

The role of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in the struggle for justice in South Africa, 1986-1990

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Abstract

A great deal happened in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) family of churches between the adoption of the Belhar Confession in 1986 and the Rustenburg Conference in November 1990. This paper uses the notion of “the church as a site of struggle” to identify three trajectories in the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church with reference to involvement by their members in the struggle for justice in South Africa. A seven-dimensional praxis matrix is used to explore one of those trajectories, namely: “Standing for justice.” The sources used for this exploration are mainly official church documents.

Introduction

This paper² examines the ways in which members of the Dutch Reformed in Africa (DRCA) and Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) – who were at the receiving end of apartheid – were actively involved in the struggle for justice in the period 1986-1990. A limited paper like this cannot give a detailed description of the two churches and the activities of all their members, due to the complexity of the political situation, the diversity *within* the two churches and the differences *between* them. It is only possible to identify major trends in the period 1986-1990.

To address this topic, I use a “praxis matrix”³ that asks the following questions: Who were involved? (= agency); What did they think was going on? (= contextual understanding); How did they view the church? (= ecclesial scrutiny); How did theology inform and shape them? (= interpreting the tradition); What did they actually do? (= discernment for action); Did they learn from their experiences? (= reflexivity); How did they experience God’s presence? (spirituality). By means of this praxis matrix I explore the integral connection and constant interplay between statement and story, confession and conduct, prayer and protest.

The primary sources used are the official publications in that period of (mainly) the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), DRCA, DRMC and Belydende Kring [“the Confessing Circle”]. Those written sources were supplemented by interviews and personal recollections. I identify three trajectories of praxis in relation to justice that were evident in the DRCA and DRMC at the time, but due to the constraints of space I analyse only one of the trajectories, namely: “Standing for justice”⁴

Three trajectories in relation to justice

The struggle for justice in the DRMC and the DRCA in the years 1986 to 1990 was directed against the apartheid policy of the state, against the economic policies of big business and against a racist way of life imposed on the whole society by the white minority community. In the DRCA and DRMC there was also a struggle against the theology and practices of the DRC, since those were still the ideological underpinnings for state policies and practices. It was true that the 1986 General Synod of the DRC approved the *Kerk en Samelewing* [“Church and Society”] report, in which apartheid was no longer supported theologically, but called an “error”.⁵ That represented a significant theological and ideological shift in DRC policy, but unfortunately did not mean the end of apartheid in the everyday life of most DRC congregations.⁶ It also did not mean widespread enthusiasm or support in DRC congregations for the reunification of the DRC “family” of churches.

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² This is a revised version of a paper presented to the conference entitled *The Reformed churches in South Africa and the struggle for justice. Remembering 1960-1990*, which was hosted by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch on 14-16 May 2012.

³ This “praxis matrix” is explained in Kritzinger, JNJ & Saayman, W. 2011. *David J. Bosch: prophetic integrity, cruciform praxis*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

⁴ I acknowledge the helpful comments of Dr RW Nel and Prof WA Saayman on an earlier version of this paper.

⁵ DRC. 1986. *Church and society. a testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church*. Bloemfontein: NG Sendingpers, p.47.

⁶ The “conditional” confession by the DRC of its complicity in the political system of apartheid also weakened the credibility of its statement: “To the extent that the church and its members are involved in this, it confesses its participation with humility and sorrow” (DRC. 1986. *Church and Society*, p.48).

The vision that informed and motivated DRCA and DRMC congregations to take part in the struggle for justice in South Africa is expressed in Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar, which says that the church – belonging to God – must “stand where God stands”. The church therefore has a double calling: compassionate solidarity (“stand by people in any form of suffering and need”) and courageous prophecy (“witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others”).

Many ministers, members and congregations of the DRCA and DRMC were not embodying this justice vision of the Belhar Confession, while those who were committed to do this, acted in a variety of ways and often with different motives. In order to construct some order in this variety, I identify a few major trajectories and then focus on only one of them. As a framework for this I use the concept of “the church as a site of struggle”, which was developed in the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in the 1980s. I am thinking particularly of an ICT conference on the theme, “The white Christian community as a site of struggle”, in June 1989, in which we used the following diagram to analyse the churches’ position and involvement in terms of the political realities of the time.⁷

Prophetic	Centre	Conservative
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In identifying these trajectories, however, I follow the advice of Dirkie Smit (2007[1986]) to name my constructs in terms of the dominant religious symbol characterising each of these ways of relating to the struggle for justice.⁸

Standing for justice (working for transformation)	Being God’s church; (working for reconciliation)	Preserving the status quo (preventing transformation)
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This framework is helpful to present different forms of praxis in the DRMC and DRCA between 1986 and 1990, but I need to emphasise that map is not territory. These are constructs that simplify the situation “on the ground” and do not claim (in a naïvely realist way) to represent the situation “exactly as it was”. They also do not represent hermetically sealed approaches. On the other hand these are not mere theoretical constructs created 25 years later at a desk. There were real contestations between these types of praxis in the late 1980s and there were real power struggles going on within these churches. Our two churches were not only involved (to some extent) in the struggle for justice “out there”, they were themselves terrains of struggle, sometimes even battlegrounds. There were also specific internal justice issues being struggled over *between* the two churches (like the legal issues involved in the unification process), but also *within* the two churches, like the position of women and their election to the offices of elder and minister.

This paper cannot do justice to all these complexities, but perhaps my framework may be helpful for further explorations of this fraught, yet fascinating, period of South African history. For the sake of space, I focus in this paper on only one of the three trajectories, namely: “Standing for justice”

Standing for justice

Agency (Who?)

Which members of the DRMC and DRCA were actively involved in this trajectory in 1986-1990? In the DRCA it was ministers and members who, mainly during their university studies, made an epistemological and ideological shift from the catechism lessons they had learnt in their home congregations or the theology they had been taught at Stofberg Gedenkskool (1908-1959) and its ethnic offshoots after 1960 (Turffloep, Lefika, Dingaanstat, Decoligny). In the DRMC it was ministers and members who were consciously and actively embodying the vision of the Belhar Confession and had been shaped by struggle politics at the University of the Western Cape.

