


Reforum: A brief but not unimportant chapter in the Dutch Reformed Church's apartheid saga

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In 1985 when storm clouds were gathering over South Africa, and a state of emergency was declared, a group of members of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) Family, clergy as well as laity, founded an organisation, Reforum. The two-fold aim of Reforum was to provide a prophetic witness against apartheid, calling the DRC to take leave of its theology of apartheid, and, secondly, to work towards the reunification of the DRC Family. The article researches the original Reforum documents, minutes, reports, conference material and letters, that hitherto laid untouched in the DRC Archive, in Pretoria. The programme of Reforum, especially the national and regional conferences held by the organisation over the 7 years of its existence, is discussed. The initial negative reaction of the DRC officials and synods, as well as the critique from some in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the DRC in Africa that Reforum was not radical enough in its approach, are recorded. The summation, at the end, is that Reforum did play a significant role, albeit humble and short lived, in the annals of the DRC's apartheid saga. Relevance: The DRC's apartheid saga, the story of a church that had over many years lived with apartheid and even provided a theological argument for separate development, eventually came to the point where the DRC not only repented of its past, but declared apartheid and the theology of apartheid a sin and a heresy, continues to fascinate historians, including church historians. For South African Christians, clergy as well as laity, it helps explain their often troubled past, as well as present. The often neglected story of Reforum and the role and contribution of the organisation in this process needs to be recorded. Original research: the author provides original qualitative research, using material that had lain untouched in the DRC Archive for three decades. This may be considered to be a preliminary study. The archival material merits more and deeper attention. It may well provide material for post graduate research.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The research is of value for the study of South African general history, South African church history, ecumenical studies, and practical theology.

Keywords: Reforum; Dutch Reformed Church; Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa; apartheid; ecumenism; Confession of Belhar; Kairos Document; The Road to Damascus; South African State of Emergency.

Introduction

Many role players were involved in the South African churches' struggle against apartheid. Some of the stories are well recorded: the role played by the S A Council of Churches, the Evangelical Alliance of S A, the S A Catholic Bishops Conference, and others. One of the smaller initiatives that, undeservedly, received almost no attention in the annals of recent church history in South Africa, is that of Reforum, an organisation born within the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches. It operated for a mere seven years, during the state of emergency in the 1980s, but as will be discussed in the article, played a humble but not unimportant role in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), and of the wider ecumenical community in South Africa. Two issues were on Reforum's agenda: *firstly*, calling for the end of apartheid and especially calling for the scrapping of the DRC's theology of apartheid, and, *secondly*, working towards the reunification of the DRC Family of churches, historically divided along racial lines.

The author perused archival material on Reforum kept in the Archive of the General Synod of the DRC in Pretoria.¹ Other sources were used to provide the historical context for the Reforum story,

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1. The Reforum Papers in the Archive consist of nine files, denoted in Roman letters: (I) Notules (*Minutes*); (II) Korrespondensie (*Correspondence*); (III) Kongresse (*Congresses*); (IV) Dokumente (*Documents*); (V) Referate (*Papers*); (VI) Sinodes/Ekumeniese kontakte (*Synods/Ecumenical Contacts*); (VII) Finansies (*Finances*); (VIII) Adreslys (*List of Addresses*) (IX) Koerantberigte (*Newspaper Reports*); (X) Reforum Nuusbrief (*Reforum Newsletter*). In this article, the English translation of the annotation of the files is used. The archival collection is rather limited: one box and one lever arch file. Apart from the official Minutes, the remainder of material was collected from the files of David Bosch, Piet Meiring and Andre van Niekerk. Other role players, including Willem Nicol, were approached, but were unable to provide more material.

but the research for this article was mainly collected from the minutes, reports, letters and conference material of Reformum. To the author's knowledge, this is a first attempt to do so.

A storm was building

'Dr William Nicol, with the accompaniment of a tremendous thunderstorm, read from Isaiah 35 and 37. Mr Angus Rabie opened the meeting with prayer'. So read the minutes of the first meeting of the executive of the newly formed organisation Reformum. The committee of five, Willem Nicol, David Bosch, Ruda Landman, Jan Mettler and Angus Rabie had met in Nicol's parsonage in Pretoria. It was 07 March 1985, and the thunderstorm was quite typical for this time of year in the capital city. But it was also symbolic. On many fronts in South Africa, in the community as well as in the churches, storms were building (*Reformum Minutes*, 07 March 1985:1).

