession and to walk the road to church unity together with the URCSA in obedience to the Lord of the church” (Letter to the Dutch Reformed Church from the URCSA, 25 October 1996).
- 1.8 The Synod of the URCSA in April 1997 decided that the talks in the Joint Commission should continue but that eventually the acceptance of the Belhar Confession is non-negotiable (Handelinge Algemene Sinode NG Kerk, 1998, p. 18).
- 1.9 On 7 April 1997 the General Synodical Commission of the DRC requested the General Synod of the URCSA for more time to allow the Dutch Reformed Church to take a decision in accordance with its Church Order and in a manner which will make provision for the assemblies of the DRC to give comment on the position of the Confession of Belhar in the DRC. On 20 February 1998 the DRC-magazine, the Kerkbode published full particulars about the Confession of Belhar requesting members and church assemblies to study the Confession and give their comment. The comment was received and the conclusion was that many members and assemblies of the DRC are of opinion that the Confession of Belhar is in essence not in contradiction with Scripture and the Three Formulas of Unity. However for the biggest majority of members and assemblies of the DRC who reacted to the enquiry, the reply was that the Confession of Belhar was not acceptable as a standard of faith in the proposed new denomination (Addendum Agenda, Algemene Sinode NGK 1998, p. 40-41; Handelinge Algemene Sinode 1998, 423; Besluiteregister, 18.3, Handelinge 516).

- 1.10 The Dutch Reformed Church General Synod of 1998 *inter alia* confirmed the results of the comments received on the Confession of Belhar but also reconfirmed its commitment to bring about one denomination for the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches, together with the other members of the Family, expressing its frustration with the slow pace at which the unity process has thus far developed and asking that the Joint Commission be extended to also include the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. Synod also decided that should issues around a confession seem to be an unbridgeable stumbling block earnest attention must be paid to alternative structures to realize one denomination. Synod also affirmed that the process regarding church unity must occur in accordance with the Church Order at least as far as the Dutch Reformed Church is concerned. The DRC also confirmed its recognition of the congregations of both the URCSA and the DRCA and requested the two churches to try and reconcile as soon as possible. Synod also noted that every local church council should have a say in the creating of a new denomination, the General Synodical Commission was also given the task to conduct the process of church unity in close liaison with church councils, presbyteries and synods (Besluite Register, 10.2, *Handelinge Algemene Sinode 1998*, p. 516).
- 1.11 In a pastoral letter to the Moderamen of the DRC the World Alliance of Reformed Churches wrote the following about the DRC and Apartheid: “Because the very nature of forced separation of people of differing races denies the fundamental biblical teaching that all humanity is equally created in the image of God, teaching so central to the Christian faith that it cannot be denied by Christians without denying their Christian commitment, we still seek an official resolution from the DRC rejection of *apartheid*. The proposed joint resolution, if approved by the DRC, would meet that last requirement” (*Agenda Algemene Sinode 1998*, 42).
- After consultation with the General Secretary of the WARC, an address by him to the General Synod (and thorough discussion) the joint resolution with the WARC was taken by Synod in which it is stated unequivocally: “The DRC assures the churches of the Alliance that it rejects apartheid as wrong and sinful, not simply in its effects and operations but also in its fundamental nature” (*Handelinge Algemene Sinode, 1998, 509*).
- This was the end of a long road that the DRC had travelled with the WARC since 1982. With the decision the right to full participation of the DRC in the WARC was restored. But even more than this, the resolution marked a very important moment in the history of the DRC. A door on the past was closed, a decision was taken that will most certainly have a profound effect on the future relationships between the members of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches and also on the position of the DRC in South Africa as well as in a world-wide context. With the decision the DRC has taken the responsibility on itself to ensure that it materializes from its future deeds and actions.
- 1.12 In the meantime an Appeal Court case between the URCSA and the DRCA was heard in November 1998. The case had its origin in the decision of the Synod of the DRCA in July 1991 to unite structurally with the DRMCSA. With a view to this, important changes and additions were made to the Church Order for the DRCA and very important decisions were taken. On 14 April 1994 a founding synod was accepted and a new Church Order of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern

Africa was held in Belhar. However from the very beginning local congregations in the Orange Free State and in Phororo (the Northern Cape) were dissatisfied with the changes made to the Church Order and the proposed union. After various attempts to solve the problem the DRCA in the Orange Free State on 27 September 1995 went ahead with the meeting of a regional synod. On 26 February 1996 the URCSA brought a request before the High Court of the Free State requesting a Court order (i) that the DRCA and DRMC united legally in April 1994 to form the URCSA; (ii) that the DRCA no longer existed; (iii) that all rights, privileges, properties, assets and liabilities of the corporate persons of the DRCA went over to corresponding corporate persons in the URCSA, and (iv) that the regional synod of the Orange Free State had no legal competence to conduct any legally valid acts on behalf of the previous DRCA in the Free State. The High Court of the Orange Free State granted the request whereupon the DRCA appealed to the Appeal Court.