These ministers were working predominantly in urban areas, because in rural areas most DRCA and DRMC congregations were more dependent financially on the DRC. Ministers in those contexts were more inhibited and refrained from making a public commitment to justice. When a DRMC or DRCA minister became known as someone who supported trade unions, attended UDF meetings or belonged to the Belydende Kring, they were often intimidated by DRC ministers and mission committees with threats of the withdrawal of their

⁷ See ICT. 1989. Report on ICT workshop: The white Christian community as a site of struggle, 2-4 June 1989, Lumko Institute, Germiston (unpublished document).

⁸ Smit, DJ. 2007[1986]. Symbols of reconciliation and ideological conflict in South Africa, in *Essays in public theology. Collected Essays 1* by DJ Smith. Stellenbosch: SUN Press: 287-307.

subsidies.⁹ In some cases ministers in this trajectory went ahead and cut the financial umbilical cord that had bound them to the DRC. Such moves were sometimes unpopular among church council members, since they then faced a problem when their “radical” minister had accepted a call to another congregation and they had to “crawl back” to the DRC to negotiate a subsidy to call a new minister. However, there were many church councils who fully supported their ministers for taking such a stand, and they survived through the financial support they received from the *Noodfonds* [emergency fund] of the Belydende Kring¹⁰ or by allowing their minister to find other employment and become a “tent-making” minister.¹¹

One key factor in the shift towards a justice trajectory was the influence of student politics on university campuses, particularly at Turfloop (University of the North) and Bellville (University of the Western Cape). Theological students got drawn into protest politics on those campuses and were forced to rethink their theology in the light of the challenges they faced.

Another key factor was the Belydende Kring (BK). It was a ministers’ fraternal established in 1974 to unite ministers of the DRMC, DRCA and (later also) RCA in a commitment to unity, reconciliation and justice.¹² Its aims were:

- To proclaim the Kingship of Jesus Christ over all areas in church and in state, and to witness for his Kingly rule.
- To achieve organic church unity and to express it practically in all areas of life.
- To take seriously the prophetic task of the church with regard to the oppressive structures and laws in our land and to take seriously the priestly task of the church with respect to the victims and fear-possessed oppressors who suffer as a result of the unchristian policy and practice in the land.
- To let the kingly rule of Christ triumph over the ideology of apartheid or any other ideology, so that a more human way of life may be striven for.
- To promote evangelical liberation from unrighteousness, dehumanisation and lovelessness in church and state, and to work for true reconciliation among all people.
- To support ecumenical movements that promote the kingship of Christ on all levels of life.¹³

One important contribution of the BK was the fact that it became a “broker” in arranging scholarships for DRCA and DRMC ministers to do postgraduate studies in theology at institutions abroad, mainly in the Netherlands. This enabled black South African ministers to develop a transformative Reformed theology that could “beat the DRC at its own game”, as it was sometimes said informally. It allowed them to overcome the narrow theological formation they had received from DRC missionaries and lecturers and to sharpen their theological skills for the struggle against injustice. Allan Boesak was one of the first DRMC ministers to study in Kampen¹⁴ and his role was pivotal in the BK and in the development of a “Black and Reformed” theology in South Africa.¹⁵

The BK started in 1974 as a group of black ministers, but by 1979 white ministers of the DRMC, DRCA and RCA, who did not see themselves as DRC missionaries and identified with the aims of the BK could also join. The names of Frikkie Conradie, Beyers Naudé, Roelf Meyer, Jan de Waal, Gerrie Lubbe, Johan Retief, Pieter Fourie, Willem Saayman and Nico Smith, among others, could be mentioned in this regard.

⁹ It was impossible to hide such involvement in the struggle for justice, even in dense populated urban areas, because many DRC members (and church council members) served in the police force and NSMS security structures, so they were fully informed of what the leaders of the opposition movements were saying and doing.

¹⁰ The BK established this fund (with overseas financial support) to assist congregations whose subsidies from DRC funding bodies had been reduced or discontinued.

¹¹ A tent-making ministry means that a minister engages in another occupation to earn an income if a congregation cannot support him/her fully. Different safeguards were built into this arrangement when the DRMC, DRCA and RCA approved it, to ensure that the quality of ministry in a congregation does not suffer.

¹² For more information on the BK, see Kritzing, JNJ. 2010. Celebrating communal authorship, p. 214-216; Van Rooi, Leslie. 2008. To obey or disobey? The relationship between church and state during the years of apartheid: Historical lessons from the activities of the Belydende Kring (1974-1990). *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXIV (No. 1), 173-191.

¹³ Belydende Kring. 1988. Statement. *Dunamis* (No.1), p.16. These aims were formulated in 1974 at the inaugural meeting of the BK, originally in Afrikaans.

¹⁴ The Theologiese Hogeschool Kampen (which later became the Theologiese Universiteit Kampen and then the Protestantse Theologiese Universiteit) and the Free University of Amsterdam were the institutions where most BK members studied in the Netherlands. Allan Boesak had been recommended (in the late 1960s) by Johan Heyns to the University of Stellenbosch for postgraduate studies, but the Faculty of Theology turned down his application. For detail on all the South African students who studied at Kampen, see Van Oel, Menno. 2011. *De wereld in huis. Buitenlandse theologiëstudenten in Kampen, 1970-2011*. Kampen: PThU, especially chapters 1 and 2 (pp.19-72).

¹⁵ See, for example, Boesak, A. 1984. *Black and Reformed*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.

From 1983, when the BK changed its name from *NG Predikante Broederkring* ["Circle of Brothers or Fraternal"] to *Belydende Kring*, women members and other "lay" members of the three churches also started joining the organisation,¹⁶ which involved a broader range of actors in this Reformed initiative for justice.