A country under siege

South Africa, in 1985, had become a country under siege.² The burden of apartheid had become unbearable to millions of South Africans. In January, violence had broken out in many cities and towns, forcing the government to suspend the forced removal of Black people from their homes to newly established apartheid townships. On February 09, an explosion rocked the Old Defense Force offices in Marshall Street, Johannesburg. The next day Nelson Mandela rejected State President P.W. Botha's offer of conditional release on condition that he condemned all violent resistance against the regime. In March, daily reports of skirmishes between police and guerrillas in many parts of South Africa appeared in the press, on the radio and on television. On March 21, 17 rioters were killed in the Langa massacre. On March 27, more than 200 men and women were arrested for marching through Cape Town to Pollsmoor Prison protesting for the release of Nelson Mandela. Among them were the two clerics Beyers Naudé and Allan Boesak.

More was to follow in April: explosions and attacks in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and on the East Rand. In May, three activists, the 'Pepco Three' were arrested and subsequently murdered by the security forces. On June 14, the South African Army raided houses and offices of uMkhonto we Sizwe (the African National Congress' [ANC] military wing) during Operation Plecksy in Gaborone, Botswana, killing 12 activists. The reaction was immediate: limpet mines caused damage and death in numerous places in South Africa. Police stations and the homes of ANC collaborators were attacked. In July, the situation became unendurable for the South African government. Earlier in the month, the ANC held its second national consultative conference in Kabwe, Zambia, deciding on their future strategy. On July 20, P.W. Botha declared a state of emergency in the country, providing the security forces vast powers to deal with the situation.

²Many reports on South Africa during the 1980s exist, in books, articles, and newspaper reports. One of the most comprehensive reports, used in preparing this article, comes from the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol 2: 165–542.

Far from containing the violence, the situation deteriorated. President Botha's infamous Rubicon speech, on August 15, caused havoc on the stock markets. The South African Rand fell dramatically against the US dollar. Business leaders voiced their alarm. On August 27, Bill Mentoer in Queenstown, became the first person to be necklaced by having a petrol-filled car tire placed around his neck and set alight. He was accused of being a collaborator with the police. In September and October, bloodshed erupted once again. More activists, among them Trevor Manuel, were apprehended or banned. In Athlone, Cape Town, a number of coloured youths were killed, or wounded, in what had become known as the Trojan Horse massacre. In November, the Queenstown massacre was in the headlines, as was the downing of a Russian Aeroflot cargo plane in Angola. Two SASOL oil refineries came under rocket attack. Farmers in different parts of South Africa were killed when a number of anti-tank mines exploded underneath their vehicles. Days before Christmas, in December, the South African Army carried out a raid in Maseru, Lesotho. On December 23, a bomb exploded in a large shopping centre in Amanzimtoti, outside Durban, killing five shoppers and injuring 40.

The year that followed was even worse. In his recent critically acclaimed book, titled *1986*, William Dicey provides a month-by-month description of the events in the country in 1986 (Dicey 2021). It was the year of the vigilante, the year of resistance and of counter measures by the security forces, the year of arrests and torture, the year when millions South Africans continued to suffer under an authoritarian regime. In a grim way, 1986 was the year that foreshadowed what was still to come.

Concern in Christian circles

For many years, deep concern about the South African government's policy of apartheid had been voiced by churches and ecumenical bodies from inside and from outside the country. While the initial criticism was relatively mild, appealing to the South African government to do away with apartheid, and to allow for all South Africans to partake in the democratic process, by the 1980s the voices became stronger and harder, impossible to ignore (Meiring 2004:121–125; cf. Kerk 1996:29–59).

The DRC who over the years had not only happily lived with apartheid, but had also developed a theological argument for separate development, as apartheid was euphemistically called, came under heavy fire from overseas churches as well as from the different ecumenical bodies of the time. The World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Reformed Ecumenical Council, the World Alliance of Presbyterian Churches, the Vatican, were united in their abhorrence of apartheid, urging the DRC to take leave of apartheid and to break unequivocally from its 'Apartheid Theology'. In 1982, the World Alliance confronted the DRC head on. At the behest of the 'younger churches' within the DRC Family – the Black, Coloured and Indian sister churches,

born from the missionary endeavour of the DRC³ – the World Alliance decided to suspend the membership of the DRC, the ‘mother church’. Apartheid, and the theological defence of apartheid, constituted a *status confessionis* for the Christian community, that is, a matter on which it is impossible for believers to differ without coming into conflict with the gospel, and with the testimony of the church. Apartheid was declared to be a sin, and the moral and theological validation thereof a mockery of the gospel, a theological heresy. The DRC was called to repent and to confess (Geldenhuys 1982:24; Meiring 2004:121–122, 2015:210–230).

