

Coming in from outside: A crucial event in the history of ecumenism of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church

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Abstract

The article argues from a “Barthian” perspective of “Revelation Theology” versus “Natural Theology”, that the current leadership of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church (NHKA) and the majority of its members consider the notion “church” primarily as a community of believers which is brought to completion by the Spirit of God and which therefore transcends all anthropological barriers such as race. In light of Karl Barth’s concept of Natural Theology, “racism as religion” is confessed to be idolatry and Apartheid a sin. Any attempt to justify racism theologically amounts to heresy. The article is a reworked version of the opening address by the Moderator of the NHKA at a meeting with an official delegation of the World Alliance of Churches (WARC) held in Pretoria from 5-8 June 2006. The article makes an appeal for the ecumenical readmittance of the NHKA by WARC. It includes documentation from the NHKA’s National Colloquium and the responses to the NHKA’s re-application for WARC membership by WARC officers and the NHKA leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1982 the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church (NHKA) terminated its membership of the World Alliance of Churches (WARC) after this Protestant ecumenical institution suspended the NHKA’s membership until the NHKA consciously and meaningfully renounce the justification of Apartheid as a theological heresy. In October 2004, however, the 67th General Synod of the NHKA decided to mandate the Church’s General Commission to reapply for membership. The WARC’s Executive Committee responded by delegating WARC officers to visit the NHKA’s leadership in Pretoria during the week of 5-

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8 June 2006 to determine whether the NHKA complies with the set conditions of Ottawa 1982 in light of social attainments in South Africa since political democracy in South Africa from 1994 onwards and especially in light of changes in the theological mindset of members of the NHKA, witnessed in resolutions formulated in official documentation of the NHKA.

During its visit, the WARC delegation² had discussions with the NHKA's Moderature,³ an expanded Commission of the NHKA General Assembly,⁴ the NHKA's Ecumenical Council,⁵ and the NHKA members of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria.⁶ This article consists of (a) the Moderator's opening address,⁷ (b) a memorandum compiled by the Commission of the General Commission for discussion and endorsement at a National Colloquium in April 2006, attended by representatives of the NHKA, (c) a joint declaration of the abovementioned National Colloquium, (d) and a letter to the NHKA by WARC's General Secretary, Rev Dr Setri Nyomi.

² Team members of the WARC delegation were: Rev Dr Setri Nyomi (General Secretary), Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde (Zambia), Rev Sandy Horsburgh (Scotland), Rev Dr Felix Chingota (Malawi), Rev Dr Egbert Rooze (Belgium), Rev Prof Thias Kgatla (South Africa), Rev Dr Kobus Gerber (South Africa).

³ Team members of the Moderature were: Prof Johan Buitendag, Dr Christo van der Merwe, Dr Wim Dreyer, and Dr Ernest van Eck. Additional members co-opted: Dr Fanie Pretorius, Mr Kobus Viljoen, and Ms Charmain Lines.

⁴ Team members of the expanded Commission of the NHKA General Assembly were: Prof Johan Buitendag (Moderator), Dr Christo van der Merwe (Vice-Moderator), Dr Wim Dreyer (Scribe), Dr Ernest van Eck (Vice-Scribe), Dr Fanie Pretorius (Secretary of General Commission), Mr Kobus Viljoen (Administrator of NHKA), Ms Charmain Line (Communication Manager of NHKA), Rev Arie Kuyper, Rev Japie Coetzee, Elders Anton Valks, Manie Dreyer, Peet Visser, Hybrecht Dupper, Johan Steyn, Frik Geyser, Obie Oberholzer, Dries le Roux, Annes Opperman. Members co-opted: Dr Gafie van Wyk, Rev Etienne Fourie, Dr Jaco Beyers.

⁵ Team members of the NHKA's Ecumenical Council were: Dr Gafie van Wyk (Chairperson), Rev Etienne Fourie (Secretary), Dr Jonanda Groenewald, Rev Thomas Dreyer, Rev Etienne Verhage, Rev Kalman Papp. Ms Charmain Lines attended the meeting as the NHKA's communication co-ordinator.

⁶ The theologians were Prof P A Geyser, Prof T F J Dreyer, Prof A G van Aarde, Prof P M Venter, Dr A Neele, Dr J Groenewald, and Dr A Groenewald.

⁷ The content of this address was extensively discussed in and unequivocally endorsed by the General Commission of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church the morning of June 7th, 2006, before its presentation. The address connotes an unanimous consensus among the members of the 67th General Commission of the NHKA (see Minutes of *Algemene Kommissie*, 7-8 June 2006). At its meeting on 7 September 2006 the General Commission endorses the publication of this article and grants permission for the publication of the Moderator's opening address (see letter to *HTS'* editor by the Scribe of the General Commission, Dr W A Dreyer, dated 8 September 2006).

2. THE OPENING ADDRESS⁸

Psalm 23 has fascinated believers throughout the ages. It is most appropriate for a normal church service, for weddings, for a funeral and even for the opening of a convention like this! It fits life like a glove, irrespective of the situation or the mood of the readers. It is like Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. It mirrors one's own feelings back to oneself. What strikes me about this psalm in particular is its character of growth and progress. One can read the whole psalm on a sort of timeline. The poet sits in the present as a guest of honour at a decorated table with a cup that brims over. And then he thinks back to his days in the pastures when he was a shepherd with his sheep. Suddenly he realises: no, he was not the shepherd; he was part of the flock himself which the Lord shepherded. And this fills him with gratitude. Then he looks forward. He looks forward to the time when he shall dwell in the house of the Lord, throughout the years to come.

But the evolution of the psalm entails a second line as well. The first half of the psalm is characterised by the third person singular. Not less than four times do we hear the word "he", referring to God. *God* makes me lie down; *God* leads me to water; *God* revives my spirit; *God* guides me. The second half however, leads to closure. Now the poet no longer speaks *about* the Lord, but *to* the Lord. No less than four times, again, we encounter the second person singular, "you". *You* are with me; *your* shepherd's staff; *You* spread the table; *you* have richly anointed my head.

How much closer the relationship has become! No longer experiencing God at a distance, the poet now encounters⁹ the God who is present! We may of course, ask the question what has brought this change about. The answer lies in the pivotal verse 4 of the Psalm (Vos 2005:118): *Even were I to walk through a valley of deepest darkness I should fear no harm, for you are with me; your shepherd's staff and crook afford me comfort.* What this valley of

⁸ The introduction of Professor Johan Buitendag's opening remarks at the first meeting session with the World Alliance of Churches' (WARC's) delegation in Pretoria on 5 June 2006 was formulated as follows: "My dear Dr Nyomi, brothers and sisters delegates, members of the General Commission and other members of the NHKA, We greet you in the name of the triune God, the *Creator*, the *Revelator* and the *Inspirator* of the whole of reality! We bid you welcome as highly respected guests of the NHKA! It is an exceptional honour for us to meet with you during these days, to be with you in Christian surrender and to open our hearts to one another. We consider ourselves truly honoured as a Church to receive such distinguished and executive members of WARC as our guests. I would like to believe that this will in years to come be regarded as one of the pivotal moments in the history of the NHKA. I as moderator and we as Commission are extremely grateful that the good Lord has chosen this very term of office and afforded us the wonderful opportunity to be part of and to facilitate the process of readmission into the ecumenical world. But firstly, allow me some reflections on Psalm 23."

⁹ Schuman (in Vos 2002:124) makes us aware of the fact the Midrash, interesting enough, places the Psalm in the context of the covenant relationship: *I am your God and you are my people*. This existential interpretation is important for the application of the Psalm.

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deepest darkness is, we don't know.¹⁰ But what we do know is that that event was a sort of Damascus experience. That happening brought the change about in whole his life – present, past and future.

I am prepared to state today that at least the General Commission of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church (NHKA), has gone through such a *kairos* event as well. We are irrevocably committed to the road ahead on which we must travel. We note the fundamental changes in the NHKA with joy and we encourage our congregants to repentance and conversion.¹¹

We do not come to the WARC officers during these days with all kinds of explanations or even with excuses in order to make our past softer or more acceptable. I will not attempt to explain or even to put into benign perspective the actions and statements of our predecessors. It simply should not be done! As I prepared for this meeting and read through the NHKA's documents of the past decades, documents that were drawn up and resolutions that were adopted in this very venue, I was, to say the least, disdained. I want to tell you that to me personally – and I believe to many of us – it seems incomprehensible that the Church leadership could make such comments and take such decisions in the first place.¹² But I do not have to give you any examples¹³. The WARC officers have at their disposal many of those

¹⁰ It is however, known that among the mountains of Judah there are deep, dangerous and dark cliffs with numerous clefts and caves. I (like Calvin) prefer to interpret it rather figuratively as the "shadow of death".

¹¹ See section 3 of this article, entitled, "The identity and relevance of the NHKA at the beginning of the 21st century in South Africa", which was endorsed by the NHKA's National Colloquium in April 2006, as seen in section 4 of this article, entitled "The National Colloquium's joint declaration of intent".