The appeal was heard on 6 November 1998 and a verdict given by a full bench of judges on 27 November 1998. The court found that that the General Synod of the DRCA acted beyond its competency in July 1991 from which follows that the decision to unite with the DRMCSA as well as all the related decisions were *ultra vires*. The court therefore found that the High Court of the Orange Free State wrongly declared in 1996 that the DRCA no longer existed, that all rights etc. of the corporate persons of the DRCA went over to the corresponding corporate persons of the URCSA and that the regional synod of the DRCA in the Orange Free State had no legal competence. The court made no finding on the request that the URCSA was founded legally because this issue was not brought before the court in the documents that were served before the court (Appeal Court Case, November 1998).

The effect of the Appeal Court case was that the continued existence of the DRCA was confirmed as well as the ownership of all the properties, rights, assets and liabilities registered in its name. Unfortunately this also had the very bad effect that the relationship between the DRCA and the URCSA became severely strained. Hardly any discussions between the two Churches can take place and according to a press report of Wednesday 16 June 1999, there are 32 court cases pending between congregations of the two churches (*Die Burger*, 16 June 1999). Furthermore the URCSA is not prepared to allow the DRCSA to join the Joint Commission of the Family of DR Churches on Church unity. Although the DRC has had bilateral discussions with all the members of the Family in South Africa in the past two months, thus far a date for a meeting between all four moderators of the churches could not be found.

- 1.13 Without fear of contradiction it can on the one hand be said that by the end of 1998 the members of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches had come a long way on the road to church unity. The Dutch Reformed Church had committed itself to one denomination for the Family of Churches (Church and Society, 1990, 33 (par 236)); discussions with a view to unity had taken place between three of the members, i.e. the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in Africa and the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa and there were also bilateral discussions between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa mainly on the longing of the DRCA to join the unity talks. On the other hand all was not going that well. The ongoing discussion between the DRC, the RCA and the URCSA had just about come to a standstill and there was great tension between the

Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa as a result of the ruling in the Appeal Court Case. More than thirty court cases were pending.

- 1.14 The years between 1998 and January 2003 were dominated by the question whether the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa can be allowed as a member of the Joint Commission and so, as a member of the Family, become part of the unity process. At the Synod of October 2002 we read the following in the Agenda and Acts of the General Synod of the DRC as a record of events concerning the process of unity between 1998 and 2002.
 - 1.14.1 In March 1999 the General Synodical Commission of the DRC issued a statement declaring with regret that the process of church unity between all the members of the Family has not progressed much up to that point as a result of various factors. The Committee once again points out that the DRC is committed to church unity with the other members of the Family and the Committee will look for ways and means to solve the current impasse. The Committee also points out to congregations that the Synod of 1998 decided that every Dutch Reformed Church council will have a say in the establishment of the new denomination. Dutch Reformed congregations, presbyteries and synods are also called upon to reach out in love to corresponding bodies and actions like youth and women's actions in the other churches in order to in order to build the unity between the churches (Agenda General Synod, 2002, 379).
 - 1.14.2 In November 1999 the General Synodical Commission of the DRC called upon all the members of the Family to treat one another in a spirit of evangelical magnanimity, sensitivity, introspection and forgiveness. And the DRC undertakes to also try and always act in such a spirit (Agenda General Synod, 2002, 379).
 - 1.14.3 At its meeting of May 2000 the General Synodical Commission decides to propose that Sub Commission 7 of the Joint Commission once again be called together to see whether the unity process cannot be restarted. The meeting of the Sub Commission can, for the time being, be without the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa in order to discuss the request of the Dutch reformed Church in Africa to become part of the unity process. At the same time the General Synodical Commission stated that it is of great importance that the DRCA be treated with great sensitivity (Agenda General Synod, 2003, 379-380). The reason for this most probably being that there was mistrust from the side of the DRCA towards the DRC that the DRC did not present its case adequately. At the same meeting of May 2002 the Committee approved of the following practical guidelines for the implementation of church unity:
 - unity in confession is a necessary prerequisite for church unity;
 - a theological and church orderly correct way of handling church unity is very necessary;
 - the General Synod as a body, where all the congregations are not present, cannot unilaterally decide on church unity;
 - there must be a continuous reflection on what correct theological and church orderly way there is for the implementation of church unity.