Within South Africa, from the heart of the Christian community, grave concern was also raised. The main line Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church were unanimous in their protest against apartheid. Statement after statement coming from the S A Council of Churches did not only call the government to task, but pointed a fraternal finger at the DRC. The younger churches in the DRC Family, the DRC in Africa, the DRC Mission Church and the Indian Reformed Church, who carrying the burden of belonging to the ‘Apartheid Church’, often found themselves in a difficult situation, joined the call upon the ‘mother church’ to change her stance on apartheid, to heal the broken relationships within the denomination, and to reunite the DRC Family into one church. The growing protest culminated in the drafting of and acceptance of the *Confession of Belhar* by the DRC Mission Church, calling for an end to racism and all forms of discrimination, and for a rigorous commitment to unity, justice and reconciliation (Botha & Naudé 2010:93–104).

Alternative voices in the Dutch Reformed Church

Not everybody in the ranks of the DRC had agreed with the official policy of the church, and during the years they raised their voices as well. Sometimes these voices were strong and confident, at other times, in the face of much adversity, they were few and weak. As far back as 1948 when the National Party, on its apartheid ticket, came into power, two intrepid theologians, Bennie Keet and Ben Marais, warned against the DRC’s acceptance of apartheid. During the 1960s and 1970s a younger generation of critics came to the fore, among them were Beyers Naudé and David Bosch, who were willing to challenge the DRC from within its own ranks – and who were willing to pay the price for their prophetic witness.

In the early 1980s, the minority voice in the DRC grew stronger. In October 1980, a group of professors teaching at the DRC’s theological faculties at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria published a *Reformation Day Witness*, calling for change. One year later, in 1981, a number of theologians and ministers contributed to a book titled *Stormkompas* (‘Storm Compass’), analysing the South African

3. For the first 200 years of its existence, the DRC catered to White, Coloured and Black members in its midst. In 1857, a synodical decision was taken allowing for separate communion services for White and Coloured congregants – setting a process in motion that eventually resulted in the formation of four churches, all forming part of the DRC Family: the (White) Dutch Reformed Church, the (Coloured) D R Mission Church, the (Black) DRC in Africa, and the Indian Reformed Church.

situation as well as the DRC’s involvement in apartheid, and included a number of critical statements on the status quo. In 1982, no less than 123 ordained ministers presented the DRC with an *Open Letter* charging the church to turn away from apartheid, and to heal the breach between the member churches in the DRC Family (Du Toit et al. 2002:51–83; Meiring 2004:123).

Reaction against these initiatives was quick and uncompromising. The DRC’s leadership warned against the dangerous views, weakening the church as well as the ‘volk’ (the Afrikaner people) from within. In a time of national crisis, dissent was not welcome. At meetings of the Breë Moderatuur (the Executive Commission) and at the 1982 assembly of the General Synod, the critical voices were strongly rejected (Meiring 2004:123; cf. Bosch, König & Nicol 1982:21–52).

Enter Reformum

The prophetic voice in the DRC was, however, not silenced. To the contrary, it served to inspire. Across the country, members of the DRC, theologians, pastors and members, young and old, dared to challenge the old way of thinking, discussing a new way for the future. In many cities, even in towns in far off rural areas, discussion groups were started. In many instances, pastors and members of the local sister churches of the DRC Family joined in the discussions. There were much on the table: the worldwide theological protests against apartheid, the incisive statements of the ecumenical bodies, the pleas of the minority voices in the DRC, and above all the comprehensive rejection of all forms of discrimination, racism and injustice in the *Belhar Confession*. But far more than theological reflection was on the agenda: the country was in crisis! Day-by-day the political and the economic situation seemed to worsen.

In May 1984, representatives of a number of informal discussion groups met at Hammanskraal, a black township near Pretoria. The deliberations centred around the *Belhar Confession*, and on its challenges to all the churches in South Africa. At the meeting, a decision was taken to create a forum for all groups countrywide to come together and to plan together. A name was chosen: *Reformum* – playing on the words and concepts of Reformed/Reform/Forum. A steering committee was appointed from various walks of life: Willem Nicol, pastor of the DRC; David Bosch, Theology Professor from the University of South Africa; Ruda Landman, radio and television personality; Jan Mettler, secretary for evangelism in the DRC Mission Church; and Angus Rabie, community leader in the Coloured township of Eersterust (Pretoria).