¹² Church history abounds in examples of divergence between churches, but fortunately also of the healing of wounds. The Roman Catholic Professor of Systematics at Washington Theological Union, Dr John J Burkhard, reflects in his 2004 *Apostolicity – then and now: An ecumenical church in a postmodern world* (p 178), on the "closing of a painful chapter of repeated misunderstanding" between Catholics and Lutherans and how "national and international dialogues have addressed the widespread misunderstanding ... and have been highly successful in correction errors of fact and interpretation of each others' belief." These words are appropriate with regard to the correction which the NHKA also have had to make with respect to its ecumenical relationships. To me, Burkhard's (2004:178-179) observation of the "Roman Catholic-Lutheran ecumenical discussions" are relevant in our context: "*It also represents the opening of a new chapter with momentous ramifications.* The salvation of the person by the Lord's redemptive act of justification was the very heart of the magisterial Reformation. Nothing else came close to expressing the radical character of this doctrine to Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the other Reformers. The fact that Roman Catholics and Lutherans can now confess their 'consensus [on] the basic truths of the doctrine of justification' means that when we re-read the earlier documents of the international dialogue, they take on added meaning" (my emphasis).

¹³ See for example the article of Dr Ernst Wolff, Anatomie van 'n teologiese ideologie: Die Hervormde Kerk se steun aan die Apartheid ideologie. *Historia* 51(1), pp 141-162. He examines official documents of the NHKA within the framework of changing accents in Afrikaner nationalism. He comes to the conclusion that the NHKA legitimised apartheid in terms of the Church's ideological practice.

documentation and many of the offensive comments are in the correspondence the NHKA had with the WARC when the Hervormde Church resigned from WARC after the Ottawa suspension in 1982.

I pledge the WARC to talk to us not only about the past, which of course, has its due place, but about the present and especially about the future of the NHKA as well. You will soon get to know the members of the General Commission of the NHKA. You will find that our members make no clever or strategic moves. The General Commission has no hidden agenda and is not looking for any political gain with its approach to the WARC. The WARC officers will find dedicated and sincere people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who seek only the will of the Lord – people who are convinced that truth, as Vincent of Lérins put it in the early 5th century,¹⁴ is “that which is believed, *everywhere at all times, and by all people.*”

It is simply unthinkable that any one church on its own can pretend to have the whole truth without listening to what other believers in other places and other times have to say¹⁵. After all, we continuously profess that we are one, catholic (general) church. And this is the whole of our agenda. We merely want to be church of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Nothing more and nothing less. And for this we believe we need the voice of the catholic Christian church, and particularly the voice of the churches of the Reformation of the 16th century.

Truth is not to be seen only as clinical and unattached in the sense of the Vincentian canon. The NHKA in particular believes that truth is much more than and often even quite different from neatly formulated propositions. On the one hand we are modest, acknowledging that we can understand only partly. Even the ancient Greek philosophers believed that something can in fact be known best in its antithesis. For us truth is primarily a Person, written with a capital letter. And whoever misses that existential conclusion in faith also misses the heart of the personal relationship that God has with God's child. The person who does not live *with* God, but who merely wants to speak *about* God, does not know the presence of the Spirit in his or her life. This

¹⁴ In his *Commonitorium, II*, Vincent of Lérins wrote in the year 434 CE, in the aftermath of the Pelagian controversy, the following important sentence: “Now in the catholic church itself the greatest care is taken that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). This is what is truly and properly catholic. This is clear from the force of the word and reason, which understands everything universally. We shall follow ‘universality’ in this way, if we acknowledge this one faith to be true, which the entire church confesses throughout the world. We affirm ‘antiquity’ if we in no way depart from those understandings which it is clear that the greater saints and our fathers proclaimed. And we follow ‘consensus’ if in this antiquity we follow all (or certainly nearly all) the definitions of the bishops and masters” (in McGrath 2000:50).

¹⁵ Karl Barth (1962:819) deals with this issue of truth and church in his CD IV/3 where he warns that the church cannot regard itself as the custodian of the truth and that it holds the content of the Gospel securely. Now it becomes the community which imposes on the Gospel its own faith, mode of thought and outlook.

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means that truth always manifests in the concrete here and now, and that the personal confession should never be understood as timeless and complete.¹⁶

Why do I linger on this? Because I have said that, while being aware of the necessity of coming to terms with the past and confessing the wrongs it contained, we do not wish to dwell on the past so incessantly that we again dwell *in* the past. That is exactly what we want to escape from. It is with conviction that this General Commission of the NHKA and, we believe, the majority of our church members, say unequivocally: we perceive the event, "church", as a community of believers (*communio sanctorum*) that is brought to completion by the Spirit (cf Kasper 2004:50-74). Indeed, a community transcending all barriers of race. For too long have we dwelt on the institutional level of our church life, thus giving priority to its particular rather than its general aspects (Bosch 1983:30). In other words, for too long have we emphasised differences, not seeking and pursuing the similarities and the unity.¹⁷ The indicative of being one in Christ must undeniably lead to the imperative of visible unity, so that the world may believe, yes even more than this, may *know* that the Father and the Son are one and that we must therefore also be one (Jn 17: 20-23).

But I also wish to state unequivocally that, in the light at our disposal and through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts today, we honestly confess that apartheid is indeed a sin and that any attempts to justify it in accordance with the Bible is nothing less than a heresy.¹⁸ In light of Karl

¹⁶ Alister E McGrath (2001:xv) expresses this "exciting, challenging and inspirational" view by means of his admiration of Karl Barth's *protestantische Theologie*: "Above all, I found myself impressed by the intellectual coherence of Barth's vision of 'theological science', and thrilled by the vision Barth offered of a *sustained theological engagement* with the past: 'We cannot be in the church without taking responsibility for the theology of the past as much as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know and that they and we belong together in the church' [Barth 1952:3]" (my emphasis).

¹⁷ In her essay "'They will know we are Christians by our regulated improvisation': Ecclesial hybridity and the unity of the church", Mary M Fulkerson (2006:267) argues: "Historically [referring to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed's four notions of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity], unity is the mark answering the question, where is the church? As a primary term for identity – what is 'the same' about this entity when we meet it in different places, or what makes it 'one thing' – I will think of unity as that which might fill in the predicate in the hymn line, 'They will know we are Christians by our ...'."

¹⁸ I am convinced that we have to take Paul R Griffin's (2004:359) remarks in his essay "Protestantism and racism" seriously because it apply not only to the North American situation, but surely also to the South African: "In *Seeds of Racism in the Soul of America*, one of my goals is to demonstrate that knowledge of the religious history of racism is crucial for two prominent reasons. First, if we are ever to acquire a true grasp of racism's real nature, we must first understand that, whatever else it might be, racism is a religion because we Christians – not crude and unlettered southern plantation owners, as most of our history books are prone to tell us – who first cast racial bigotry into a system of twisted theological ideas. Over the past five centuries this theologically informed racism has become an orthodox confession, not only in the churches but also in secular society. This brings us to the second reason ... The failure of the ... sincere and powerful efforts to end racism affirms that

Barth's (1957:85-87) notion of "natural theology",¹⁹ "racism as religion" is idolatry.²⁰ I am therefore, prepared to endorse the following three previous resolutions of WARC wholeheartedly:

- Frankfurt (1964) declared that racism is nothing less than a betrayal of the gospel. Therefore the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation or part of life of the church contradicts the very nature of the church.
- Nairobi (1970) added that the church of Jesus Christ does not make room for walls, be they tribal, racial, cultural, economic, national or confessional.
- Ottawa (1982) stated that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a heresy. It is not possible to differ from this without jeopardizing the integrity of the common confession of the Reformed churches.

antiblackness is more than the racist practices that can be readily seen by the naked eye. Racism is America, as well as throughout Western societies and South Africa, has always been just as much a matter of evil thoughts in the mind and heart as it has been of concrete deeds of the hand."

¹⁹ I distinguish "natural theology" from a "theology of nature" (cf also Ted Peters 2005:1-2). Peters (2005:1) confirms that systematic theologians "are used to employing two concepts of revelation, natural or general revelation combined with special revelation." Peters confers with Ian Barbour (1997:100) that a "theology of nature does not start from science, as some versions of natural theology do. Instead it starts from a religious tradition based on religious experience and historical revelation." My position, very much in agreement with Barth, is the conviction that "Natural Theology starts with unfaith and finds in nature evidence for the existence of God. Theology of Nature, in contrast, starts with faith and interprets the natural world as God's creation" (Peters 2005:2).