- lessons from the past must not be forgotten, i.e. the role that the Council of Dutch reformed Churches played in the establishment of the General Synod in 1962.
- 1.14.4 In a bilateral discussion between the DRC and the URCSA in May 2000 the DRC proposed that Sub Commission 7 be called together. Unfortunately this would only realize on 7 May 2001.
 - 1.14.5 At a bilateral discussion between the DRCA and the DRCA on 14 September 2000 it was proposed by the DRC that the DRCA write a letter requesting to be permitted to the unity discussions between the other members of the Family. The DRCA reluctantly agreed to this request because it felt that it was a member of the Family and as such did not have to ask for permission to join the discussions.
 - 1.14.6 The discussions between the DRC and the URCSA at the meeting of 7 May 2001 were mainly about the application of the DRCA to become a member of the process. The URCSA put it that they were not against the DRCA becoming part of the process but that the URCSA and the DRCA had to sort out the problems between them. The DRC urged both churches to urgently work on the problems between them so that the process of unity could proceed. At the meeting of 7 May 2001 a few misunderstandings could be dealt with (Agenda Algemene Sinode, 2002, 380).
 - 1.14.7 After the meeting of 7 May the General Synodical Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church recommended to the URCSA and the DRCA that they make use of a arbiter or a facilitator to help them sort out their relationship. Through mediation of the Moderamen of the DRC in the Free State both the URCSA and the DRCA agreed to the former Appeal Court judge, Jan Eksteen, to arbitrate in the more than 40 pending court cases between the URCSA and the DRCA. It was also agreed that the Rev Mochubi Lebone from the DRCA and the Rev James Buys from the URCSA would assist Mr. Eksteen in the process of arbitration. The first meeting of the arbitration committee took place in Bloemfontein in November 2001. Unfortunately already at this meeting no agreement could be found on the parameters for the arbitration. The attempt at abritration thereby came to an end (Agenda Algemene Sinode, 2002, 380).
 - 1.14.8 On 3 December 2001 a bilateral discussion between the DRC and the DRCA took place at Kroonstad. At this meeting the following was agreed upon:
 - i. The DRCA must inform the DRC as soon as possible, preferably early in 2002, whether they first want to have a further discussion with the DRC before the DRC goes ahead with plans to call a meeting of the Joint Commission;
 - ii. A meeting of the Joint Commission should be called before May 2002 and that the DRCA must be invited as observer to this meeting;
 - iii. The first matter on the agenda of this meeting must be the question of the participation of the DRCA. If they were accepted their delegation must immediately take up their seats;
 - iv. Should the DRCA not be allowed to participate the DRC would also not, in accordance with its mandate from the General Synod (1998), be able to further participate in the meeting. The General Synodical Committee would then be obliged to rapport to General Synod that the unity process in its current form could not be continued and that a new initiative would have to start probably in the form of a convent that would be called and to which all four the members would be invited as full participants;