Contextual understanding (What was going on?)

The contextual understanding of this trajectory was that the South African situation was deeply unjust and therefore in need of radical transformation. The BK aims quoted above speak of "oppressive structures and laws" and of "unrighteousness, dehumanisation and lovelessness in church and state" that are part of "the ideology of apartheid." In an analysis of apartheid society that was widely shared in this trajectory, five "legislative pillars" were identified: The Population Registration Act (1950), the Land Acts (1913, 1936), the Group Areas Act (1950), the Homeland Citizenship Act (1970), and two influx control acts: the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act (1945) and the Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Act (1982).¹⁷ Apartheid was therefore seen as an ideology and oppressive system enshrined in societal structures and laws that controlled every aspect of the lives of black people. At the same time this system instilled fear in the minds of the oppressors, so that everyone in society was negatively affected, thus needing "evangelical liberation" into "a more humane way of living."¹⁸ Beyers Naudé also referred to the urgency of removing the "main legal pillars of apartheid" in his presentation to the 1990 Rustenburg Conference.¹⁹ This contextual understanding included a structural ethic, which gave attention to power and justice issues in the broad field of political, economic and social systems.

The DRMC gave significant insight into the nature of the apartheid system by pointing out that its point of departure was the irreconcilability of people²⁰ and the insistence that people who were defined as racially and culturally different from each other should be kept separate as much as possible. The Synod said:

[T]he apartheid policy ... is in conflict with the gospel ... because – in direct opposition to the gospel of Christ which is aimed at the reconciliation of human beings with God *and* neighbour – the enforced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour is essentially based on the conviction that people who are separated in such a way are fundamental irreconcilable.²¹

In the view of the DRMC (since 1982), this represented a heretical view of human nature and society, which was a fundamental denial of the efficacy of God's work of reconciliation in Christ.

Discernment for action (What did they actually do?)

The kinds of actions engaged in by DRCA and DRMC ministers and members who were trying to live Article 4 of the Belhar Confession were not spectacular, but they embodied the double focus of Article 4: to stand *with* those who are wronged and to stand *against* those who oppress and exploit.

Standing with those who are wronged (compassionate solidarity)

First and foremost the DRCA and DRMC members in this trajectory created a community of solidarity among those who were being wronged by the apartheid system. There is a danger that one could interpret Article 4 of the Belhar Confession as if it addressed the comfortable and "non-wronged" of society to "go and stand *over there* with the wronged". But Article 4 is not primarily addressed to "outsiders", it firstly calls on oppressed and wronged Christians to hear the good news that God is standing with them in their plight – and to receive that presence of God by faith as a gift of grace, which then unites and mobilises them to work for justice. From this flows a radical freedom to undermine and defy unjust societal attitudes and structures, and to spread that good news by "going and standing with" others who are suffering even more or who have recently experienced a specific disaster. This totally unspectacular work of preaching, teaching and pastoral care in black communities,

¹⁶ See Kritzinger, JNJ. 1984. From Broederkring to Belydende Kring. What's in a name? in *Unity and justice: the witness of the Belydende Kring* edited by SP Govender. Braamfontein: Belydende Kring, pp.5-12.

¹⁷ See Palos, J. 1982. "The problem of present polarization between whites and blacks," in ICT: Polarization in South Africa between black and white. Report at the La Verna Conference for the launch of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians in Southern Africa (EAATSA). Braamfontein: ICT, pp.4-10.

¹⁸ Belydende Kring. 1988. *Statement*, p.16.

¹⁹ Naudé, CFB. 1991. The role of the church in a changing South Africa, in *The road to Rustenburg: the church looking forward to a new South Africa* edited by L Alberts and F Chikane. Cape Town: Struik, pp. 220-231.

²⁰ This theme of irreconcilability was publicly formulated for the first time at the 1978 DRMC Synod. It is also implicit in Article 3 of the Confession of Belhar (on reconciliation): "God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity."

²¹ NGSK. 1978. *Handelinge van die twee-en-twintigste vergadering van die hoogerwaardige sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika op 20 September to 4 Oktober 1978*. Kaapstad: NG Sendingkerk, pp.400-401.

who were daily experiencing the injustices and indignities of apartheid, was perhaps the most significant way in which ministers of the gospel “stood where God stood” in South Africa from 1986 to 1990.

Conferences, workshops and Bible studies organised by the BK, for example, brought together ministers and members of the racially divided “daughter churches” of the DRC family in a way that was unacceptable and unpredictable in the political climate of the time. In this process the BK helped to build a theologically well-equipped leadership corps spanning the divides between these churches and communities. At the same time, warm and lasting friendships developed across the deep racial divides of apartheid society. In that sense the BK was hugely influential in the eventual unification of the DRMC and DRCA.²² Without such a “critical mass” of dedicated friends and colleagues, who became leaders in both churches, there would have been neither the common ground nor the trust needed to negotiate and establish the United Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). The BK contributed to it by building the intellectual leadership for such a convergent and unifying movement. It is important to add that this community of interpretation and commitment was not merely *against* apartheid; it was already living *beyond* apartheid in some sense, by anticipating and embodying the reality of what a post-apartheid church and society could look like.

Standing “over there”, with the wronged, showed itself in actions such as visiting church and community members who were in prison or in detention because of their involvement in activities in the struggle. Numerous DRCA and DRMC ministers were detained during the 1970s and 1980s and some were also tortured in the process. It would be wrong to mention names, since one is bound to omit someone, thus doing an injustice to that person. Let it just be said that the DRCA and DRMC had its share of members who were detained in the struggle for justice – and that their relatives, colleagues and fellow church members rallied around them in solidarity.