²⁰ Alister McGrath (2001:270) shows how Barth built upon Calvin's insights. "A 'natural theology (*natürliche Theologie*)' is here defined as a theology 'which comes to humanity from nature (*von der Mensch von Natur herkommt* [, *von der Natur her...* – Barth 1958:158])', which expresses humanity's 'self-preservation and self-affirmation' (*Selbstbewahrung und Selbstbehauptung*), in the face of God. Natural theology now becomes the paradigmatic instantiation of the human longing for self-justification, which the appearance of a controlling dialectic between a true theology based upon revelation and human self-justification based upon anthropology" (McGrath 2001:269). Because the "Kirche ist immer auch Welt" (Barth 1958:161), Barth argues that people can easily say that the "Verbürgerlichung" of the gospel is an illusion. However, "Die Illusion, daß wir uns selbst desillusionieren könnten, ist die größte von allen Illusionen. Und eine Theologie, die dem Menschen die natürliche Theologie als solche ausreden und verbieten zu können meint, ist bestimmt selber noch natürliche Theologie. Man darf sich selbst und Andere nicht dadurch in Versuchung führen, daß man es unternimmt, die natürliche Theologie direkt und als solche angreifen und vertilgen zu wollen" (Barth 1958:190).

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The 66th General Church Assembly of 2001 (NHKA 2001) in fact said the same, although within a context that tried to present it in a “balanced” frame of reference, by making the crime and violence experienced today by the then oppressors also part of the confession of guilt. Suddenly white people are at the receiving end of the effects of apartheid. Nevertheless, it was specified unequivocally that the Church a) condemns apartheid and b) confesses her guilt about it.

This balanced evaluation also includes the acknowledgement that individuals who commit (and committed) such atrocities, most certainly have (and had) the freedom and choice to refuse or to decide differently. They will therefore have to answer to God for their atrocities. That guilt must not be passed on to the Church, a government or a system.

It also includes that the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk noted the atrocities committed under the auspices of the Apartheid policy, even by this Church’s own members. For that, the Church expresses its sorrow and remorse before God.

The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk calls for a confession of guilt before God and fellow humans and to a new life where the love of God determines our conduct towards all people.

This General Church Assembly is deeply aware of our Church’s sin, sin to its fullest terrifying extent as the Bible depicts it: Hate, animosity, rebellion, lovelessness, disobedience, and negligence towards God and fellow man.

In truth, we have now addressed the third matter, in fact the actual matter, of your resolution of Ottawa 1982, namely “Unequivocal synod resolutions which reject apartheid and commit the church to dismantle this system in both church and politics.” In the coming discussions we will endeavour to indicate clearly that we comply entirely with the other two matters of the resolution, namely a) “Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from holy communion” and b) “Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid.”

However, and with due respect to you, brothers and sister delegates of the WARC, your letter of 28/10/2005 to us stipulated more conditions than that demanded by the decision of Ottawa 1982. You also requested that we take two more steps, namely membership of the SACC and to reunite with our black mission church, the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika (HKSA). This means that the WARC is demanding *more* from us than it did from the Dutch

Reformed Church (NGK) in 1993 when the WARC handled their request to be readmitted. The Dutch Reformed Church was not a member of the SACC at the time either, neither is their process of reunification completed at this point in time, but continues to this day.

I can react in advance to these two additional conditions you demand by stating explicitly that we have indeed started on our way to obtain membership of the SACC. Our past General Church Assembly required the current Commission to achieve precisely that – *and* I am pleased to tell you that our official letter on the matter has already been sent to the SACC. Beforehand, also, I would like to make two remarks on the other matter, that of reunification. Firstly, the word "re-unite" is incorrect in our context. Unlike the Dutch Reformed Church with her daughter churches, our church and the HKSA have never been one church. We are therefore, in the literal sense of the word, in a process of *un*fication, not *reunification*. And this process *has* indeed started. We will continue to refer in the next few days to our Church's *National Colloquium*²¹ that was convened by the General Commission and held from 27 to 29 April 2006. Its "Declaration of Intent" is attached as an addendum to this address.²² You will notice from it that we intend to move closer to the HKSA in a *church orderly* way. This indeed also means visible unity. We have already met a number of times with the General Commission of the HKSA and each prepared memoranda on the matter.

Please allow me to elaborate on this National Colloquium. It was not a meeting in the strict sense of the word. It was an initiative of the General Commission because we wanted to test our reflections on the identity and calling of our Church within the current South African situation, with reference to a unanimous memorandum of the General Commission. Out of the approximately 130 representatives from throughout the NHKA, representative in terms of geography, age, gender and office, only two persons were explicitly against the "Declaration of Intent", with possibly three more who implicitly jointed ranks with them. In other words, this declaration expresses the quintessence of the thoughts of the NHKA today and we present it with pride.

I already mentioned the fact that our discussions must take place in honesty and that we shall not try to manoeuvre with cunning political moves a favourable situation for us. That is why I feel obligated to refer now also to the

²¹ See section 4 of this article.

²² See section 5 of this article.

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NHKA's right-wing.²³ There are church members and incumbents in the NHKA who are against any ecumenical ties. My personal estimation is that they make up a very small particle of the voice of the Church. But they are there and they make themselves heard.

That is precisely why it is so important to the current General Commission of the NHKA that you should strengthen our hands. You must help us to manage this faction in the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church and to lead us to conversion as a whole. We need your help. You also have work to do in the NHKA! Therefore, take our hands and make our challenge also your challenge!

What we thus present, promise, and urge for in turn, are honesty and impartiality. It was therefore with regret that we had to read last Saturday (03/06/2006) in a national daily newspaper²⁴ that some of our South African brothers and sisters are allegedly of the opinion that the NHKA does not yet comply with the conditions stipulated by the Ottawa Synod in 1982. We find this hard to believe, since these alleged opinions were reported in the press *before* this convention and *before* we were heard. Quite on the contrary, what we honestly believe, is: we *did* achieve exactly this and we think that you as an unprejudiced delegation will be able to determine that for yourselves during these days.

I have to close, but still need to appeal to you. As a systematic theologian I teach my students (and with "students" I mean the students of the NHKA, the students of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church, and the students of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of my esteemed colleague Prof Maake Masango) the following about *remorse* and *forgiveness*.²⁵ Reconciliation is the umbrella term and is possible only if both remorse and forgiveness are present. These latter two matters of course represent the two parties that have to be reconciled. Both these matters, remorse *and* forgiveness, *must* be present, or no reconciliation is possible. Reconciliation is

²³ See, e.g., a letter from the HCM Fourie-Stigting, entitled "Nasionale Colloquium – 'n eenrigting gesprek?", published in *Die Hervormer*, 1 August 2006, p. 2. This letter explicitly lays the blame for the changes with regard to direction, values, style, and culture in [*from* – sic] the NHKA on my personal leadership. The "changes" that the National Colloquium promotes are judged as the fruits of "Social Gospel" and not of "Biblical-Reformational Theology". However, in the published version of my "homiletic speech" – served as the opening address to the Colloquium – I contested the modernistic notion that church life should be based on human deeds alone without a spiritual embeddedness (see Buitendag 2006). In this regard, I confer with Christoph Schwöbel's (2006:58-86) appeal, nicely formulated in the title of his essay published in the *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift*, "Wiederverzaubering der Welt? Die Transzendenzen der Kultur und die Transzendenz Gottes".

²⁴ See remarks in interview with Dr Alan Boesak in *Beeld* of the abovementioned date.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of this interpretation, see Vincent Brümmer (2005:73-111).

therefore dependent on both. But now this. *Forgiveness dare not be made dependent on remorse, and remorse in turn dare not be made dependent on forgiveness.* Each must occur unconditionally, irrespective of the other's reaction and conduct. I should not forgive my sister only on condition that she shows remorse first and my sister should not demonstrate remorse only on condition that I will forgive her. In that case we would be making the two absolute matters dependent on each other and would relativise them in the process. Both must therefore manifest unconditionally, despite the other's reaction. If they don't, reconciliation will not be possible.

The challenge to you is therefore as enormous as the challenge to us! We call on you in your turn to forgive. Unconditionally. We appreciate that it is probably as difficult for you, even more difficult, than it is for us to confess our remorse. But only in this way shall we be able to reach true and deep reconciliation. And this is my sincere prayer. That these next few days will be *dialogue* in the full sense of the word and that we will indeed hear each other's heartbeats. Because dialogue is not merely talking, not even two-way talking. Dialogue does not produce truth; dialogue *discovers* the truth that is given to us once and for all in Jesus Christ (Kasper 2004:38). The main feature of this dialogue is the Christ event itself. And this is also how I perceived your letters, the personal conversations during the past year and also your decision of Ottawa 1982. There your resolution read as follows:

Therefore, the general council, reluctantly and painfully, is compelled to suspend the NGK and the NHKA from the privileges of membership in WARC, until such time as the WARC executive committee has determined that these two churches in their utterances and practice have given evidence of heart. They will be warmly restored to the full privileges of membership when the following changes have taken place

And with this the NHKA has, in our honest opinion, complied with the three changes you have prescribed and to which I have referred. And what is more, we have even complied with the additional two conditions you have required.

Brothers and sisters, welcome! It is my sincere prayer that we will *hear* each other, and, more still, that we will *experience* each other and so feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, and consequently demonstrate the one body of Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all of us. May the Lord guide and bless us in our deliberations. May we all dwell in the house of the Lord throughout the years to come.

THE LORD'S SHEPHERD²⁶

As I receive the Lord's cup at the table,
my thoughts survey the pastures where my flock I keep.
And now I realise how he makes me able:
to shepherd, I myself have to become a sheep!
His lovingkindness only all together
as one united flock enjoy forever!