Even before the first official meeting of the executive committee (referred to in the Introduction), Willem Nicol sent a letter to all the discussion groups in the country, informing them of the Hammanskraal meeting and inviting them to join Reformum. Local committees needed to be formed,

and regular local meetings were planned to be held, Nicol advised (*Reforum File II*):

Let us work the iron while it is still hot. We have taken note of growing interest for Reforum in the country. Groups in Sabie, Kempton Park, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Stellenbosch as well as Cape Town have already reported that they are forming local forums. (*Correspondence*: Letter February 06, 1985:1)

The agenda for Reforum, locally as well as nationwide, contained, inter alia:

- Contact and dialogue between churches, especially within the ranks of the DRC Family.
- Addressing critical issues. The example of a local Reforum group that had successfully prevented the proclamation of a 'white by night proclamation' needed to be followed.
- Invitations to experts in different fields to address Reform groups on critical issues.
- Public statements to be made on burning issues, preferably in consultation with the national executive.

Reforum decided to publish a newsletter. Piet Meiring, pastor in the DRC Congregation Lynnwoodrif (Pretoria), was asked to act as the editor.⁴ News items, summaries of papers given at conferences and meetings, as well as statements put forward by *Reforum*, were regularly published (*Correspondence*: Letter, February 6, 1985:2).

A wide interest, from many sides

During the months following the first meeting of the Reforum executive committee in March 1985, wide interest was noted. Minutes from subsequent meetings reported of more local groups that were formed in the Free State Province, in the Transkei, Natal, even in far-off Harare (Zimbabwe). Relations with other ecumenical bodies in South Africa were established, with the S A Council of Churches, The Evangelical Alliance of S A, as well as ministers' fraternal within the DRC Family. Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) took a keen interest in Reforum – at a time when the DRC severed its ties with the REC. Encouraging messages from overseas partners, from England and Scotland, even from the French Embassy in Pretoria, were received. Among local ecumenical leaders who supported the Reforum initiative, Archbishop Desmond Tutu deserves special mention. In March 1986, on his way back to Cape Town from Sweden where he had attended the funeral of Olaf Palme, the assassinated Swedish premier, the archbishop, at the invitation of Willem Nicol, stopped over in Pretoria. He spent a long afternoon in Nicol's parsonage with local *Reforum* members, advising and encouraging them.⁵

One of the refreshing aspects of the Reforum initiative was the variety of South Africans who joined in the action, not only clergy but lay brothers and sisters as well. A few

4. Copies of the *Reforum Nuusbrief* (Newsletter) may be found in Reforum: File X.

5. Over the years Desmond Tutu was highly interested in developments in the DRC, at times uncompromising in his criticisms, and at others encouraging and guiding. John Allen's (2006) biography of Tutu touches on this frequently (pages 168–169, 268–291, 342–343, etc.).

examples illustrate this point. The editors of two newspapers, Ton Volsoo and Piet Muller from *Beeld* and Tertius Myburg, editor of the *Pretoria News*, as well as Timo Kriel, manager of the Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy (CUM), the largest religious publishing house in the country, were enthusiastic members, offering support in many ways. Ockie Doyer, a respected farmer from Carolina, not only attended Reforum conferences, but saw to it that his two sons who were, later, to be ordained as ministers in the DRC, attended as well. Marinus Wiechers from the Law Faculty of the University of South Africa (later to be appointed principal of UNISA) pledged his support and addressed Reforum meetings on various occasions. Two journalists, who in later life became influential forces in the South African media community, cut their teeth with Reforum. Ruda Landman, who had recently moved with her husband from Stellenbosch to Johannesburg to her new assignment at the S A Broadcasting Corporation, was chosen to be Reforum's first secretary. Ruda Landman's career blossomed over the years, becoming a multiple award-winning journalist. Her 19-year stint on the investigative television programme *Carte Blanche* endeared her to millions of South Africans. Neels Jackson, teacher at the Pretoria Boys' High School, a young and enthusiastic Reforum member, was approached by Ton Vosloo to try his hand at writing articles for *Beeld*. He succeeded, and for many years Jackson acted as well-respected religious editor for the newspaper – before accepting an invitation to edit the DRC's official mouth piece, *Die Kerkbode*.