To spread this message “among the wronged”, BK members spoke up unequivocally at synodical meetings when issues of church unity or social justice were on the agenda. They were at the forefront of the drive for these two churches to become observer members (and later full members) of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which meant that their theology represented not a narrow or doctrinaire Calvinism, but an open, ecumenically-minded and progressive Reformed approach.²³ Between 1978 and 1989 the BK also published a journal, *Dunamis*, in which the theological message of unity and justice was strongly articulated. It did not have a large print run, so it did not reach thousands of ministers, but it played a significant role in shaping a Reformed theological perspective on the struggle for justice in South Africa.

Theologians in this trajectory empowered fellow black Christians theologically to develop a self-affirming and transformative Christian praxis in congregations and communities. But it was not only the BK who represented this trajectory. Since 1978 numerous official resolutions taken by the DRMC synod clearly fitted in this trajectory, especially since BK members and likeminded theologians were playing a strong role in the debates of the synod and were elected to leadership positions in the 1982 and 1986 synods. One example of such a resolution of the synod was the call on congregations to support the struggles of workers for fair salaries and working conditions at the 1990 DRMC Synod.²⁴

The Synod encourages congregations to get involved at local level in the struggle for a just dispensation for the most exploited workers in the labour market, by supporting farm workers and by appealing to the consciences of farm owners who are active members of Christian churches.

It is difficult to know how many members of the DRMC congregations heeded this call or to ascertain what concrete form their support for farm workers took, but there is an unmistakable concern expressed for the plight of workers, as an embodiment of Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar. One local congregation that did put this concern for workers into practice was the Via Christi congregation in Lenasia, south of Johannesburg. During the three-week mineworkers’ strike in August 1987, that small congregation opened its hall to 150 dismissed NUM workers, most of whom were migrant workers from Lesotho.²⁵

Another form of “standing with” the suffering was to attend solidarity services in communities threatened with forced removal – like Oukasie (Brits) and Magopa (near Ventersdorp) – often together with journalists and/or ecumenical visitors. Such visits had the dual effect of encouraging the local communities not to give in to the pressure and also of making it more difficult for the government to effect the removals, due to the negative national and international publicity created around it. BK members regularly took part in such acts of solidarity.

²² On the key role of the BK in the unification process between DRCA and DRMC, see also Van Rooi, *To obey or disobey?* pp.173-191 (especially p.182).

²³ The influence of numerous Reformed theologians from Europe and North America is evident in the type of theology that BK members developed. It will be an interesting research project to investigate which Reformed (and other) theologians from the global North were most influential in the lives of BK members.

²⁴ NGSK. 1990. *Handelinge van die vyf-en-twintigste sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika, 20 September to 4 Oktober 1990*. Kaapstad: NGSendingkerk, p.1110.

²⁵ Information obtained in a personal interview with Prof GJA Lubbe, the minister of the Via Christi congregation at the time.

DRCA ministers and members often found themselves in dangerous and awkward situations, for example, to be present in a crowd intent on “necklacing” someone who had been identified as an *impimpi* (police informer). In a few instances church leaders were able to convince an angry group not to go ahead with a necklacing, the most publicised incident of such a nature involved Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Dr Nico Smith also managed to achieve this in Mamelodi and a theological student, who worked closely with him, also saved a suspected informer’s life on an occasion in Mamelodi when he was accompanying a group of COSAS students. He managed to distract the crowd by chanting the COSAS slogan: “Each one teach one!”²⁶

The struggle for justice in South Africa between 1986 and 1990 did not only involve the plight of black people under the racism of apartheid, but also the position of women under the sexism of church and society. Ministers and elders in this trajectory used their voices and votes in synods during the 1980s to allow women access to all the offices in the church. In 1978 women were allowed to serve as deacons in the DRMC and they could be appointed as ministers and elders in 1986. In the DRCA the office of deacon was opened to women in 1983 and that of elder and minister in 1991. The argumentation in favour of such a move required a contextual hermeneutical method, which meant moving beyond the conservative theology that ministers had learnt in the Stofberg seminaries. The members of this trajectory played a key role in convincing the “silent majority” of synodical delegates to vote for these resolutions.

In “standing with” suffering people, members in this trajectory comforted and encouraged fellow believers whose family members had been injured or killed in the violent crackdown by the security forces. Practical care giving and the help of neighbours and fellow church members, to assist when conducting funerals and to provide support to orphans, was a common feature of “the struggle”. This brought people closer together to affirm their shared humanity and their joint commitment to survive the evils of “the system”. There were high profile funerals of community leaders, who were in the forefront of organising resistance to state policies, that were very well attended and in which DRMC and DRCA ministers played a role. One example, among many others, was the funeral in December 1986 of Dr Fabian Ribeiro and his wife Florence, who had been shot by members of the security forces.²⁷ Dr Nico Smith, a DRCA minister who lived nearby in Mamelodi, conducted the funeral, even though the Ribeiro family were members of the Roman Catholic Church. This showed the ecumenical character of Christian involvement in the struggle for justice; to emphasise denominational uniqueness in such a situation of suffering was seen as a complete luxury.

It is only possible to give some detail of one sermon preached at such a political funeral.²⁸ The tone of the sermons was not to instigate violence or vengeance, but to express anger at the violence employed by the state and to publicly reject its inhuman policies:

As I stand here today I am overcome by a terrible sadness and anger ... because yet again, as so many times this year, we must mourn; yet again we must bury our people. Yet again we must come and lay to rest some of the finest sons and daughters of this country ... The church is being persecuted for its obedience to God and for its decision to stand alongside the poor, the weak and the oppressed of our country.²⁹

Such sermons often openly addressed the South African government:

And I want to say to the South African government: ... Why have you created a climate in which the police can kill? Why have you created a climate in which death squads roam around and do whatever they like as if the lives of our people do not matter? Why have you created a climate in which people know they can kill our leaders and they will not be brought to justice? ... I must say to the South African government: ... There is a God in heaven who knows about justice, and you will reap what you sow!³⁰

A key element of such sermons was to testify to the God of justice and hope, who was not on the side of oppressors, but on the side of justice, freedom and humanity. One expression that was used at such occasions

²⁶ I obtained this information from a personal interview. COSAS (Congress of South African Students) was a student movement that was active in high schools during the 1980s as part of the United Democratic Front.