Anointed for our office in the Lord's fields,
we look ahead for pastures that we all can share.
The safety of the shepherd's staff our Lord wields
for many flocks in one fold he expends with care!
Your lovingkindness, Lord, let all together
as one united church enjoy forever!

3. THE IDENTITY AND RELEVANCE OF THE NHKA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY IN SOUTH AFRICA²⁷

The title of this document may seem pretentious. It may seem as if final answers are given and as if one person or body speaks for and on behalf of the whole of the church. This is not the intention at all. This memorandum has the sole purpose of complying with the Biblical call that we should always be ready to answer anyone who asks us to explain the hope we have in us (1 Pt 3:15). A church exists concretely in a specific situation. Every period and place demand answers – also of our church. The General Council of the 67th General Church Assembly accepts this challenge.

The matter of identity and relevance in the world is of great importance to any church. With this is implied that the church indeed has a specific identity, but that there is always a sense of unease – the believer walks the extra mile, turns the other cheek, blesses where others curse... (Mt 5:38-42). That is the case because we are in the world but not of the world. We are heavenly as well as simply worldly citizens, indeed, citizens of two kingdoms. For that reason members of the church are *similar* to other people, but at the same time radically *different*. Even Paul talked of Christ being offensive to some and nonsense to others (1 Cor 1:23). This dissimilarity or otherness

²⁶ Anonymous. Especially composed for the occasion of the opening's address, based on the Moderator's exegesis of Psalm 23. The hymn was sung by the delegates during the opening ceremony.

²⁷ This memorandum was compiled by the Commission of the General Commission for discussion and endorsement at a National Colloquium in April 2006, attended by representatives of the NHKA.

exists because the values of the Kingdom of God have absolute priority over any other worldly values, cultural or political, in the church. The church, therefore, is an eschatological community. That is why it is so important that those of us who are in the church should constantly be alert that the identification or *fitting* with the world does not become all too equable. The prophetic voice of the church, her otherness and sameness, may never be compromised. However, this otherness may never be justification for withdrawal or uninvolvedness either. Then the *fitting* becomes distorted, and then we are renouncing our purpose in this world. Indeed, the church is, in a manner of speaking, a square peg in a round hole! The moment this situation is terminated, we are no longer church. For this very reason the church is constantly in a crisis. Every church and every congregation must experience this tension all the time. In fact, the church must determine if and how this otherness, amidst the church's distinctiveness, will be embodied.

The reason for and meaning of our existence is Christ alone. The NHKA will always be church of the Word. We profess, in obedience to Scripture as the only source and norm of the ecclesiastical preaching and service, our faith in the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The NHKA, emphatically and in accordance with her confession, regards herself as an embodiment of the one, holy, apostolic and catholic (general) church. The shortest definition we can give of the church, as Order 1 of our Church Order indeed states, is that the church is a *fellowship of believers*. We acknowledge the individual, but at the same time we place him or her within the larger framework of the fellowship of believers. We are of the opinion that the church fundamentally precedes the individual, and not the other way round (Heidelberg Catechism 54). Church is an event and therefore a dynamic community that constantly takes shape in terms of language and culture. In other words, language, culture, economics and politics are contingent, but the Word of God is not. The Word is heard again and again in a specific context. God speaks to us in the present time. The church therefore does not have the salvation, does not measure it out, but experiences the salvation and constantly expresses it in a very human way.

Christ unites us with the church of all ages. We are now living in an interim – it is the time between the worldly, human time and God's time which is open to the future. This interim is the Spirit's field of power that allows us to look forward with eager anticipation to what lies ahead. In this regard the church's story does not differ from that of Israel. Also, the church can not be understood on her own, but only in terms of interrelations within the perspective of hope. In this way the future is united with both the present and the past. The Christological foundation of the church is therefore completed by

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the eschatological dimension. The centre point of a circle is indeed recognisable only in terms of its circumference. The church must therefore always regard all her relations in the light of the future. Since Christ already entered human time and transcended and annulled it with His death and resurrection, the church has indeed already entered the dimension of eternal life. The church now shares in it by means of the Baptism and the Holy Communion.

We believe that God also uses our church in His gracious approach to the world. The gospel enriches us and brings us in motion, and for that reason we must and want to share it with others. Proclaiming the gospel is the heart and soul of being church. We do it both individually and corporately. The NHKA indeed wants to reach out tangibly in her missionary work and proclaim in her diaconate. Unlike the world, we reach out to others, not to be honoured or favoured by it, but that God may be praised. What God does for us, we do unto others, so that they may in turn glorify God (2 Cor 9:11, 12). That is the way and continuation of Christian love. With this we also accommodate others, especially those who are or who think differently, but who also consciously seek and cherish God's loving presence. We believe that our church can and should contribute in the spheres of theology, ethics and ecology and we in no way want to forsake that call.

We also acknowledge the multicoloured character of Christ's church. This diversity emanates from the context of every individual church and also from every congregation. We read in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 in particular of the different gifts and the resulting distinctiveness of congregations and churches. In both these passages the apostle emphasises that the diversity is a characteristic of the transitory, human existence. Yet we cannot be content with this. The unity of the body of Christ remains the characteristic of the work of the one God and one Spirit. Thus, the unity of the church, and not the diversity, is the divine demand. We can also never be content with the diversity and ignore the unity. A conciliatory unity remains the church's task. Also, we do not regard pluriformity and diversity as a threat and we are not of the opinion that all people should speak with one voice. On the contrary, the different voices rising to God in praise are cherished as a wonderful symphony to the glory of God. God's revelation in Christ is indeed so abundant that no one single thing can express it adequately. Nuances of spirituality must therefore be respected rather than repressed. After all, the rainbow with its many colours does not wish to be blended into a grey mass. Admittedly, the existing differences must serve the kingdom and must never become absolute in isolation or in competition.

The crisis of today's church can not be understood separately from the confusion of our society. It is clear that today's society is much different to that of even five or ten years ago. Many people experience it as liberation and joy, others as disillusionment and uncertainty. That, unfortunately, sometimes leads to tension and often also to suspicion. The NHKA wants to hear and tune in to the heartbeat of her people, but never at the cost of the gospel. Where hostility and isolation exist, the church's voice against it must be heard loud and clear. Where self-centredness is discerned, the church must once more bring an external focus and hope. That is why a collective vision is so very important. It is the star that sparkles on the horizon, the force that draws us into the future.

For this reason the General Council accepted a vision and a mission in March 2005 that express this hope: *Our dream is that all people will believe in Jesus Christ as hope for the world.* The way we envisage to achieve this, is that the church, as a fellowship of believers, will celebrate our faith in Jesus Christ in word and song, will be of service to people and will bear witness to the salvation in Christ. The shared values that support this ministry should be: *humility* in our life before God, *level-headedness* in our application of the Word, and *compassion* in our relations with each other and with other people.

We are of the opinion that truth can not be utterly grasped in a doctrine. Truth is primarily a Person and essentially transcends all concepts and propositions. It is no rational comprehension of the current reality, but an encounter with the living God. On the basis of Romans 10:9 we distinguish between *homology* and *credo*. With the former we mean to say that the confession primarily deals with an existential deed with which you bind yourself to Christ, and only secondary with an account of the salvation history on which this personal decision is based. Thus this element is the *credo* that relates to faith as the content of the doctrine. To us, being church is therefore primarily a *life issue* and not an *academic issue*. Members of our church are fully aware of the fact that God is in heaven and we are on earth (Eccl 5:1). This of course leads to modesty. We realise therefore that man can never say the last word, that reality is much greater than a simple yes or no spoken by a human being. Often something is known in its very opposite, and that is why complementarity is fundamentally important for our understanding of reality.

Other churches are important to us. We believe that churches worldwide and of all times are indeed one church and that this unity in ecumenical ties must be pursued prudently. Ecumenism takes shape every time a church recognises herself in another church and in that way identifies herself as a member of this one church of Jesus Christ. That is why we should also listen to other churches and learn from them. A church of the

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Reformation must in fact always reform. A church that stepped onto the ecumenical road can no longer attempt in her own doctrine to justify only her own confession against other confessions. Therefore, joint study and cooperation with other churches are essential.

The foundation of the ecumenical movement rests in Christ's prayer (Jn 17:21): ... *That they may all be one*. The Bible's indicative of this unity is also a basis for our understanding of our relationship with other churches. *There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all* (Eph 4:4-6). We acknowledge that it can not be understood without this imperative: church unity is indeed a given of the collective faith in Christ, but at the same time it is also a command to let the collective mission come to life. The hope that believers and churches share, brings us in motion and eventually brings us together: *Instead, by speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we must grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head: Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love* (Eph 4:15-16). With the ecumenical endeavour, churches become complete. Churches must therefore also watch vigilantly over *the doctrine that is expressed in the confession*, namely that *Jesus Christ is the Lord*. This conviction of the church lets us view and handle unity for the most part theologically and not sociologically.