Conferences and issues

During the seven years of its existence, Reforum held both annual national conferences as well as regional conferences, with the subjects of the meetings reflecting on the burning issues of the day. Most of the conferences were well attended, participants coming from across the country to partake in the discussions. Well respected speakers, among them academics, jurists, theologians, artists, and politicians were invited to address the conferences. Overseas church leaders and theologians – among whom the renowned Catholic scholar Hans Küng – appeared at the podium. Reports on the discussions often appeared in the secular and church press. Not all the reactions, especially those from the DRC leadership, were favourable, as will be discussed below. The issues under discussion were:

- Human Rights in South Africa. The conference was devoted to discussing the recently published document: 'A Call to Democracy. A Theological Reflection on the Future of South African Society' (January 18–19, 1988).
- The Christian Hope, reflecting on hope in the current situation in South Africa (January 24–25, 1986).
- Reflecting on the DRC's recently adopted policy statement, Church and Society (January 23–25, 1987).
- The Choice for an Inclusive Democracy in South Africa (January 18–19, 1988).
- Church and Security. Has State Security become our New Ideology? (January 16–17 1989).
- The Vereeniging Consultation: Reunification of the DRC Family (March 3, 1989).

- A Christian and War (August 14, 1989).
- Beyers Naudé: 'If I still were a Member of the DRC...' (August 27, 1990).
- 'Nelson Mandela: How I See him Today'. An address by Judge John Trengrove who had appeared for the State in Mandela's trial (April 02, 1990).
- The Formation of the Uniting Reformed Church in SA: Can the DRC still Join in the Process? (June 12, 1990).
- Liberation Theology in South Africa (January 28, 1991).
- Unity in the DRC Family. A call to ministers from the different churches to discuss the way ahead (Cyara Conference Centre, Hekpoort (March 11–13, 1991).

The Dutch Reformed Church leadership's reaction

It was to be expected that the leadership of the DRC would harbour misgivings about the founding of Reform, and the initiatives launched by Reform. In a strong statement published by *Die Kerkbode*, DRC's official magazine, the moderamen of the General synod, made 'a very serious call upon members of the DRC not to partake in polarizing group action', by joining Reform and taking part in its activities. At the meeting of the Reform Executive, November 2, 1985, mention is made of this harsh attack. David Bosch and Willem Nicol were asked to compose a suitable answer. The letter appeared in *Die Kerkbode* on December 18, 1985 (cf. Reform *Minutes*, November 15, 1985).

In March 1986 the Federal Council of the DRC, consisting of delegates from the DRC Family, denounced Reform, together with 'Belydende Kring' ('Confessing Circle') and Campus Crusade for Christ, as pressure groups who operate in competition with the institutional church, and who purport to do the church's work better than the church itself (*Jaarverslag* January 25, 1987, p. 2).

Preparing for the General Synod of 1986 a number of regional synods in the Eastern Cape, Western and Southern Transvaal distanced themselves from Reform, urging their members not to partake in Reform's programmes. A welcome exception was the moderator of the Central African Synod, Deon van Dyk, who advised his synod that discussions between Christians, as were organised by Reform, were of the greatest importance, seeing that the official structures did indeed lack sufficient channels to provide for these discussions (Reform: *Synods/Ecumenical Contacts*).

When the general synod met in October 1986, the moderamen strongly advised synod to reject Reform, and to urge its members not to join the organisation and not to take part in its programme. The report stated (Agenda, N.G. Kerk Algemene Sinode 1986):

Reform operates outside the church ('n buitekerklike organisasie); there are sufficient structures within the church to do what Reform wants to achieve; such an organization that exist outside the church, is all too often the cause of confusion, disunity and strife...and contributes to disloyalty to the official

policy of the church. The church would not like to allow the official policies of the church be confused and obfuscated by the voice of extra-church organisations. (p. 59)

Fortunately, the moderamen's proposal was not accepted. It did however lead to a vibrant discussion on the floor of synod. Article 70 of the Church Order, it was argued, did allow for free Christian organisations within the church. The moderamen's recommendation therefore did not carry the day, but the Commissions for Church Law and for Doctrinal Affairs were mandated to continue to keep an eye on Reform. The fact that Reform had good working relationships with ecumenical bodies inside and outside South Africa was of concern to the DRC leadership.

At the same synod, however, events did take a turn for the better (Du Toit et al. 2002:83–93; Meiring 2004:123–124). For years, the DRC's policy on apartheid had been under pressure. The Church's policy document on *Human Relations and the South African Scene in Light of Scripture*, that was accepted in 1974, drew much criticism from churches inside South Africa and from across the globe. For years, the church tried to defend her stance, but to no avail. Ecumenical partners called upon the DRC to rescind her acceptance of the praxis of apartheid and especially the theological argument offered in defense of separate development. The plea from within the circle of the DRC Family for the 'mother church' to confess the sin and heresy of apartheid could no longer be ignored. The alternative voices within the DRC, referred to earlier in this article, among whom the voice of Reform, could no longer be ignored.