²⁷ Major General Abraham (“Joep”) Joubert testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the assassination of Dr Ribeiro and his wife was a joint operation between the Northern Transvaal Security Branch of the police and the Special Forces of the SANDF. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 6, Section 3, p.243.

²⁸ It is the address of Allan Boesak at the funeral of the Cradock Four on 20 July 1985 in the town of Cradock in the Eastern Cape.

²⁹ Boesak, A. 2009. *Running with horses; reflections of an accidental politician*. Cape Town: Joho, p.208. He spoke these words at the funeral of the Cradock Four on 20 July 1985.

³⁰ Boesak, A. 2009. *Running with horse: reflections of an accidental politician*. Cape Town: Joho, p. 210.

was to say that the blood of those who had died “irrigated the tree of freedom”, in other words, they have not died in vain.³¹ The preachers therefore called on the mourners not to give up:

But this is the price we have to pay for our freedom. We are here today, but we will do more than just mourn. ... we will wake up from our mourning and we will dedicate ourselves anew to the struggle for justice and liberation and freedom and peace ... [R]aise up a sign of hope that this country will become what it must become and that we will make our contribution to that future.³²

The sermons also expressed comfort and encouragement to the bereaved families, although that element was sometimes eclipsed by the more strident rhetoric of justice and freedom, especially in the larger (more “political”) funerals. The overall message was that the struggle was indeed costly, but that it would not last forever.

Standing against the powerful who practise injustice (prophetic courage)

Whereas the focus in the preceding section (standing *with*) was on empowerment, comfort and solidarity among the wronged, the emphasis in this section (standing *against*) is primarily in the ideological field. People in this trajectory worked hard to undermine and delegitimise the theology on which the apartheid edifice had been erected, which had been declared a heresy by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1982.³³

Prophetic appeals to the government to scrap particular laws and to dismantle apartheid were common in the period 1986-1990, especially due to the viciousness of the operations of the security forces during the successive states of emergency in force between 1985 and 1989. These appeals took the form of strongly worded synodical resolutions and press statements, often issued by churches jointly, as an ecumenical movement of churches belonging to the SACC. Here is one example of such a resolution, adopted by the DRCA General Synod in 1987:

This synod expresses the opinion that in the long run the state of emergency increases rather than decreases the tension and polarisation in our country’s communities. For this reason synod urgently requests government to start negotiating with the respective leaders so that state of emergency can be lifted speedily;

Synod wishes to express its concern about the detention without trial of thousands of citizens and especially of children, who are being held in prisons. Synod mandates the new commission to take up this matter with government;

Synod further instructs the commission to consider the possibility of negotiating with leaders of the ANC and PAC to find out what the points of conflict are between these organisations and the government and to discuss possible ways towards negotiation and reconciliation between the competing parties in the present conflict situation in South Africa, so that stability and peace may be achieved.³⁴

The *Testimony of Vereeniging* released by a consultation of Southern African member churches of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) in March 1989 was worded more strongly:

[W]e commit ourselves to work together towards the dismantling of apartheid. Therefore we believe that all discriminatory and unjust laws should be abolished, especially the Land Act, Group Areas Act, Separate Amenities Act and the Population Registration Act.

We call upon government to a) cease immediately the practise (sic) of detention without trial; b) lift the State of Emergency; c) release all political prisoners and detainees; d) unban all organisations opposing apartheid; e) as a matter of urgency start negotiations with the authentic leaders of the majority in our country.³⁵

³¹ This expression was used, for example, at a “Service of witness and solidarity with church leaders” on 31 May 1988 at the Regina Mundi church in Soweto.

³² Boesak, A. 2009. *Running with horses: reflections of an accidental politician*. Cape Town: Joho, p. 213.

³³ See De Gruchy, JW and Villa-Vicencio, C (eds). 1983. *Apartheid is a heresy*. Cape Town: David Philip.

³⁴ NGKA. 1987. *Agenda en handelinge*, p.412.

³⁵ DRCA. 1989, July. *The saga of Vereeniging: the decisions of the Dutch Reformed Churches in perspective*. Supplement to *DRCA Action* (2):10. I give more detail on the Vereeniging Consultation later.

Some DRMC and DRCA ministers also took part in talks with the banned liberation movements, mainly the ANC, in Lusaka and elsewhere.³⁶ Dr Nico Smith also arranged for a group of seven DRCA and DRMC ministers to travel to Lusaka to meet the ANC, but the plan leaked out to the newspapers and the government refused to give passports to the black colleagues, who did not have travel documents, so the trip didn't take place. What is significant are the reasons supplied by Dr Smith for wanting to organise the trip. After sketching the depth of conflict between the security forces and the youth in black townships and the escalating tension throughout the country, he continued:

I came to the clear conclusion that, when a conflict arises that seems insoluble and will simply escalate, the church is the institution with the responsibility to say: We can simply not accept that violence and killing must go on; we need to try and bring the situation back to normal. The church is the one institution that must be willing to do everything in its power to resolve the conflict.³⁷

Another important vehicle for such prophetic statements was direct engagement with DRC representatives, in forums such as the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (later the Reformed Ecumenical Council). Since most members of parliament and of the Cabinet at the time belonged to the DRC, it had an open door to government officials. It was therefore strategically important for DRCA and DRMC leaders to try and convince DRC leaders of the injustices of government policy and of the wrongness of their theological support for those policies. It was hoped that such an approach would eventually have an effect on government policy.