The relationship with the *Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika* (HKSA) is precious to us. This bond, dating back to 1923, is never regarded lightly or viewed as unimportant. Although we regard the present state of this church primarily as testimony of our missionary work, we also wish to acknowledge and value the HKSA as a complete and independent church. The subsidy of the NHKA to the HKSA is meant, and has never been intended differently, as an apostolic outreach from a church that received more material blessings and can not fail to share it. Diaconal support may therefore in no way imply an obvious acceptance of *employmentship* or *prescriptiveness*. Consequently, we want to continue to assist the HKSA financially, theologically and pastorally for as long as we are able to. However, our relationship is symmetrical, and we realise that we can and want to learn just as much from the HKSA as they can possibly learn from us. We are convinced that Africa has much to offer Christianity, inter alia liturgically, communionly, diaconally, pastorally and apostolically. We admit that we have received much from this church and we look forward with anticipation to what we can receive in the future.

Every congregation is responsible for the church's work at grass-roots level. The church is neither governed from the top to the bottom nor from the bottom to the top. Church is where the fellowship of believers is realised in history due to the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the essence of the church is expressed concretely in history. That is why every congregation must act and work out of her own niche and within her own situation. Only then can justice be done to the dialectics between church and congregation, between congregation and church member. We can not proclaim the true salvation (= wholeness) in Christ if we are divided at grass-roots level. Actual unity is attained when the church proclaims the unity in Christ and fulfils it explicitly in her ministry. For this reason we appeal to our congregations to associate in brotherliness and sisterliness with congregations of other churches and also with the HKSA. Our fundamental relationship is that of brothers and sisters in faith, of partnership, if we may use the secular term. To put it briefly, unity *is* not, it *happens*. Therefore unity is being on our way together to the one hope we must hold on to with all our might.

We do not want to become involved, in the modernist sense of the word, in a merging process with the HKSA. That would negate all diversity and history is filled with examples of unity at the cost of diversity. Hence we seek, in a post-modern way, unity within the diversity and diversity within the unity. We believe that it is indeed possible for every church to maintain her individuality and at the same time be encompassed organisationally under the larger umbrella of a Reformed church. The Dutch model of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) has succeeded in creating a *house with many rooms* where different churches and congregations can feel at home without giving up their own identities. In fact, other reformed churches in South Africa should also form part of such a greater unity. After all, it is the pronounced objective of the Interchurch Council (TKR) and now also of its Convent of Reformed Churches. However, we still cherish the ethos and specific character of the NHKA.

In all of this we still acknowledge our brokenness and sin. No church in history existed without people. Although these people form a fellowship of believers, they are at the same time a community of sinners. The vertical section (between invisible and visible) must not be seen horizontally as between *us* and *them*, as if the 'mixed body' would mean that the church comprises of two groups, sinners and believers. No, every believer is at the same time 'sinner and justified'. I carry this mixture within myself! The battle between God and evil rages even in my own heart. Of course, the church should not merely accept this fact, but should fight the battle where good will triumph over evil. Being church can therefore never be realised without

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repentance and conversion, neither can it be without conflict and eventual triumph. This turns church into a graced community in transit. All of this humbles us and makes us dependent on the powerful God. Ultimately, it lets us pray, *Kyrie eleison*, but, at the same time, *Maranata!*

4. THE NHKA'S NATIONAL COLLOQUIUM'S JOINT DECLARATION OF INTENT

4.1 Mission

The content of our mission as church is God-given and determines our identity. We believe that God has called us, as the body of Christ, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world and to the world. In our changing world we should continuously consider whether we still abide by God's will in the way we live and act.

4.2 Church

The fact that our identity is determined by the values of God's Kingdom and not those of the world, makes us unique. The church is a community unlike any other, yet it comes to life within the context of its own tradition, culture and language. We must propagate this mission to all people, and the term *national church* may impede upon our efforts.²⁸

God's involvement in the lives of people is so rich that it can not be adequately expressed in a single form. The church of Christ is multicoloured, as reflected by the diversity of churches, congregations and believers. Varying nuances of spirituality, experiences of God and liturgical forms are therefore respected within the contours of the church tradition, and are regarded as enriching. We do not find pluriformity and diversity threatening, neither do we believe that all people should speak with one voice. However, unlike diversity, unity is indeed an evangelical demand.

Personal preferences may not result in conflict or discord, but should resonate together in a symphony to the glory of God.

²⁸ The term used in the Afrikaans Church Order is "volkskerk" which carries a connotation of a specific ethnicity – in this case Afrikaners. In accordance to Ordinance 10.1 of the NHKA's Church Order the General Commission decided to formally request an amendment of the Church Order. At the same meeting on 7 September 2006 the General Commission granted the editor of *HTS Theological Studies* permission for the publication of this official appeal (see Annexure at the end of this article) to the coming General Synod of the NHKA in 2007 that Ordinances 1 and 4 of the Church Order should be revised, recommending the replacement of the concepts "national church" ("volkskerk") with "God's people" (letter to *HTS'* editor by the Scribe of the General Commission, Dr W A Dreyer, dated 8 September 2006).

4.3 Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika (HKSA)

The relationship between the NHKA and the HKSA illustrates something of the multicoloured nature of the church of Christ. In our interactions with other churches we become even more aware of our own identity. The HKSA and NHKA are drawn closer together by the Word of God, the unity in Christ, our confession and our solidarity. We realise that this unity is not always reflected in our mutual conduct. We are convinced that a more official form of unity between the NHKA and the HKSA should be pursued by means of church ordinances, following a process that takes into consideration the individual identities of the different religious communities. The unity should also become tangible in the cooperation between congregations locally and at synodal level. Within this cooperation a symmetrical relationship is pursued, where people listen to one another with love and respect, and learn from and are strengthened by one another's faith, hope and love.

4.4 Ecumenical orientation

We regard it as important to participate actively in the ecumenical arena. We should actively strive to live ecumenically, also on congregational level. This way the one, holy, catholic Christian church becomes visible, enabling us to make a difference in the world.

4.5 World

The church is God's servant in the world and therefore has no choice but to be involved in the distress of people both in and out of the church community. In this process, the NHKA joins forces with other churches and organisations. We pray that God will help us to not take part in the wounding of people, and that He will open our eyes to recognise and alleviate their need. Where the church makes a difference, the world experiences hope.

4.6 Confession/Creed

To confess flows from an encounter with the living God. We distinguish between *homology* (to confess existentially) and *credo* (that which is confessed). With the former we wish to convey that all aspects of a person's existence should express that he or she belongs to God. The latter is an attempt to give structure to the experience of redemption through formal doctrines, such as confessions of faith. We distinguish between a *confession* church and a *confessing* church. The NHKA wants to be a confessing church because we believe that a doctrine cannot adequately capture the truth. Truth is first and foremost a Person and transcends all human attempts at formulation. The process of being church is primarily a *life issue* and not an

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academic issue for an institutional church that wishes to be a confessing church. We live in the presence of God by His grace alone. Building on the formulations of confessions of the past, every new context requires of us a renewed confession. The expression of our confession may therefore be different today than in the past. We are acutely aware of the fact that God is great and that we are small. This makes us humble when we talk about God.

4.7 Future

We confess that God calls the church to proclaim to all people that Jesus Christ is the hope for the world. Fellowship with the Holy Spirit creates the space for fellowship with God and one another. We want to *celebrate* our faith in word and song, *bear witness* of the salvation in Christ, and *serve* all people. The values we strive to uphold and live according to in this ministry are *level-headedness* in our dealings with the Word, *humility* in our life before God, and *love and compassion* towards other people. Our failure to realise this calling reminds us that despite being church of God, we are still broken human beings. As church we therefore wish to continuously confess our sins before God and to turn towards Him in utter dependence.

5. A LETTER FROM WARC'S GENERAL SECRETARY

Dear Prof Johan Buitendag and Rev Wim Dreyer.²⁹ Warm greetings from the WARC family. Since we left Pretoria, I had one full day in the office in Geneva on Monday and had to leave for the USA on Tuesday. I am still here in Birmingham, Alabama, for the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly. Hence, it is only now that I am getting back to you.

I write to express appreciation for the time the WARC team spent visiting the NHKA. We are grateful for your hospitality and all the investment of time and commitment to the process which brought us to Pretoria. Please extend our gratitude to all who participated in one way or the other in making our visit successful. We thank especially Ms. Charmain Lines who took care of most of the logistics.

After the last session with the Commission, the team spent its last three hours together back at the Guest House finalising the documents. The attached are in their final shape. Each has some changes which reflect both the discussions we had with you in the morning and some additional reflections of the team. We have tried to accommodate as much as possible

²⁹ This letter is dated 16 June 2006. It was mailed from the address: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 150 route de Ferney, PO Box 2100, 211 Geneva, 2 Switzerland. It is addressed to Prof Johan Buitendag, The Moderator, and to Dr Wim Dreyer, Scribe, of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA, PO Box 2368, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.

the reflections from the morning – though not all of them. And we also felt a couple of omissions from the document we presented needed to be reinserted.

