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PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM



Addressing racism in church and society

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

We greet you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2: 4-10 we read the following about who we are in Christ:

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

At our Executive meeting 21-22 January 2016 we discussed the issue of racism and how it affects us all. We talked about racism in our church and in society. We pondered about what we as church and Christians should do. We realized that many were asking when do they hear a word from the leadership in URCSA?

Our response to the complex issue of racism is a long response. To some of you it might be too long, others may say it is not extensive enough. This is not the first or the last word by URCSA on this burning issue.

1. Racism is sin and we as church are not spared this sin. In different ways we as children of God and faith community are struggling to address racism, we struggle with the effects of racism, we are perpetuating racism prejudices and practices and therefor as church we cannot point fingers to others in society when it comes to racism.

So before we start addressing racism in society, we need to talk with ourselves and be honest. As URCSA we experience on a daily basis that members of our church are practicing racism. They are not practicing a lesser racism than others. We need to acknowledge and confess that we as church is not an example of a non-racist church. We can try and convince the world that we are a church in which people of differences races, cultures and language groups are one. The fact that at some places people of races are worshipping together does not mean it is happening everywhere. The reality is that we are part of a race divided society in Southern Africa in which racism is well and alive. We have to confess that we are not doing enough to address racism constructively and that we do not help one another to combat this destructive sin. The only way to address a problem is first to acknowledging the problem. We may differ about the nature of the problem, the extend of the problem and the way to address it, but it all starts by confessing that we are also guilty of the sin of racism.

2. **How should we as Christians respond to the escalating conflict caused by racism in church and society?**

We do not think that we should join the blame game and point fingers at one another or others. The whole racism debate is an emotional debate because it hurts people. People are angry and while in anger say, write and do things that we later may regret. We think that we should start to constructively engage with one another and find a way and process to get to a long term solution. In responding to racism we need to start with who we are? Black, White, Coloured, Indian, Asian, Mixed decent, Human or Christian? As members of URCSA we are part of a confessing church. In our confessions and especially the Belhar Confession we confess our identity and calling. Let us help one another to start with the questions: **Let us start with ourselves and ask who we are. Who are we as Christians? With what kind of theology do we face racism?**

3. **Our identity. Based in God or race?**

We could start with Genesis 1 in which we state that there are only one humanity and that we are all made in the image of God. The creation stories do not know of different races.

Different groups along culture, political and language lines developed in history but as Christians we look at these differences in a different way:

We would like to take you to Ephesians 2:11-22 (NIV) where we read that we are a new creation through Christ.

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)- 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.**

17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

In the **Belhar Confession Article 1** we confess the following:

We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

Our point of departure is God, the triune God who in his grace made us part of a community. This mean that we have received a particular identity from God that will determine how we will react to racism.

As a church we confess (Belhar article 2) that we are a community (We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the **entire human family**) in which "*Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;*"

Our departure in addressing racism is not in the differences of people and races, but in the unity of God.

4. Our identity. Living reconciliation so that the world may believe

We as church are challenged by Article 2 of the Belhar Confession to **live the unity and reconciliation** although we acknowledge the brokenness of the church, society and humanity:

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

These words of the Belhar Confession really speak to us in our own times.

Many people caught up in the racism situation of our society are Christians. The racial division of the church (not only in URCSA but also in other churches) is not helping us to constructively address racism. The unity of the church at all levels is an integral part of how we can address racism. Let us lament the fact that we still have a long way to go before we are one.

5. Our identity. Preaching and embodying reconciliation in a world of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity

As a church and faith community we have something special to offer the world. **God has entrusted us with the message and good news of reconciliation. God entrusted us not only to preach reconciliation but also to be reconciliation.**

Article 3 of the Belhar Confession reminds us that *credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed* if we do not address the racism issue.

We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the Church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world that the Church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

that God by his lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity that God, by his lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

It is wonderful that when we start embody this gospel and “**live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world**” we can make a difference! We confess that as church we are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Is it true? We are grateful that there are places where Christians across race lines have succeeded in opening new possibilities of life for society and the world. Please continue to do so.