Other DRCA and DRMC members took part in more confrontational (and more dangerous) forms of prophetic action, like joining protest marches. Jan de Waal, a DRMC minister, sustained permanent damage to his one eye when police started beating protesters taking part in the march on Pollsmoor Prison on 28 August 1985. On that day thousands of people, demanding the release of Nelson Mandela, marched to Pollsmoor from different parts of Cape Town. On the day 9 people were killed and, by the end of that week 28 people had died, as the unrest spread due to the harsh police response.³⁸

Even more confrontational and dangerous was the option to join the armed struggle, by leaving the country to get military training and coming back as a guerrilla. The DRCA and DRMC synods never took any resolutions to support the armed struggle or to encourage their members to get training as guerrilla fighters. In fact, the synods of both churches repeatedly called on their members to use non-violent means to work for justice and transformation in South Africa.³⁹ The same applied to the BK, which never called on its members to participate in the armed struggle, although a number of BK members had signed the *Kairos Document* in 1985, in which the armed resistance of oppressed South Africans against the "tyranny" of the apartheid state was not ruled out.⁴⁰ Although such opinions were not expressed in any BK document, one could assume that at least some BK members identified with the proposal made from the floor at the 1990 DRMC synod, but which was not approved by the meeting:

The use of revolutionary violence as last resort for the achievement of a just state dispensation is theologically justifiable;

In our South African apartheid context there were legitimate occasions when the oppressed community could have concluded that they had to use this last resort.⁴¹

However, in a situation of increasing polarisation and violence under the state of emergency between 1986 and 1989, BK members were indeed involved with church members, relatives and community members who had taken the route of violent resistance. As a result they were sometimes faced with difficult (and dangerous) choices. Ministers sometimes helped young people to leave the country or helped those in exile to make contact

³⁶ The most publicised journey to "talk to the ANC" was the trip of a group of Afrikaner intellectuals to Dakar, Senegal, arranged by Breyten Breytenbach and Frederick van Zyl Slabbert in 1986 (see Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan*, p.35ff). See also Olivier, G. 1985. *Praat met die ANC*. Emmarentia: Taurus for interviews with various groups who undertook that journey.

³⁷ In Olivier, *Praat met die ANC*, p.11.

³⁸ http://sabctre.saha.org.za/glossary/pollsmoor_march.htm [Accessed 30 May 2013].

³⁹ Two examples must suffice here: "Synod disapproves of all forms of violence and calls on its members not to take part in the destruction of property or human lives" (NGKA. 1987. *Agenda en handelinge*, p. 424); "Synod expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Mr Nelson Mandela (ANC) and other political groups that are using peaceful means to achieve transformation (not reform) in our society; ... Synod issues an urgent call to all parties and groups on the political spectrum to stop their mutual accusations, to take hands and to seek solutions together." (NGSK. 1990. *Handelinge*, p.1036).

⁴⁰ Two extracts make this clear: "[T]he most loving thing we can do for both the oppressed and for our enemies who are oppressors is to eliminate the oppression, remove the tyrants from power and establish a just government for the common good of all the people" and "True peace and true reconciliation are not only desirable, they are assured and guaranteed ... liberation will come ... But the road to that hope is going to be very hard and painful. The conflict and struggle will have to intensify in the months and years ahead because there is no other way to remove injustice and oppression" (*Kairos Document*. 1986. 2nd edition. Braamfontein: ICT, p. 24f).

⁴¹ NGSK. 1990. *Handelinge*, p.1097.

with their families. Sometimes ministers acted as conduits for foreign funds to underground guerrillas operating inside the country (or for their families). Many of these stories still need to be told.

The double morality of Christian ethics on the question of violence became painfully clear in that situation. The DRC and the South African Bible Society could openly support “our boys on the border” by giving them pocket Bibles and praying for them regularly in public. The South African Defence Force had chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of its soldiers, but when DRMC and DRCA ministers gave pastoral or material support to a church member trained as a guerrilla fighter, they risked detention and a long jail sentence.

Ecclesial scrutiny (How did they view the church?)

Members of the DRCA and DRMC in this trajectory were actively involved in their local congregations. Contrary to a prevailing stereotype, that is, that ministers who are committed to justice neglected their congregations because they were more “involved in politics” than in ministry, BK members were active ministers and members. They had more than one string on their theological guitar: they preached every Sunday and served the Lords’ Supper; they baptised, married, visited and buried church members all the time. It is true that the tent-making ministry put extra pressure on the ministry in congregations, but it often also had the salutary effect of getting church members more actively involved in ministry.⁴²

BK members were also ecumenically minded. They took part in organisations like the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and the Alliance of Black Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA). The BK itself was granted observer status by the SACC. The affinity for such organisations was occasioned by their joint ecumenical commitment to a theology and ministry that would further the cause of justice.

The BK was critical of the leadership of the DRCA and DRMC, primarily because of the cautious and muted criticism that the two churches expressed on the injustices of apartheid. A group like the BK, which attempted to articulate and embody a strong prophetic stance within the DRCA and DRMC, was likely to be accused of being divisive and disrespectful of authority, acting as a “church within the church”.⁴³ Especially when the Dutch theological institutions started asking the BK to assess applicants from the DRCA and DRMC for scholarships to study overseas, the tensions increased.⁴⁴

In spite of this criticism of church leadership, the BK was not anti-church. In fact, as mentioned already, BK members worked hard for church unity. However, by the mid-1980s there was a growing impatience and disillusionment with the leadership of the DRMC and (especially) the DRCA – and the vested interests that their governance structures as such represented. The realisation started to dawn that the unification of two “top heavy” churches could in effect produce a “doubly top heavy” church that would be even less involved in the struggle for justice than the two separate churches. For a short while the possibility was seriously entertained whether the BK should not give birth to a “confessing movement” of loosely linked communities from various denominational backgrounds. The BK convened an Assembly of Confessing Communities on 31 May 1987 in Broederstroom to discuss this possibility and issued a Statement on Confessing Movement,⁴⁵ which read (in part):

We believe that the true and lasting Christian unity can only be born out of the struggle for liberation from political oppression and economic exploitation; ...