- v. After an exploratory discussion between Prof Pieter Potgieter, chairman of the Synodical Commission of the DRC and the Rev James Buys, chairman of the Synodical Commission of the URCSA the four churches involved were requested to declare in writing that each saw itself compelled to see the other members of the Family as reformed churches, to recognize the offices and legitimization of the other three churches of the Family and that as a church it was still fully committed to the unity of the Family Agenda Algemene Sinode, 2002, 380);
 - vi. In May 2002 the Synodical Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church answered the questions as follows: The DRC accepts the other three churches of the Family as reformed churches; The DRC accepts the offices and legitimization of the other three churches given the fact that a candidate for the ministry in the DRC must comply with the minimum requirements that the DRC lays down for its own candidates. Thirdly the DRC assured the other members of the Family that it remains committed to church unity (Agenda Algemene Sinode, 2002, 380). The following answer was received from the DRCA: the DRCA is absolutely committed to the principle of church unity. They are of opinion that their sincerity is proven by their attempts to be allowed to the Joint Commission. Trying to be allowed would make no sense if they were not absolutely committed. On the question of the recognition of the other three churches as reformed churches the DRCA points out that it is no problem for them. There is no decision of the General Synod of the DRCA through which it can be doubted that the DRCA recognizes the URCSA as a church in its own right; the DRCA has never doubted the existence of the DRCA, not even in the court case between them. On the fact whether the URCSA is a reformed church the DRCA has never expressed an opinion or taken a decision. The DRCA however has a problem with the recognition of the offices and the legitimisation of the URCSA. According to the DRCA legitimisation is closely connected to a confession of faith and this brings about a big difference between the DRCA and the URCSA. Out of conviction the URCSA accepted the Confession of Belhar and that brought about a division between the DRCA and the URCSA. The DRCA does not accept the Belhar Confession and says that by accepting the Belhar Confession the URCSA seceded from the DRCA. The DRCA accepts the legitimization of those churches which belong to the Federal Council of Churches. Lastly the DRCA expresses its desire to be part of the discussions on church unity. Should the application of the DRCA to join the discussions be unsuccessful they wish to meet the whole Joint Commission and go into discussion with them. (Letter received from the DRCA). From their answer it was clear that the DRCA could not unconditionally answer on the three questions that were put to them. This created problems for the unity process. The executive committee of the Synodical Commission was given the task of bilateral discussions with the DRCA to discuss the whole matter. From the bilateral discussions it became clear that the problems were not unbridgeable it also became clear that a discussion between all the parties involved was very necessary.
- 1.14.9 At the meeting of the Synodical Commission of the DRC on 6 May 2002 a group of about 35 ministers and church council members of the URCSA from the Free State demonstrated in front of the building where the DRC Synodical Commission

met. They did this without the consent of the Synodical Commission of the URCSA. In reply to the petition of the demonstrators the Synodical Commission subscribed to the importance of church unity; declared that they share in aspiring for church unity because it is an imperative from Scripture; undertook to work for church unity together with the other members of the Family. The Synodical Commission also noted that it took cognisance of the fact that the demonstrators acted in their personal capacity without any official sanction from the URCSA. The Synodical Commission also stressed the fact that in its endeavours to reach church unity the sensitivity of the process must be borne in mind together with open discussion and mutual consultation (Agenda Algemene Sinode, 2002, 381).

- 1.14.10 On Friday 11 October 2002, two days before the opening of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, a meeting of the Joint Committee of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC, the URCSA and the RCA) and representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Dr Setri Njomi (General Secretary of the WARC and chairman of the meeting), Dr Herbert Ehnes, Dr Bukelwa Hans and Rev Majaha Nhliziyo) was held in the Manhattan Hotel in Pretoria. The hotel was chosen to provide for a neutral setting. The chairman noted that he experienced a willingness from all the churches to unite. He also declared that the WARC was available to facilitate the process. Each church had an opportunity to explain its position on the uniting process. Some very valuable insights came to light which can be read in the report of that meeting which served at the General Synod of the DRC. The URCSA stated that the churches, which meet the criteria posed by Sub Commission 7, should be represented on the Joint Commission. The criteria are those mentioned earlier in this paper. After the chairman summarized the different viewpoints of participants the representatives of the WARC left the meeting for the members of the Joint Commission to discuss their differences. After a very intense debate on whether the DRCA should be allowed into the Joint Commission or not, the whole unity process nearly came to a complete standstill, even dissolution, before the following decision was taken "The official reaction of the four churches on the above-mentioned three criteria, will be submitted to the three moderators of the member churches constituting the JC (Joint Commission). If and when the moderators find that the three criteria are complied with adequately by all members, the DRCA will become a member of the JC. If the three moderators disagree, the matter will be referred to the JC to resolve (Report, 11 October 2002).
- 1.14.11 At the meeting of the General Synod, 13 October 2002 and following days, the following proposals were brought before Synod in an addendum report of the General Synodical Commission: (i) Synod reconfirms its intention and commitment to one denomination for the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches. (ii) Synod expresses its deepest disappointment over the fact that up to this date, eight years after the decision of the General Synod of 1994, very little progress has been made with church unity. (iii) Synod instructs the General Synodical Commission to organize a convent on general level in which the URCSA, the DRCA and the RCA must all be involved; (iv) requests such a convent to identify key issues and key steps for the attainment of one denomination and to initiate a process by the members of the convent. (v) refer all other proposals regarding a convent to the proposed convent (General Synod, 2002, Addendum Report Synodical Commission A16, 1). All of these proposals were accepted unanimously by Synod.