6. Reconciliation and justice are inseparable. A compassionate justice

Sisters and brothers, the damage done by racism should never be overlooked or negated by a cheap reconciliation. As Christians we are called to a compassionate justice in which we deal with the realities but in a compassionate way. God shows his compassion for those in need and at the receiving end of injustices. In the same way we as church should have compassion with those suffering because of racism. That is where we should stand. Reconciliation is never cheap. For any reconciliation to last, we need justice.

It helps to read again article 4 of the Belhar Confession and to remind ourselves about our role as church.

We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this; that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right;

that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

Racism functions at various level. It can be on a personal level but it can also be institutionalized and entrenched in systems. Undoing the effects of racism needs the addressing of institutionalized racism.

7. The only option is total obedience to Christ

As Christians we like to do things because it suits us. Those things that does not suit us, we neglect. As children of God we do not have the luxury to choose whether we would like to be involved against racism. We should be involved and not on our own terms. The Belhar Confession spells out the basic points of departure from which we should get involved. It challenges us to set an example or to embody how a non-racism society should look like. Obedience to Jesus Christ is the bottom-line. Not obedience to my own race, culture, language or social economic position.

Let us be reminded again by article 5 of the Belhar Confession:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

8. Constructive engagement.

Given our points of departure, we as faith community need to engage constructively with the issue of racism on different levels. In this part of the pastoral letter we would like share with you how we think about the way forward.

A **hermeneutical approach** to racism should be followed so that people may understand:

- the dynamics of society and church that created and perpetuate racism;
- the teachings of Scripture about human dignity;
- the teachings of Christ who came to be our peace and to destroy the barriers between people, and
- The role of the church as a healing community in society.

People who understand can make plans together to constructively engage with racism.

In dealing with racism we need to acknowledge that a programme alone will not solve the problems but rather a **process** in which we are involved. People do not change overnight. It takes time and it takes work.

We will have to start with things like:

- Academic and theological modules at universities and Seminaries to address racism;
- Research and publications on the topic;
- Short courses, workshops and retreats for ministers and other church leaders;
- Events and opportunities at congregational level;
- Developing and proving teaching material for children and adults

9. ARNSA: Anti-Racism Network South Africa and 14-21 March 2016

In November 2015 the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Achmed Kathrada Foundation launched the ARNSA and URCSA was presented at the launching.

The week of **14-21 March 2016** has been identified as our first **Anti-Racism week** in South Africa. We request churches to reach out to other churches and organizations and to start planning events for that week. Local congregations need to take the lead. Do not let political parties take over this important week.

- Ask yourselves how can you start the conversation about racism?
- How can we share our hurtful stories but also stories of hope?
- How can we start at local level a process of embodying reconciliation and justice?
- How can we arrange marches and events to show that we are part of the solution?
- How can we on Sunday 20 March (Palm Sunday) in our worship services bring people of races together and celebrate our common human dignity?

This is what we can start with in the very near future. This is an opportunity that the Church should grab with both hands. Let us not let this opportunity pass.

10. Long-term solutions

In addressing racism URCSA has already embarked on long term solutions and we really hope that in this year we will get things going. Our lack of capacity frustrates us that we have not been able to do more. We ask all in URCSA to assist us in the way forward. Get involved and help us make a difference.

10.1 Season Human Dignity

URCSA has engaged with the DRC family on the issue of racism and together we have agreed to start and developed a **Season Human Dignity**.

Together we will reflect and discern how we in South Africa are going to be obedient to Jesus in the coming years. The magnitude to which people's God-given human dignity is denied, stands in stark contrast to the demands of the Gospel. We want to testify together of a life in which these four values function very strongly: **respect, listening, embracing, and selfless love**. We are convinced that practicing these values will bring about new habits of human dignity. The Season of Human Dignity will span over several years and will continue until God guides us otherwise. We hope to later also include other churches and start a national movement from within the church. Our goal with this is to testify to the new life in Christ in which the intrinsic value that God gives to each person is guaranteed.