The paper from our visit is now final. That is what we are now submitting to you and to our Officers and Executive Committee. The second paper is the joint agreement. That is submitted now only to you. Once we receive your feedback and changes you would like to suggest, then we will go through the process of finalising it and then we will submit it also to WARC Officers and the Executive Committee.³⁰

We praise God for the commitment we all (WARC and the NHKA leadership) have in wanting to do the hard work that will result in seeing the NHKA back in the family. May God bless you. Sincerely yours.³¹

6. THE WAY FORWARD

6.1 Preamble³²

The WARC team visited the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA) from Monday, June 5, to Thursday, June 8, 2006. The team held discussions with the leadership of the NHKA in a number of configurations:

- The Moderature
- An expanded Commission of the NHKA General Assembly
- The Ecumenical Council

³⁰ On request to publish the “Proposed Joint Resolution between WARC and the NHKA” as part of this article Dr Setri Nyomi (e-mail July 10, 2006) replied: “On the basis that the publication will help the process of discussion towards next year’s General Assembly, I have no problems with publishing the NHKA paper. So you do have my permission to publish it, However, the second document [i.e. the “Joint Resolution” and “Conclusions and Recommendations” – *HTS* editor] is of different nature. That one the NHKA and WARC will have to agree on the final wording before it becomes an official document. So I will prefer to have your Moderamen feedback, and our officers to look at it in November before we can deem it appropriate for any public consumption”. *HTS*’s editor decision: Since the NHKA’s General Commission officially endorsed the “Joint Resolution”, Dr Setri Nyomi’s letter is documented as part of this article, however without the General Commission’s official response and without the WARC’s team’s final “Conclusions and Recommendations”, in expectation of WARC’s final resolution in 2007.

³¹ Enclosures to the letter included the abovementioned “NHKA paper” (see section 6 of this article and (b) the abovementioned “NHKA Joint Resolution” (see section 7 of this article). As conclusion, the letter was signed by Rev Dr Setri Nyomi, General Secretary.

³² This “Joint Resolution” is introduced by mentioning the names of the WARC team members: Rev Dr Setri Nyomi (General Secretary), Rev Peggy Mulambya Kabonde (Zambia), Rev Sandy Horsburgh (Scotland), Rev Dr Felix Chingota (Malawi), Rev Dr Egbert Rooze (Belgium), Rev Prof Thias Kgatla (South Africa), Rev Dr Kobus Gerber (South Africa).

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- The NHKA members of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria.

The team also visited the leaders of the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika (HKSA), as well as the leaders of WARC member churches in South Africa.

We also received a number of documents, which were very informative in the process. We regret that we received some of the critical documents only while we were in Pretoria. The documents include the current Church order, the 2001 General Assembly agenda, the 2004 General Assembly minutes, the April 2006 Colloquium report and the opening statements of the Moderator at the April colloquium and also of the team in June 2006.

The main task was to help WARC's Executive Committee, which will meet in October 2007, to determine the extent to which the NHKA in its actions and practices has fulfilled the conditions set by the 21st General Council for warmly restoring our sisters and brothers to the full privileges of membership. These are:

- Black Christians are no longer excluded from Church services, especially Holy Communion.
- Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer(ed) under the system of apartheid.
- Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the Church to dismantling this system in both church and politics.

7. THE JOINT RESOLUTION BETWEEN THE WARC AND THE NHKA

Both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA) express their desire to restore the membership of the NHKA after their withdrawal from the Alliance in 1982 following their suspension by the 21st General Council, and to see the NHKA warmly welcomed back into active membership with full privileges in the family of WARC.

- As part of this action, the Alliance reaffirms its repudiation of any theological justification of apartheid as a matter of status confessionis for the churches inasmuch as such a theological justification is a

travesty of the gospel and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.³³

- As part of this action, the NHKA through its General Assembly, meeting in 2007, within the framework of the decision of WARC (paragraph 1 above), assures the Alliance that it rejects apartheid as wrong and sinful not simply in its effects and operations but also in its fundamental nature.
- WARC pledges to continue to work pastorally with the NHKA and other churches in Southern Africa in the process of unity and reconciliation.
- Upon visible concrete changes expressed clearly in all NHKA instruments of governance and intent for church unity called for in the WARC team visit of June 2006 by the NHKA General Assembly of 2007, and after the WARC Executive Committee of 2007 is fully satisfied that is the case, the NHKA will be re-admitted into WARC.

Both WARC and the NHKA give thanks to God for this act of reconciliation and pray that it will strengthen the joint witness of all Reformed Churches both in Southern Africa and throughout the world.

³³ For the purposes of this resolution, the word 'heresy' is to be interpreted in terms of the following extract from the pastoral letter to the Dutch Reformed Church from the Alliance: "There has been some confusion over what the Ottawa General Council meant when it called the theological justification of *apartheid* 'heresy'. This term should not be understood to imply 'excommunication'. WARC is not a church but a fellowship of churches; therefore, it possesses no authority to excommunicate. WARC does not presume to judge whether those who in the past taught the rightness of *apartheid* will be damned or saved. Reformed people leave the dead to the merciful judgment of God. WARC intended to convey its profound concern for the responsibility of the living church to teach faithfully the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the teachers of the church stand under God's judgment, accountable for their stewardship of the mysteries of God. 'Heresy' is persistent and deliberate teaching of false doctrine after the error has been pointed out by the wider church. This term conveys WARC's conviction that the theological justification of apartheid was not simply an 'error' in stating doctrine or a disagreement in matters where there is freedom to disagree but rather a fundamental perversion and deformation of the heart of the gospel."

ANNEXURE BY HTS' EDITOR³⁴

Voorstel tot wysiging van Ordereël 1 en Ordereël 4 deur die Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering van die NHKA, Opgestel op 7 September 2006

Aangesien die Kerkorde (Ordereël 10.1) bepaal dat die Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering minstens een jaar voor die volgende Algemene Kerkvergadering 'n voorstel ter wysiging van 'n Ordereël van die Kerkorde aan al die betrokke rade, ouderlinge- en ringsvergaderings moet voorlê vir kommentaar, en aangesien die Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering op sy vergadering van 7 September 2006, ná voorafgaande studie en besprekings, besluit het om in die Kerkorde na die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika en die Kerk se gemeentes alleen in die gees van die Woord van God en die kerklike belydenis te verwys, en sosiale terme – soos 'volk' – wat nie noodwendig op gelowiges dui nie, te vermy, en aangesien dit implikasies vir Ordereël 4 van die Kerkorde het, en aangesien die voorstel behels dat ook Ordereël 1 van die Kerkorde geraak word, word nou derhalwe deur die Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering voorgestel dat die eerste paragraaf van Ordereël 1 die laaste paragraaf van Ordereël 4 van die Kerkorde sal vervang en wel met twee gepaardgaande veranderings, te wete dat die woord 'kerk' in Ordereël 4 met 'n hoofletter geskrywe word en dat die woord 'volk', soos tans in Ordereël 1, gekwalifiseer word deur die Bybelteks 1 Petrus 2:9 tussen hakies daarnaas te plaas. Dit beteken dat die betrokke twee ordereëls soos volg sal lees:

Ordereël 1

Ons, die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, bely in gemeenskap met die kerk van alle eeue ons geloof in die Drie-enige God, Vader, Seun en Heilige Gees wat Hom en alles wat vir ons verlossing nodig is, duidelik en voldoende deur sy Woord, die Bybel, bekend maak.

Ons belydenis is in die drie ekumeniese belydenisse verwoord, naamlik die Apostoliese Geloofsbelydenis, die Geloofsbelydenis van Nicea en die Geloofsbelydenis genoem na Atanasius; asook in drie Reformatoriese belydenisskrifte, die drie formuliere van eenheid, te wete: die Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis, die Heidelbergse Kategismus en die Dordtse Leerreëls.

³⁴ This formal petition to the coming General Synod of the NHKA in 2007 is recorded in Afrikaans. *HTS'* editor (Prof Andries G van Aarde) formally requested the authorization for publishing the official appeal of the General Commission to the General Synod of the NHKA in 2007 that Ordinances 1 and 4 of the Church being revised. This request is granted at the meeting of the General Commission on 7 September 2006 (letter to *HTS'* editor by the Scribe of the General Commission, Dr W A Dreyer, dated 8 September 2006).

Ordereël 4

'n Gemeente is

- 'n gemeenskap van gelowiges wat selfstandig georganiseer is en deur die eenheid in geloof en belydenis saam met al die ander gemeentes die Kerk is;
- die wyse waarop die Kerk op 'n bepaalde plek bestaan.

Die Kerk is

- 'n gemeenskap van gelowiges wat God deur sy versoening in Christus tot stand bring en in stand hou deurdat Hy mense in Jesus Christus in genade uitkies en deur die werk van die Heilige Gees saambring om deur die Woord en sakramente 'n heilige volk (1 Petrus 2:9) te wees en dienswerk in die wêreld te verrig.