We resolve to encourage each confessing community to determine its own programme of action, taking into account the needs in the local situation ... ;

An ongoing unity for struggle of Christians should be concretised. We henceforth establish a committee from this gathering which will co-opt representatives from local and national groups who identify with this process. The committee will work towards the formation of a permanent national organisation of Christians involved in the struggle for liberation.⁴⁶

⁴² See the article by Gerrie Lubbe. 1986. A church struggling to be relevant; a South African case study. *Missionalia* 14(1):35-43.

⁴³ The DRCA produced a detailed report on the BK which served at the 1983 General Synod at Barkly-Wes. NGKA. 1983. *Agenda en handeling van die sesde vergadering van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika gehou te Barkly-Wes*, pp.224-254. The resolution adopted by the Synod read: “Since the BK acts in competition with the Moderamen, operates with a one-sided theological emphasis regarding the task of the church, and creates confusion and tension among believers, Synod decides as follows: a) Synod disapproves of the way the Broederkring acts on the terrain of the church; b) Synod requests ministers and members to distance themselves from the way that the Broederkring acts and to show the necessary respect and loyalty to the church’s own elected officials (NGKA. 1983. *Agenda en handeling*, p.384 – my translation).

⁴⁴ Van Oel, *De wereld in huis*, pp. 44-46 explains why the *Theologische Hogeschool* (Theological Seminary) at Kampen decided in 1976 to accept the advice of the BK rather than the leadership of the DRMC and DRCA or the Christian Institute when assessing applicants from these two churches for postgraduate study.

⁴⁵ BK. 1987. Statement on Confessing Movement. *Dunamis*, Second Quarter, pp.17-18.

⁴⁶ BK. 1987. Statement on Confessing Movement, pp.17.

This represented a more radical view of the church, which had virtually “given up” on structural unity in the DRC family, but it seems that the change of leadership at the 1987 DRCA General Synod (and the ensuing unity discussions) diverted energy from this Confessing Movement. What is clear is that for the BK church unity was not an end in itself, but integrally linked to – or determined by – the struggle for justice.

Interpreting the tradition (How did theology form and shape them?)

The theological approach to the struggle for justice of the DRCA and DRMC members in this trajectory can be briefly stated: Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar. On the one hand the BK, through its Aims (1974) and Theological Declaration (1979), contributed to the actual wording of the Confession of Belhar.⁴⁷ On the other hand BK members were actively involved in embodying Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar in actual practice, as pointed out already.

Some BK members in this trajectory went beyond the Confession of Belhar, for example, by signing the *Kairos Document* and using liberation language when explaining what the struggle for justice was about, but without abandoning a Reformed theological framework. Allan Boesak exerted a large influence in this regard, by reinterpreting John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper from a black South African perspective, thus producing a “Black and Reformed” praxis.⁴⁸ Another influential theologian was Takatso Mofokeng, whose doctoral thesis at Kampen consisted of a dialogue between Black Consciousness, Karl Barth and Jon Sobrino in constructing a Reformed liberation theology.⁴⁹

Spirituality (How did they experience God’s presence?)

The spirituality of the DRCA and DRMC members in this trajectory differed from that of the other trajectories in that they tried to overcome the dichotomies inherent to the Pietist missionary legacy of DRC mission. These dichotomies – between soul and body, spiritual and political, Sunday and weekday – prevented Christians from seeing the wholeness of the message of God’s coming Reign and thus paralysed the church’s involvement in the struggle for justice. In an issue of the *BK Bulletin*, this challenge was expressed as follows:

The theology of the Confession of Belhar is now struggling to gain dominance over what the Kairos Document has called “church theology.” It is the traditional pietism, fundamentalism, biblicism and individualistic moralism which the white missionaries bequeathed to black Christians, and which black Christians took over uncritically. Black preachers preach this old-style faith ad nauseam, thinking that it is the equivalent to “sola Scriptura” reformed theology. The spirit of the Belhar Confession, that God struggles on the side of all those who struggle against apartheid, is still foreign to the very church which produced the Confession.⁵⁰

However, ministers in this trajectory affirmed their loyalty to their respective churches and their connectedness with fellow members, by regularly using the official hymn books, *Hosanna* (DRCA) and *Sionsgesange* (DRMC). The formal liturgies of the two churches did not change during this period, although several DRMC congregations introduced new liturgical elements, like responsive litanies and new *formuliere* ["formularies"] for baptism and the Lord’s Supper. So-called “liberation songs” were not often sung in DRCA and DRMC Sunday worship services, but they were characteristic of BK meetings and ecumenical gatherings of Christians involved in the struggle for justice. Some of the prominent songs were laments like *Senzeni na?* [What have we done?], songs of trust and encouragement like *Thula sizwe* [Be quiet, people; don’t weep; your Lord will conquer for you], but above all the prayer of supplication, *Nkosi sikelel’iAfrika*, simply identified as the “national anthem” already at that time. It was the longer version, which also included the words *Woza, Moya oyingcwele!* [Come, Holy Spirit!] and *Makubenjalo, Kuze kube ngona phakade* [May it be so always, forever and ever]. It was sung with raised fists, so it was a unique kind of prayer, in which four dimensions – affirming a connectedness to the whole of Africa, asking for God’s blessing and an end to war, calling on God’s Spirit for help, and committing oneself to dignified and defiant action – were united in a communal act of “struggle spirituality”. More than anything else the singing of *Nkosi sikelele* with raised fists epitomised the spirituality of this trajectory.

⁴⁷ See Kritzinger, "Celebrating communal authorship".

⁴⁸ See Boesak, A. 1984. *Black and Reformed*.

⁴⁹ Mofokeng, TA. 1983. *The crucified among the cross-bearers*. Kok: Kampen.

⁵⁰ Quoted in De Gruchy, John W. 1991. *Liberating Reformed theology. a South African contribution to an ecumenical debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Cape Town: David Philip, p.217.

Reflexivity (Did they learn from their experiences?)