Structures

1. The Season of Human Dignity (SHD) has a Management Team consisting of members of the four churches. The Management Team receives its mandate from the Synodical Boards of the four General Synods. The Management Team reports to each of these synods. Dr Dawid Kuyler has been appointed as manager consultant for the SHD

2. The Season also has a Task Team. The regional synods of the four churches each appoint a synodical representative in the Task Team.
3. The Management Team is responsible for the business matters of the Season and final decision-making lies with them. The Task Team, together with the Management Team, focuses on product development and is responsible for establishing and leading a Season Task Team in each synodical area. Synods with overlapping areas form joint task teams.

Process

How does the process of the Season work?

1. Every church council, presbytery, synod and church member should accept responsibility and do as God guides them. You may preach, organise conferences, lead local discussions, establish groups, or reflect on the values of the Season and the implications thereof.
2. The task teams in the different synodical areas will launch initiatives such as conferences, awareness events, and the distribution of products.
3. Products: The Management Team, in collaboration with the Task Team, develops products such as theological books, liturgical suggestions, music, and small-group discussion models. Congregation leaders are requested to use these products in congregations, presbyteries and synods.

Reflections and dialogue

The Season is a space in which reflections and dialogue about human dignity is promoted. There are many issues which require our attention. The Task Team has, however, identified eight themes for now: **gender, sexuality, racism, poverty, disability, health, ecology and education and training**.

For each of these themes, Circles of Discernment will be established for profound reflection on each particular issue. From these reflections “products” could be developed to assist believers to proceed with their own discernment on a particular issue.

If you would like to become part of such a Circle, contact your synodical representative or e-mail your name and chosen theme to our office.

Information

1. Please contact your synodical representative if you would like to obtain more information.
2. Our website is a very important source of information: <http://humandignity.co.za> or <http://menswaardigheid.co.za>.
3. **Chris van Wyk** (acv.vanwyk@gmail.com) is the webmaster. Feel free to e-mail any information or contributions you would like to make to the website to him.
4. We also have a Facebook page. At the search function, type in the words “Menswaardigheid/Human Dignity”. Please “Like” the page so that you will be able to see all further information posted there. **Hanzline Davids** is responsible for the Facebook page. You can contact him via e-mail at revhanzlinedavids@gmail.com.
5. The administration of the Season is the responsibility of **Salomi Steenkamp**. You can contact her via e-mail at admin@humandignity.co.za or admin@menswaardigheid.co.za.

10.2 Churches Addressing Racism

URCSA initiated a programme to address racism that will be operating under the auspices of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. At a meeting of the leadership of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church in February 2014 racism was identified as the elephant in the room that is a stumbling block on the way to unity, reconciliation and justice. In the statement that was issued after the meeting, the following was stated:

Recognizing the destructive power of racism so embedded in all our communities, we resolve to jointly develop and implement a program for our churches to help us all to address this challenge in a way that will bring us closer together and enhance the healing we so long for.

This programme was approved by URCSA General Synodical Commission of 2104.

We are in the process to get the programme established and funded. Both URCSA and the DRC have allocated some funds for this program. It will be housed with the Beyers Naude Institute at Stellenbosch.

Some background of the programme:

In the declaration by the WCC Conference on Racism in 2010 the following was said about racism as a sin:

Racism, caste-based discrimination, and other exclusionary practices are inherently sinful because, on several levels, they subvert the double commandment: ‘to love God and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 20:37-39)’. These exclusionary practices are expressions of self-deification on the part of those who practice them and, thereby, violate the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3) that states that we can have no other gods before the One True God, who creates, redeems, and sustains all, including us and those we consider as “them”. These forms of discrimination deny the biblical witness of Genesis 1:26-27, which affirms that the human being is created in the image of God. These harmful exclusionary practices belie the reality that the socially constructed divisions we devise to separate ourselves from each other have no place in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Racism, caste-based discrimination, and other forms of discrimination foster hatred and violence – the very antithesis of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and a negation of our faith in God who gave us life and sent his son to ensure life for all, in all its abundance (John 10:10).