In response to all of this, the 1986 Synod accepted a new policy document, *Church and Society – A Testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church* ('Kerk en Samelewing'), that indeed opened the door to a new era. All forms of racism were condemned, and a strong commitment to unity within the DRC Family was made (Gaum 2013:67–74; Van der Merwe 2013:52–66).

At the Reform Conference, January 1987, 'Church and Society' was on the agenda. Speaker after speaker lauded the change of heart in the DRC. The unambiguous commitment to unity within the DRC Family, and the equally unambiguous rejection of race, nation, and colour determining the membership of the church, was welcomed by all. But there were concerns as well: the continued room for a 'volkskerk' (a church for believers from one nation/people), as well as the fact that the DRC did confess the wrongness of apartheid, but also emphasised the need for 'verskillende bedieningsbehoefes' (the different cultural and ministerial needs of believers). There was a real danger that the DRC was harbouring two conflicting views of the Church: a universal biblical view of the Church as the unique body of Christ embracing believers from all cultures and groups, where all the walls of separation are brought down, as well as, secondly, a church honed to the 'ministerial needs' of separate groups. The ever widening gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa, partially caused by

apartheid, should have been given more attention, as was the case with the power struggle and violence in the country. In two extensive articles published in *Die Kerkbode*, the 'joy and concern about *Church and Society*' expressed at the Reformum Conference were discussed (April 15 and May 6, 1987).

The mere fact that the editor of *Die Kerkbode* made room for Reformum to publish its views indicate that after the 1986 synod, sympathy for Reformum and its views were growing, also within leadership circles in the DRC (Rossouw 1989:285–286). In 1990, a revised policy document on 'Kerk en Samelewing' was put before synod, where the concerns not only of Reformum but of many others in the ecumenical community were taken care of. The DRC at long last, firmly, took leave of racism and apartheid:

We have listened not only to each other but also to outside advice. We especially listened again to Holy Scripture. Matters were weighed and sifted, studied and formulated – in conversations and meetings, in committees and in the Synod itself.

The moderator of the 1990 synod, Pieter Potgieter wrote in his Foreword to the 1990 edition of 'Kerk en Samelewing' (Kerk 1990:i). The membership of Reformum was grateful to have been a partner in these conversations.

Four years later, the 1994 Synod reiterated the DRC's resolve to turn away from the past, acknowledging that apartheid, as it was theologically justified and supported by the DRC, was unacceptable, and that it had largely contributed to the inequality and suffering of fellow South Africans.

Furthermore, Synod expressed the church's heartfelt apology to the 'prophets of the past' who had warned against apartheid and were treated by the DRC in 'in an uncharitable and inappropriate way'. Again a strong commitment to the reunification of the DRC Family was made (Gaum 1994:59; Handeling 1994:374, 443; Meiring 2004:124).

Four years later, in 1998, the final piece was put in place when the General Synod of the DRC, echoing the demand made by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 18 years earlier, condemned apartheid 'as a sin and a heresy' (Meiring 2004:124).

Still room for Reformum?

An interesting result of all of this was that some members of Reformum were asking the question: is there still room for Reformum? Have we not, with the DRC's adoption of 'Kerk en Samelewing' and the decisions taken by synod, taken leave of apartheid, and by committing ourselves to reunification in the DRC Family, achieved what we had set ourselves to do?

At a meeting of the Executive Committee on February 08, 1988, the decision was taken to continue with Reformum. All the original aims have not yet been reached. New ways of doing so needed to be found. It seemed that, even at that moment, new and wider opportunities were opening. By continuing with its high level of discussions and holding to

its style of operating, Reformum may continue to offer a significant contribution. What was important, though, was to focus not only on relations within the DRC Family, but on cooperation in the wider ecumenical field. The personnel of the executive received attention as well: As new chair, Adrio König (systematic theologian at the University of South Africa) was elected, with Henning Viljoen (law professor at the University of Pretoria) serving as vice-chair.

Not radical enough?

A second question that Reformum had to face, came from side of the Belydende Kring ('Confessing Circle') consisting of pastors from the DR Mission Church and the DRC in Africa (later to be united into the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa [URCSA]). In their estimation, Reformum's actions and pronouncements were not radical enough. Participating in Reformum's programme became problematic. Invited to address one of the conferences, Lucas Mabusela was unable to accept. He was at that stage under house arrest. Thakatso Mofokeng also declined, stating his uneasiness to appear at a Reformum gathering.