Motivering vir die vervanging van die begrip 'volkskerk' met 'heilige volk (1 Petrus 2:9)' in die Kerkorde

A. INLEIDEND

Die begrip 'volkskerk' het byna sinoniem met die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk geraak. Dit is 'n tradisie wat reeds uit die negentiende eeu dateer. Vir baie jare al het Christene van ander kerke – in Suid-Afrika en ook in die res van die wêreld – egter as gevolg hiervan 'n persepsie oor die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk gevorm wat vir die Kerk nie goed is nie. Weliswaar het die Kerk dit in die verlede beklemtoon dat die Hervormde Kerk die volkskerk anders verstaan; dat kerk *vir* die volk en nooit kerk *van* die volk is nie. Hierdie argument het egter nie genoemde persepsie oor die Hervormde Kerk verander nie, omdat dit nie genoegsaam die gevaar verreken het dat mense – ook lidmate van die Hervormde Kerk self – die grense van kerk en volk met mekaar laat saamval nie. Ons het dus nie daarin geslaag om aan te toon dat die begrip 'volkskerk' vir die Kerk 'n praktiese aangeleentheid is en wat ons nooit bedoel het om Skriftuurlik en teologies te begrond nie. Grondige teologiese argumente, gefundeer op die evangelie en ons Reformatoriese erfenis, eis van ons vandag om genoemde persepsie ernstig te neem. In talle publikasies het sekere Hervormde teoloë inderdaad op die teologiese problematiek van 'n kerkbegrip gewys wat geformuleer word in terme van 'n natuurlike kategorie soos 'volk' en nie in terme van 'n Bybelse kategorie soos 'volk van God' (in 1 Petrus 2:9 genoem 'heilige volk') nie. In die besinning oor ons verstaan van die kerk, kan ons as 'n kerk wat graag na ons teologie verwys as Bybels-Reformatories, dit ook nie anders doen as deur te luister na die Woord van God alléén nie. Tiperend van hierdie teologiese denkwysie is dat ons, in die gees van die Reformasie, ook nie anders oor kerk kan dink as in terme van God se *genade alléén* nie. In kort, dit is hierdie grondslag en erfenis wat die Kommissie daartoe gebring het om bogenoemde beskrywingspunt aan die Kerk vir besinning en besluit voor te lê.

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Onderstaande motivering bevat besinning oor (a) die herkoms van die begrip 'volkskerk' in Europa en die kritiek daarop; (b) die voorkoms daarvan in Suid-Afrika; (c) Bybels-teologiese perspektiewe en (d) 'n slotsom.

B. HERKOMS IN EUROPA

Die negentiende en die twintigste eeu was die tyd toe humanisme in Europa die kerk en die wêreld direk beïnvloed het. Menswees was met ander woorde nie vanuit die genade alléén verstaan nie, maar wel vanuit die feilbaarheid van die natuur. Hierdie siening het ook bygedra tot die verwêreldliking van die kerklike lewe. In Nederland was die bedoeling van die 'volkskerkteologie' weliswaar die 'ver-Christeliking' van kultuur. Wat egter op grond van die hoogbloeï van humanisme daarop gevolg het, was 'n 'burgerlike teologie' en 'n 'kultuurpropaganda' in die naam van sending. Die Protestantse teoloog, Karl Barth, het hierdie 'verburgerliking van die evangelie' toe ook baie duidelik uitgewys. Hy het wel erkenning gegee aan die implikasies dat die kerk *in* die wêreld bestaan en daarom bepaalde kultuurvorme vertoon, maar sonder dat kultuurbehoud as sodanig die opdrag van die kerk word of die grense van die kerk durf bepaal. Evangelies gesien, mag die kerk, soos die koninkryk van God, egter nie as *van* die wêreld beskou word nie. Volgens hierdie Bybels-Reformatoriese teologie is 'n kerk nie die ruimte waar die waardes *van die wêreld* verwerklik behoort te word nie, maar in gehoorsaamheid aan die bedoeling van die Woord van God, moet die waardes *van die koninkryk* van God in die kerk uitgeleef word. Die Protestantse kerke in Nederland en Duitsland het daarom bewustelik van hierdie tipe kerkwees en sendingwerkwyse afskeid geneem – onder andere ook bewus van die gevolge van kolonialisme en nasionaalsosialisme.

Kerk en teologie het dus op grond van die evangelie, in die lig van die geskiedenis in Duitsland, die etnies meerderwaardige en humanistiese gebruik van die term 'volk' in nasionaal-sosiale terme, destyds as 'n sondige verskynsel ontmasker. Selfs die gebruik van die term 'volk' as liberaal-demokratiese ideaal waar 'gelyke geleentheid' vir alle mense beklemtoon is, is niks anders as net nog 'n humanistiese ideologie nie. Teenoor humanisme beklemtoon die Bybels-Reformatoriese teologie God se versoening, geregtigheid en barmhartigheid.

Die kerkorde van 'n Protestantse kerk verwoord nie 'n hiërargiese orde nie. Dit verwoord selfs ook nie die ideale van die demokrasie nie en sien nie hierdie ideale as die evangeliese norm vir kerkwees nie. Kerkregering is diensbaar aan Christus as Hoof van kerk en wêreld. Volgens die evangelie bestaan die 'wet van Christus' uit God se onbegrensde liefde. Een van die teologiese verleidings van die liberale demokrasie was juis dat die 'stem van die volk' in kerkordelike terme met die 'stem van God' (die werk van die Heilige Gees) verwar is. In 'kerkregering' geld nie die meerderheidstem soos in die demokrasie nie, maar wel die 'wet van Christus'.

In Nederlands het die term 'volkskerk' semanties die begrip 'volk' as die breë samelewing van die hele Nederland ingehou. 'Kerk' is daarom wyer verstaan as alleen die verbond van gelowiges terwyl die doop die latere wedergeboorte veronderstel het. Die term 'volkskerk' het gevolglik daartoe gelei dat in werklikheid

teruggekeer word na die voor-Christelike idee van 'n 'natuurlike volk' waarvan lidmaatskap bloot deur die besnydenis aangedui word.

C. VOORKOMS IN SUID-AFRIKA

Die geskiedenis van die begrip 'volkskerk' in Suid-Afrika toon dat die aanvanklike bedoeling van die gebruik in die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk verander het. Sekere Nederlandse teoloë (byvoorbeeld Hoedemaker) was in die vorige eeu van mening dat die genadeverbond die grondslag vir die volk vorm en Duitse teoloë (byvoorbeeld Warneck) dat die term 'volkskerk' die beste uitdrukking gee aan die kerk se apostolaat. Daarmee is, *sosiologies gesien*, eensyds die Nederlandse volk as sodanig bedoel – met die teologiese bedoeling dat die kerk 'n Christelike waarde tot die volk se kulturele lewe sal toevoeg. Andersyds, *teologies gesien*, is daar weer gedink dat kerkvorming op volksmatige wyse deur sending behoort plaas te vind. Beide hierdie twee sake (hierdie kerkbegrip in Nederland en sendingwerkwyse in Duitsland) het die Hervormde Kerk se teologie in Suid-Afrika beslissend beïnvloed.

In die lig van die voorafgaande is die agtergrond van die oorsprong en gebruik van die begrip 'volkskerk' in die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk duidelik. Die begrip kom uit die politieke en kulturele aspirasies van die Afrikaner sedert die 19e eeu. Dit dateer uit die ou ZAR-grondwet wat onder andere op die Franse en Amerikaanse vryheidsmanifeste gesteun het. Hierdie 'republikeinse' ideaal het die wil van die volk (demokrasie) bó dié van die monargie (aristokrasie) geplaas. Ten spyte daarvan dat hierdie verwikkeling positief gewaardeer kan word, neem dit nie weg dat dit 'n produk van die humanisme is nie.

Ons het begrip daarvoor dat die politieke beleid van 'afsonderlike ontwikkeling' in Suid-Afrika positief gesien is en dat daar 'n tyd was, ook in die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, dat daar met goeie bedoelings probeer is om dit teologies te regverdig. In die lig van ons insigte vandag erken ons egter dat humanistiese ideale nie in 'n Kerkorde tuishoort nie, maar slegs evangeliese waardes. Ons besef ook dat die begrip 'volkskerk' in Suid-Afrika se meervolkige samelewing, om die minste daaroor te sê, problematies is. Daar is nie net een volk in Suid-Afrika nie en die Hervormde Kerk is kwalik 5% van diegene wat hulleself Afrikaners noem. In die veranderende sosio-godsdienslike klimaat van ons dag, dien die begrip 'volkskerk' nie meer die kerk se apostolaat nie. Ons sien Karl Barth se oortuiging in dat hierdie (en ander humanistiese) kwalifikasies van kerkwees die versoeking bevat dat die merktekens van die kerk, soos uitgedruk in die kerklike belydenis – te wete eenheid, algemeenheid en heiligheid – ontkrachtig kan word.