These sinful practices of dehumanizing exclusion are governed by a denial of the blessedness of the rich diversity within the creation itself, where each kind of living thing was named and pronounced “good” (Genesis 1). Diversity within the good creation is a reflection of the value of diversity within the very life of the triune God, who creates, preserves, and loves in freedom and abundance. The biblical witness enjoins us to celebrate the blessedness of diversity as a gift (Romans 12) designed to bless the churches and the communities which

they serve. Wherever and whenever we reject these instances of God's fecundity and abundance, we deny the very nature of the God we claim to profess.¹

1. Proposed Solution

One of the institutions in society that can and must address racism is the church as a faith community.

The WCC Conference on Racism in 2010 also declared the following about the church's role:

We note and celebrate the various ways in which some of our churches have been working diligently not only to challenge diverse forms of discrimination, but have also initiated programs designed to promote greater understanding and acceptance across multicultural and religious lines. However, the churches have not done as much as they should in addressing racial and other exclusionary practices within their own ranks. This is a state of affairs which cannot continue if the churches are to have any credibility in their claim to be the Body of Christ. Because the very nature of racial and other forms of discrimination entails levels of economic, social, and political marginalization which create profound suffering and life-long hardship, our local and national churches cannot continue to ignore this nightmarish reality in which men, women, and children of God are condemned to live. The entire Body of Christ has a prophetic task to denounce by word and deed all forms and expressions of existence which constrain the reality of the abundant life which God offered to us in Jesus Christ. Our failure to do so constitutes disobedience to the God we endeavor to serve through faithful discipleship.²

2. Goals

1. Assisting the church at different levels of her existence to acknowledge the presence of racism in the church and society on personal and institutionalized level
2. Assisting the church to understand the consequences of racism in and for the church
3. Acknowledging the lack of focused programs to address racism in church and society
4. Equip and empower theological students and ministers to constructively deal with racism in their own lives as well as in their ministries
5. Provide the church with resources
6. Provide the church with research
7. Fulfilling a prophetic role in speaking out against racism

3. Action plan

1. Developing a program to address racism that includes knowledge and understanding of:
 - Dynamics of a society and the process how racism develops and is perpetuated
 - Human psychology and internalization of racism

¹ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/racism/statement-from-the-wcc-conference-on-racism-today>

² <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/racism/statement-from-the-wcc-conference-on-racism-today>

- Scriptural understanding of human dignity
 - The church as a healing community of unity and diversity
2. Partnerships with an academic institution(s) to ensure that the program can:
 - Be academically recognized and research can be done to support the program
 - Be part (compulsory) of all theological students' curriculums.
 3. Establish a partnership with churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in South Africa to make it a joint program that supports the goal of the WCRC for communion and justice.
 4. Develop short courses and material for ministers and their congregations.
 5. Facilitate racial integration in churches
 6. Develop instruction material for use in Sunday school and catechism

As you can see we think as church we should constructively involve ourselves on the long-term since we believe there are no quick fixes to the complex issue of racism. We need you to commit yourselves to this process and the various programmes.

11. A Word of caution

As Moderamen we would like to caution the public and political leaders not to fuel racism with irresponsible statements or actions or use the race issue for political gain. Simple and populistic solutions will not solve the problem.

We are shocked by the level of aggression and the deep rooted naked racism that we see in the media. We believe we are in a very sensitive situation that could explode if we do not manage it well. Inflammatory speeches and posts on social media is not helping us. Violence is not the way to solve racism. It will only aggravate it. We urge all to find together a solution. Being part of those seeking a lasting solution might not be popular but it is the right thing to do.

12. Word of encouragement

We would like to conclude this pastoral letter with passage from Scripture while we request you to be in prayer that the church and the people of Southern Africa will find a solution.

In Philippians 2:1-4 we are reminded:

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

We are grateful for every member of URCSA who is embodying reconciliation and striving to live a life free from racism. May God bless you and use you and your stories to give hope.

Thank you for taking your time to read through this long pastoral letter. We pray that it will also give to some guidance. We would also like to welcome suggestions from you.

Blessings in Christ on behalf of URCSA Moderamen

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. A. Kuyler".

Dr Dawid Kuyler

Scribe: General Synod

Vision: A Committed and United Church in service of unity, reconciliation and justice to all people through Christ