1.14.12 On 27 and 28 January 2003 the moderatures of the four churches met at the Orchards Conference Centre in Johannesburg. At this meeting some conditions for and fears of church unity were discussed. Each church also had the opportunity to air its views regarding the three questions that were put to them. After intense discussions the meeting realized that it could not go forward before deciding on the membership of the DRCA in the Joint Commission. The members of the DRCA left the meeting and the minutes report that a prolonged discussion took place after which it was noted that the JC received a letter in which the DRCA requested membership of the JC. On this the following decision was taken: (i) it is decided to admit the DRCA to the Joint Commission. (ii) The meeting notes that at the moment the DRCA has not responded positively to the second question due to standing articles in their Church Order. (iii) The meeting also notes that it is the intention of the DRCA to discuss the whole matter at its coming General Synod. The meeting expressed its hope that the whole matter will be turned around satisfactorily so that the next phase of the unity process could commence. (iv) The meeting then also decided to recommend to the four churches that a convent between them be formed that will take over the role and function of the current Joint Commission. Furthermore it was also decided to call a convent from 28 to 30 August 2003. With a view to this a task team was appointed to decide on the place for the convent, appointment of a commission to draw up rules for the convent and to seek for a sponsor for the convent. It was also decided to place the following items on the agenda of the convent: (i) The Confession of Belhar; (ii) a Model for Church unity; (iii) The name of the new denomination; (iv) Rules for the convent.

2. The road ahead

- 2.1 Without fear of contradiction it can be said that since 1994 the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches has come a long way on the road to church unity. It was not always an easy way on the contrary it quite often was very frustrating. But today it can be stated that in spite of all the frustration much has been achieved – at least as far as the Dutch Reformed Church is concerned. A level has been reached where, despite the fact that some problems still exist, all the churches of the Family in South Africa are involved and are positively committed to church unity.
- 2.2 There are still many points that have to be discussed and on which consensus has to be reached, but there is a commitment for church unity and where there is a will there is certainly also a way.
- 2.3 For the road ahead there are certain matters that will have to be borne in mind. Matters such as:
 - i. The Scriptural and theological basis of church unity will have to be confirmed. Church unity must be achieved because of sound Scriptural and theological reasons and not because of ideological reasons.
 - ii. The confessional basis of a new denomination must also be confirmed by everybody involved beforehand and stated as such beforehand in a proposed church order.
 - iii. The church orderly road to church unity and the creating of a structure for the new denomination must be treated very carefully and everybody involved must know clearly beforehand what the new denomination will be about before final decisions

are taken. The experiences of other churches in this regard are very valuable and must be noted.

- iv. The members of the Family will also have to commit themselves mutually to one another in trust and reconciliation, both at the level of church councils (locally, in presbyteries, synods and on the level of General Synods) as well as on the level of the ordinary members. We all will have to know and also tell one another that we accept each other in our commitments and viewpoints and also in our confession of the sins of the past. Church unity will not be achieved if there are still hidden agendas and distrust towards one another.
- v. The experiences of other churches also teach us that it will be very valuable if an estimate of costs involved for church unity can be made beforehand so that each church may know what its responsibility will be and so that, if necessary, certain alignments can be made in time.
- vi. Clear agreements beforehand on theological training, legitimization and ordination will also be very necessary.
- vii. In similar vein agreements beforehand on properties, pension funds salaries etc. will also be imperative. The experience of churches that have gone through this exercise before also tell us that if there are not agreements beforehand it could lead to a lot of distrust and animosity afterwards which is very harmful to the new denomination.

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show where the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches stood nine years or so ago and where they are today regarding church unity. The forming of one denomination for the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa, as an expression of the unity of the church of Christ, is not impossible and will be a tremendous opportunity for a Christian witness in South Africa. We have come a long way and much has been achieved. Where the process had just about come to a standstill during this time and also at times threatened to disintegrate, it is really a joy to be able to say that it is again underway – perhaps now really for the first time. Much thanks must be given to God. In the next months and years the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa need anew to listen to the Word of God and needs to remain steadfast in its mutual commitment. This will require that all the members cooperate and reach out to one another in love, hope, trust and mutual acceptance in co-operation to establish their common identity in Christ and to find the most suitable form in which to do it.

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