Hoe humanisme die kerklike belydenis van die eenheid, algemeenheid en heiligheid van die kerk in gedrang gebring het, kan onder andere gesien word in die feit dat die ZAR-grondwet bepaal het dat inheemse stamme geen gelyke regte in kerk en staat sou hê nie. Hier het dit duidelik oor sosiale waardes soos onder andere 'gelykheid' gegaan. Na die beëindiging van die bestaan van die ZAR in 1902 het die NHKA in 1904 besluit om 'n artikel 2 (later artikel 3) in die destydse Kerkwet op te neem wat bepaal het dat slegs blanke persone aan die Kerk kon behoort. Hierdie politieke motief het mettertyd met die opbloei van nasionalisme sterker geword en 'n

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'teologiese' legitimering daarvan in die NHKA was toe die gevolg. In byvoorbeeld die Herderlike Skrywe van 1973 word kommer uitgespreek oor die moontlike oorheersing van een groep (Swartes) oor 'n ander (Wittes). Hierdie skrywe het ook gedien as verdediging van die destydse Artikel 3 van die Kerkwet. Rasvermenging en afsonderlike kerkvorming in 'volksmatige' sin – in ooreenstemming met 'n politieke beleid van 'afsonderlike ontwikkeling' – is deur middel van Artikel 3 gesien as 'n "blywende en *onveranderlike* beginsel wat Skriftuurlik gefundeer is" (onderstreping oorspronklik). In die lig van die evangelie en die kerklike belydenis erken ons vandag dat so 'n uitgangspunt nie ons kerkwees mag bepaal nie. Hierdie erkenning ontnem egter nie ons ideaal om steeds die kulturele lewe met evangeliese waardes te deursuur nie.

D. BYBELS-TEOLOGIESE PERSPEKTIEWE

J P Oberholzer het in 1999 reeds uitgewys dat Ordereël 4 sowel 'n logiese as 'n teologiese teenstrydigheid bevat. Enersyds wil dit die evangelie primêr aan die 'Afrikanervolk' verkondig, maar andersyds tegelyk ook aan 'alle mense'. Aangesien dit as 'n ordereël verskans word (kyk Ordereël 10.1), dui dit verder daarop dat die volkskerkbegrip 'n prinsipiële aangeleentheid is en nie bloot 'n praktiese maatreël soos dikwels in die verlede betoog is nie. Hiermee word die verskeidenheid in die skepping op dieselfde vlak as die eenheid van die liggaam van Christus geplaas.

Die skeur van die voorhangsel in die tempel na aanleiding van Jesus Christus se sterwe en opstanding, dui op God se onvoorwaardelike aanvaarding van alle mense in die geloofsgemeenskap. Ook Efesiërs 2:14-16 beklemtoon dat Christus die 'muur van skeiding' tussen mense in die kerk afgebreek het. Hierdie boodskap van 'verskeidenheid in eenheid' word kragtig in Efesiërs 4, soos ook in onder andere 1 Korintiërs 12 en Romeine 12, verkondig. Die 'sosiologiese' onmoontlikheid het deur Christus 'n 'teologiese' moontlikheid geword (Hoekendijk). Volgens ons belydenis raak die eenheid van die kerk die wese van kerkwees. Verskeidenheid dui hoogstens op die 'welwese' van die kerk, maar nie op die kerk se 'wese' nie. Soos ander dinge in die sosiale geskape wêreld, word verskeidenheid *waargeneem*; eenheid word egter *geglo en bely*. Eersgenoemde is 'n *skeppingsaangeleentheid*, laasgenoemde 'n *herskeppingsaangeleentheid*. Die wêreld moet weet dat soos Jesus en die Vader één is, gelowiges ook één moet wees, sodat die wêreld kan glo dat Jesus God se gestuurde is (Johannes 17:21).

Dit behoort duidelik te word dat die begrip 'volk' in 'volkskerk' juis meebring dat 'n natuurkategorie konstitutief tot 'n kerkbegrip gereken word. Vroeër is die bestaan van verskillende volke as 'n Goddelike skeppingsordening gesien. Vorige studies in opdrag van Algemene Kerkvergaderings het eksegeties reeds onder andere aangetoon dat Psalm 74:17 nie die ondersteuning vir 'n bepaalde verstaan van Handeling 17:26 bied om te meen dat God die grense tussen volke ewig vasgestel het nie. Die psalmis wou bloot die grense tussen grond en see aantoon en daarmee dus die plek waar die nasies sal woon (te wete die land). Die boodskap van Handeling 17 is buitendien duidelik, naamlik dat dit 'n kerklike opdrag is dat die apostels mense van verskillende kulture en natuurlike agtergronde, ten spyte en te

midde van menslike teenkating en kulturele konflik, in die kerk moet insluit. Dit is boonop ook duidelik dat die spraakverwarring van Genesis 11 nie in die gees van 'n positiewe skeppingsordering geskied het nie, maar in die gees van 'n negatiewe strafmaatreeël. Die mense was óngehoorsaam aan God se wil en vandaar die ingrype van God.

Die huidige Ordereël 4 lei onmiskenbaar tot die persepsie dat die NHKA eksklusiwiteit voorstaan en sodoende die belydenis van die eenheid, algemeenheid en heiligheid van die kerk in gedrang bring. Die boodskap van die Skrif is dat die evangelie ook – en veral – gerig is op die geringstes van die samelewing. Almal is in die koninkryk van God welkom en alle gelowiges moet daarom tuiste in die kerk as geloofsgemeenskap vind, selfs teen alle konvensies in. Hierdie opdrag tot eenheid van geloof, ook in die plaaslike gemeente, is nie net 'n transendente geloofswerklikheid wat slegs in die hemel moontlik is nie. Markus 10 en Matteus 19 en 20, onder andere, toon hoe Jesus juis ruimte aan die geringes van destyds gee – veral vroue, armes, kinders en vreemdelinge. Matteus 28:19 is ook allermens 'n kerklike opdrag tot kulturele volksbehoud, kultuurpropaganda of selfs die 'ver-Christeliking van die kultuur'. Die groot sendingopdrag in Matteus 28:16-20 (wat in die vorige Kerkwet as Skriftuurlike onderbou van Artikel 3 gedien het) bevat die opdrag dat die ganse menslike geslag dissipels van Jesus Christus gemaak en gedoop moet word en dat sy liefde in woord en daad deur gedooptes uitgeleef moet word. Die argument van die verlede dat volkskerk in terme van die apostolêre gerigtheid van die NHKA verstaan moet word, is Skriftuurlik gesien, agterhaal.

E. SLOTSOM

In die begrip 'volkskerk' word twee 'soorte' (*genera*) met mekaar vermeng, wat teologies 'n kategoriale onsuiverheid bevat. Kerk word in Ordereël 4 tegelyk 'van bo' (genade) en 'van onder' (natuur) verstaan. Dit veronderstel dat die raakvlak tussen God en mens nie 'n saak van die geloof is nie, maar van die natuur. God praat met ons alleen deur Woord en Gees en Jesus Christus is die vleesgeworde Woord van God. 'n Natuurlike teologie wat dít uitsluit, is vir ons onaanvaarbaar omdat dit die geregtigheid van God op die natuur bou en nie op die evangelie nie. Soos hierbo uitgewys is, het Karl Barth dit as 'n 'verburgerliking' van die evangelie beskryf en dit selfs 'n 'domestisering' van die openbaring van God in Christus genoem. Volgens die HK 54 en die NGB 27 is alléén *geloof* in Christus konstitutief vir lidmaatskap aan die kerk. Ook Calvyn beklemtoon dat geen biologiese (dus per implikasie ook etniese) verbande die deelkry aan die kerk bepaal nie.

Met ander woorde, gedurende die afgelope dekades het dit toenemend duidelik geword dat etniese eksklusiwiteit (ook bedoel as die ideaal van die bevordering van gelyke geleenthede vir alle mense) en die teologiese substansiëring daarvan die produk van Eurosentryse humanisme is. Dit het veral in Suid-Afrika gebeur dat hierdie ideologie eenduidig teen hulle wil op ander mense afgedwing is. Reeds in vorige belydenisse van die NHKA het ons op sinodale vlak erken dat rassisme 'n dehumaniserende en traumatiese uitwerking op ander mense het.

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Vandag sien ons in dat die volkskerkidee 'n res van hierdie humanistiese ideologie in die bestaande Kerkorde is.

Ten slotte, die NHKA is waarskynlik die enigste kerk in die wêreld wat nog formeel 'n volkskerkidee vir kerkwees voorstaan. Die ekumeniese wêreld toon sedert die vroegste byeenkomste aan dat dit 'n onhoudbare begrip en teenstrydig is met die evangelie. So het ekumeniese liggame soos byvoorbeeld die Wêreldbond van Gereformeerde Kerke onafgebroke onder andere by Frankfurt (1964), Nairobi (1970), Ottawa (1982), Seoul (1989) en Athene (1992) ons reeds daarop gewys dat dit teologies onaanvaarbaar is om kerk en volk met mekaar te vermeng.

Die Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering kan nie anders as om – in die lig van die evangelie en die kerklike belydenis – hiermee saam te stem nie. Ons versoek derhalwe die Algemene Kerkvergadering van die NHKA om aan die evangelie en die kerklike belydenis gehoorsaam te wees en daarom Ordereël 4 (asook Ordereël 1) van die huidige Kerkorde te wysig.

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