The *Confession of Belhar*,⁶ adopted by die DRMC in 1982, was well received by the members of Reformum. It provided the background to many discussions of Reformum, and was wholeheartedly embraced by all. The credal statements regarding unity, justice and reconciliation of Belhar, reflected all that Reformum stood for.

But, some black and brown ministers asked, would Reformum also adopt the *Kairos Document*? *Kairos*, issued by a group of South African theologians in response to P.W. Botha's declaration of a state of emergency in 1985 was harsh in its critique of 'state theology' as well as 'church theology', demanding that the churches should develop a radical 'kairos theology' to confront the enemy of apartheid. In 1989, *Kairos* was followed by *The Road to Damascus*, calling all South African Christians to join actively in the struggle. Were the Reformum members, especially the white membership, willing to do this? (Reformum *Minutes*, August 21, 1989:1–2). At a special meeting in September 1989, Reformum addressed these questions, with Willem Nicol and Klippias Kritzinger introducing the different views on the matter (Reformum *Minutes*, January 17, 1).

While some Reformum members gladly sided with *Kairos* and *The Road to Damascus*, other members were hesitant to follow suit. Reformum, therefore, did not officially adopt these documents. The Belydende Kring ('Confessing Circle') made it clear that embracing these statements were a *sine qua non* for their continued participation in Reformum.⁷

Reformum in the New South Africa

The dramatic turn of events in February 1990, when President F.W. de Klerk, who had succeeded P.W. Botha, announced that

6.The full text of the Confession of Belhar is widely published, also on the Internet. One source is Botha and Naudé (2010:14–17). For a comprehensive discussion of The Confession of Belhar, cf. Botha 2013, pp. 75–91; Botman 2000, pp. 105–119; Cloete and Smit 1982, pp 1–160.

7.Cf. Shun Govender's letter to the Reformum executive, August 22, 1986. Govender wrote in his capacity as General Secretary of the Belydende Kring.

the State of Emergency was lifted, and that the ANC and other banned political organisations would be unbanned, that exiles would be welcomed back in the country and that, above all, Nelson Mandela, after serving 27 years for his role in the struggle, would be set free, came as a surprise to all – to his fellow members of the National Party in Parliament, to white and black South Africans in general, and to millions across the world.

With Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the lead, South Africans raised their heads in hope. The Rainbow People of God, in the often repeated words of the Archbishop, were called to embrace one another in the spirit of *ubuntu*. Apartheid was coming to an end (Tutu 1999:1–9). The clouds have lifted. The lightening on the horizon, the ‘tremendous thunderstorm’ that was felt at the first executive meeting of Reform, for the participants symbolic of the times they were living in, had abated. Four years later, after the first democratic elections in South Africa’s history, Nelson Mandela was elected as the first president of the new South Africa.

Where did this leave Reform? Had the time come for the initiative to come to an end? The executive was of the opinion that there was still work to do, and issues to address. Liberation Theology, and the church’s response to the radical demands of the Kairos and Road to Damascus documents, were still on the table. The call for reconciliation in the new South Africa was accepted by all. But at what cost – at the cost of justice? How should the fatal chasm between rich and abject poor be bridged?

A second burning issue had still not been resolved: In 1990, the reunification process of the DRC in Africa and the DRC Mission Church was well on its way. In 1994, the (Black) DRC in Africa and the (Brown) DR Mission Church were united into the URCSA. It was a time for celebration and jubilation. But, sadly, the (White) DRC and the small (Indian) Reformed Church in Africa were not part of the process. A lot of work still had to be done. Did Reform had a role to play?

At the annual conference of 1990 the first issue was addressed. The national conference on Liberation Theology (Pretoria, 29 January 1990), was widely attended. Father Smangalis Mkhatswa, general secretary of the Institute of Contextual Theology, one of the stalwarts of the struggle, opened the proceedings. He remarked that White Afrikaners and the DRC who in history had been on the receiving end of political and economic injustice, and who had made strong statements on these issues, should be the first to understand the motivation behind and the validity of Liberation Theology. Father Mkhatswa’s address as well as the sometimes heated discussions that followed were reported on in the daily press.⁸

As what was to be the last of Reform’s national initiatives was a colloquium on unity in the DRC Family. In a letter co-signed by Willie Cilliers, secretary of URCSA’s Commission for Mission and Evangelism and Piet Meiring, who recently had been appointed Director of Ecumenical Affairs and

⁸A collection of newspaper clippings is to be found in the Reform File: Newspaper Reports.