Did the BK experience any turning points or “conversions” in the five years under review here? Did it change its minds about basic strategy? Maybe one can identify two defining moments in the self-understanding of DRMC and DRCA members in this trajectory. The first was in 1987, with the election of a “BK-minded” moderamen of the DRCA General Synod. As I indicated, this changed the situation in the DRC family in a fundamental way, since it opened the way for serious unity talks to start between the DRCA and DRMC and thereby lowered the enthusiasm for the proposed National Assembly of Confessing Communities. It presented the BK with the possibility of realising some of the dreams it had been praying and working for since 1974 – and with some BK members serving on the synodical leadership of both churches. For the first time in 14 years the BK was no longer in opposition to the church leadership – a small prophetic group calling on the two churches to carry out their own decisions on unity and justice with passion – but “on the same side” as the leadership of both churches. In an ironic way this “success” of the BK was also the result of its eventual demise. As BK members became central players in the unity process between the two churches and were appointed on various synodical commissions, the need for the BK as a theological “think tank” and action group seemed to fall away. The BK’s overseas donors also regarded the new situation as a sign that the uniting church (still to be born at the time) would need to receive the funding in future, rather than the BK.

The other defining moment came at the end of the period under review, in November 1990, when the BK-minded leaders in the DRCA and DRMC were confronted with a difficult situation in their relationship to the DRC. In February 1990 the government unbanned the liberation movements and released their political leaders, including Nelson Mandela, from prison. To the BK, and everyone else in this trajectory, that was an answer to years of prayer and protest. And yet, there were also doubts about the sincerity of the government and the implications of the new political situation.

In March 1989, at the Vereeniging Consultation, convened by the Interim Committee of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC), there was difference of opinion between the DRC and the eight other churches of the broader DRC “family” of churches in Southern Africa.⁵¹ At its 1988 Harare assembly, the REC had requested the nine churches to hold a follow-up meeting to try and find consensus on two questions: a) the attitude of the churches to apartheid; and b) the structural (re)unification of the DRC family.⁵² Early in the consultation, the DRC delegates confessed their complicity in apartheid as an evil system and asked for forgiveness from their colleagues. That was received very positively, but when the consultation statement, *The Testimony of Vereeniging*, was drafted, the DRC delegates backtracked and stated that they could not go beyond the contents of their church’s 1986 *Church and Society* document. In the end, the *Testimony* was sent out together with a separate statement by the DRC delegates.⁵³ At the General Synod of the DRC in October 1990, a new version of *Church and Society* was adopted, in which the DRC rejected all forms of discrimination, declared that the system of apartheid was sinful, and that any attempt to justify it theologically was a serious deviation from Scripture [*‘n ernstige dwaling*].⁵⁴ A month later, in November 1990, the Rustenburg Conference gathered together a significant number of churches to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of the impending negotiations for a genuinely “new” South Africa. In his presentation to the Consultation, Professor Willie Jonker of the University of Stellenbosch said:

I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economical and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, and the results of which you and our whole country are still suffering from, but *vicariously* I dare also to do that in the name of the DRC of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaans people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the DRC at its latest synod has declared apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago.⁵⁵

⁵¹ These eight churches were established throughout Southern Africa as a result of the DRC’s mission work. For details on the churches outside South Africa, see NGK, *Kerk en samelewing 1990*, p.34; Cronjé, JM. 1981. *Aan God die dank. Geskiedenis van die sending van die Ned Geref Kerk, Deel 2. Buite die Republiek van Suid-Afrika*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel; Saayman, Willem, *Being missionary*, p.45-68

⁵² The Vereeniging Consultation was convened by the REC since the relationship between the DRC, DRMC and DRCA had reached crisis proportions at the 1988 meeting of the REC in Harare (see Bax, Douglas. 1989, September. The Vereeniging Consultation. What happened? *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 68, p.62.

⁵³ DRCA. 1989. *The saga of Vereeniging*. Supplement to *DRCA Action* (No.2, July). Bryanston: DRCA.

⁵⁴ Ned Geref Kerk. 1990. *Kerk en samelewing 1990: ‘n getuienis van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*. Bloemfontein: NG Sendingpers, p.40. The 1986 version of *Church and Society* called it an “error”, as I pointed out above.

⁵⁵ Jonker, WD. 1991. Understanding the church situation and obstacles to Christian witness in South Africa. in *The road to Rustenburg* edited by L. Alberts and F. Chikane, p.92.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a member of the 12-member steering committee of the conference, responded very positively and emotionally, stating publicly that he, as an Anglican, had no option but to accept Jonker's confession and to forgive him. In the light of their experience at the Vereeniging Consultation eighteen months earlier – and a long journey of disappointment in promising moves by the DRC over the years that later turned out to have raised false hope – the leaders of the DRCA and DRMC present in the conference were sceptical of the confession. What made that a defining moment for DRMC and DRCA members in this trajectory in 1990 could be formulated like this:

How do we relate to the DRC in this new situation, now that it has finally renounced apartheid on paper and is beginning to confess it as sin, but before it: a) shows its heartfelt sorrow for supporting apartheid by creating (or joining) a united Dutch Reformed church, and b) begins to make restitution for the harm done by its policies and practices over many decades and actively starts dismantling the racist system it had helped create? Are we being petty, nasty and unforgiving by being sceptical about the DRC's sincerity in all this?

The ensuing history of the DRC in its relationship to the DRCA and DRMC (and since 1994 the URCSA) seems to suggest that to some extent the hesitation on the part of DRCA and DRMC leaders at Rustenburg was justified.

Conclusion

Due to the multi-faceted development in the DRC family between 1986 and 1990 – and the nature of my praxis matrix – it wasn't possible to explore the praxis of the two other trajectories that I identified in this paper. The central trajectory ("Being Gods church") made up the majority of DRCA and DRMC members and were pulled in different directions by the trajectories at the two extremes ("Preserving the status quo" and "Standing for justice"). The praxis of the two other trajectories – and the ongoing interaction between all three – remains to be investigated to gain an adequate view of the praxis of the DRCA and DRMC in this period.

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