Information for the DRC, all ministers from the ranks of the DRC Family in Transvaal were invited to the Cyara Conference Centre, at Hekpoort. The colloquium took place from March 11–13, 1991. The attendance as well as the outcome was heartening. A growing section in the DRC was committed to the reunification of the churches.

By 1992, the Executive Committee decided that the time had come for Reform to close its doors. Not all the objectives have been reached. The call for justice was as important as ever. The reunification process was still not completed. But to a large extent Reform’s agenda had become the DRC’s agenda. Many Reform members found themselves able to work with the church, within the official structures, to further the cause. Informal discussions would still have a place, wherever and whenever needed. But Reform, it was felt, played its role to the full.

Characteristically, at the last meeting of the Executive, a decision was taken to pay over all the money still in Reform’s bank account, to URCSA’s Church Action for the Needy (CAN). The very last document in the Reform archive is a letter from the chair, Adrio König, to the manager of the local Volkskas Bank, instructing him to do so (Reform: *Finances*, November 18, 1992).

Conclusion: A brief but not unimportant chapter in the Dutch Reformed Church’s apartheid saga?

The title of this essay suggests that Reform over the relatively brief span of seven years did play a role in the DRC’s saga with apartheid. Is this correct? Looking back at Reform’s story, after three decades, the answer seems to be in the affirmative. Of course, there were disappointments. Reform’s testimony was not welcomed by many within the structures of the church. Initially, Reform was regarded by the official church as a ‘pressure group’, an ‘extra-church organisation’, not helping, but standing in the way of change. In the eyes of some URCSA members, especially the ‘Broederkring’, Reform was too timid in its approach. It should have been more radical in its pronouncements and more brave in its actions.

This being said, four things stand out:

1. Reform did succeed in voicing protest against the injustices of apartheid and the violence perpetrated during the State of Emergency in the 1980s. It was by far not the only group to do so. Many voices were raised, often by individuals and groups far more powerful than Reform – the S A Council of Churches, the S A Catholic Bishops’ Conference, and many others. In 1979, the South African Leadership Assembly (SACLA) brought a large number of Church leaders and laity together in Pretoria, to celebrate the unity that did exist among believers from many denominations and race groups, and to plan for a better future for South Africa. Ten years later, in 1985, the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR) was launched, which had a huge impact on the life and the ministry as well as the witness of South African Churches. David Bosch, Willem Nicol, Piet

Meiring and Adrio König were deeply involved in both SACLA and the NIR. But Reforum's mandate was a family affair, bringing clergy and laity in the DRC Family together, providing a vision and an exhortation, as well as a vehicle for many to take a stand against apartheid, and to work towards church unity. This was done during a difficult time, during the state of emergency in the 1980s, when prophetic witness often went with risk. The leadership provided by the 'old guard', David Bosch, Willem Nicol, Adrio König, Piet Meiring, Angus Rabie, Jan Mettler, et al., encouraged and inspired the younger generation, André van Niekerk, Manie Taute, Dons Schutte, Leon Westhof, Neels Jackson and others, to take up the baton.

2. For many DRC Family members, clergy as well as laity, Reforum provided a platform where believers were able, sometimes for the first time, to meet across racial lines. Taking part in Reforum's activities, especially on a local level, provided a *koinonia*, a foretaste of what a united DRC Family in future may offer. Unity was not only spoken about, it was experienced. Many letters sent to the executive as well as reports of local meetings attest to this.
3. For many in the ecumenical community in South Africa as well as abroad, it was heartening to note that a voice of dissent did exist in the DRC Family. A number of letters in the archives of Reforum, report on this. When the DRC did at long last in the 1990s took leave of apartheid, it did not come as a total surprise. Many in the ecumenical community had taken note of developments in the DRC and of the critical voice within the church. It enabled them when the time came, to open their arms to the DRC, and to invite the DRC back into the fold.
4. Reforum was an initiative driven by clergy and laity alike. From the start, not only ministers and theologians were involved, lay Christians took an active role as well. On the executive committee, from the outset lay members were invited to take a leadership role. Bosch, theologian; Nicol, pastor; Mettler, church official; were joined by Landman, journalist; and Rabie, elder. This was replicated in the regional committees. The amount of success Reforum had was definitely because of the active interest and support of academics, journalists, farmers, housewives, business people, young and old, men and women, lay believers, who worked hand-in-hand with clergy.

In summation: the DRC Family as well as the wider community did profit from Reforum. South Africa, during the Emergency, was served by the women and men from Reforum, albeit in a humble way. It may well be considered a brief but not unimportant chapter in the DRC's apartheid saga.

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