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Perold de Beer: Reflecting on the theology of a missionary pioneer

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Dr Perold de Beer was a missionary pioneer who contributed as both a church leader and a theologian to the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA). This research recorded his contribution to the RCA as this church navigated political issues during apartheid, multireligious positions and the challenges accompanying church unity; all of these ended up in the Laudium Declaration (LD) which De Beer drafted and was then accepted as the church's official position. In addition to De Beer's views, other, differing positions from his colleagues and contemporaries were used to reflect on the eventual decisions and theologies developed in the RCA. The article's social and scientific value lies in both recording and reflecting on the work of a missionary pioneer not yet investigated; it addressed and informed issues that are still relevant today (racism, pluralism and unity) and which are still heading the church's agenda. Both literature study and interviews were employed.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: While this article investigated missiology (mission theology, social justice and church unity), it also contributed to religion studies (interfaith dialogue), church history, and polity (the history and documents of the RCA) and systematic theology. It offered insight into the history of a specific segment of South African society during apartheid.

Keywords: Perold de Beer; Reformed Church in Africa; Dutch Reformed Church; Laudium Declaration; politics; apartheid; deliverance; dialogue; church unity.

Introduction

On 18 July 2022, Dr Perold de Beer passed on after a life dedicated to mission and ministry in the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA). Passionate about missionary work in the Indian community since his days as a young high school student, he felt a strong calling for this mission during an evangelistic service by the Canadian missionary advocate, Dr Oswald Smith, and he joined the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) outreach to the Indian community in 1956. In 1966, he was called to start a ministry in Pretoria, and after the formal establishment of the RCA in Pietermaritzburg in 1968, he was one of the founders of the Charisma congregation in Laudium in 1972. Between 1979 and 1991, he led two Durban congregations of the RCA (Emmanuel and Jeshurun), before returning to Laudium where he retired in 2004. During his 41 years of ministry in the RCA, De Beer was not only one of the early pioneers of the church, but he also became a national leader as secretary and later moderator of the RCA. He authored the document that became the Laudium Declaration (LD) which guided the RCA on important issues. De Beer's PhD thesis, completed in 2010, also recorded the planting of the RCA and its subsequent ministry and theological positioning (Crafford 1982:450; De Beer 2010:83; Orbituary 2022; Pillay 2022:1; Swanepoel 2008:208–209).

While the history of the RCA is recorded thoroughly elsewhere,[1] it is the purpose of this study to investigate De Beer's contribution to the church's theological stance and vision. He was an important leader while the RCA was formulating its theology amid an apartheid South Africa and its racist policies, being a church 'between temple and mosque' which had to deal with a multireligious setting, and taking part in the healing and restoring of relations through reunification processes in the DRC-family. As De Beer drafted the LD[2] as a theological answer to the questions of the time, this will be used alongside his own comments and motivation for the various positions and subsequent developments are also recorded.

De Beer's voice was not the only one in the RCA. As the church faced its times and issues, some of his contemporaries differed significantly from his theological positions and the decisions that the RCA ended up making. This article will briefly sketch the background for each of the issues,

1.For example Crafford (1982:443–463) and Verster et al. (2008:360–363).

2.While parts of the LD are quoted in this research, the full text is available at the website of the RCA Shalom in Durban http://www.rcashalom.co.za/LD.html.

describe other possible positions (as taken by colleagues in the RCA) and record De Beer's reaction and its eventual conclusion and acceptance in the church.

Politics

Given the South African context of racial segregation, politics affected the RCA from the very beginning of its existence. The apartheid policies restricted the movement of the RCA's ministers and members and made it difficult for people of different racial groups to meet and worship together. The RCA vocally addressed the injustices of the day by petitioning the then Minister of Community Development to amend the apartheid laws and regulations that hindered its ministry. It also changed its name from 'Indian Reformed Church' to 'Reformed Church in Africa', not wanting to perpetuate the racist divisions forced upon society by the state. Within the DRC family, the RCA spoke against apartheid and sought structural unity with the other DRC churches in opposition to the dictates of the government (more about the name change and unity below) (De Beer 2010:188–189; Sukdaven 2009:60; Verster et al. 2008:361).

By the 1970s, the racially structured society revealed its injustice around the discrepancies between the benefits received by white and Indian ministers in the RCA. When the DRC synod of 1975 and the RCA synod of 1976 agreed that white RCA ministers should become full members of the RCA, the salary differences between the white ministers (on the white DRC scale) and Indian ministers (on the much lower RCA scale) highlighted this racism. This led to three white RCA ministers[3] choosing to become tentmakers instead, in order to eliminate this injustice and preferring to raise their own income through outside work, rather than simply being paid a higher salary than their Indian colleagues for doing the same job; in addition, they were not prepared to accept subsidies from the DRC as long as it gave its theological support to apartheid (which it did at the time) (Lubbe 2014:215–216; Kritzinger 2001:255).

Soon afterwards, two other events confronted the RCA and its position towards the politics of the day.

World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, Canada 1982

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) was an ecumenical body that represented more than 200 Reformed churches worldwide. When the WARC assembly took place in Ottawa, Canada, in August 1982, the meeting was to open with the celebration of the Eucharist (as was the custom). Before this could take place, the sitting president, Dr James McCord, allowed Rev K. Moodley,[4] representing the RCA (along with Dr Charl le Roux), to read a declaration stating that he, as well as other Christian delegates from South Africa, could not with a clear conscience partake of the Lord's Supper together with representatives of the white South African Reformed churches, since they were not allowed to do that in South Africa, and because of their support of the heretical Apartheid policies (Lubbe 2014):

> Dear sisters and brothers,
>
> There are some South Africans who have participated with pain up to this point in the service, and who now feel constrained not to take part in the Lord's Supper, which is the essence of Christian fellowship (Mt 5:23–24). The reasons for this refusal are threefold:
>
> In our country, by custom and by church decision which are defended theologically, black people are not permitted to partake of the Lord's Supper in the NGK and the NHK.
>
> The theological heresy which undergirds apartheid racism finds its origin in separate communion. Our refusal to participate is a choice for righteousness and a refusal to reinforce the Christian roots of our oppression. These churches, which are members of WARC, have consistently refused to have genuine reconciliation with us black Christians, through a confrontation with the evil of apartheid and by participating in the search for justice and peace and true humanity. To share communion with those who represent this disobedience of the gospel would mean eating and drinking judgement upon ourselves. 'For if he does not recognise the meaning of the Lord's body when he eats the bread and drinks from the cup, he brings judgement upon himself as he eats and drinks' (1Cor 11:29).
>
> Our refusal to participate anticipates the day of our freedom when we shall all – black and white – drink from one cup and eat from one loaf. (pp. 222–223)

This statement was to set the tone for the rest of the meeting. Dr Allan Boesak, famous South African anti-apartheid activist, was elected as the new president of the WARC, and the meeting declared a 'status confessionis' in respect of apartheid, meaning that apartheid was seen as an issue on which it was not possible for member churches to disagree without compromising the integrity of the Reformed confession. The assembly concluded that the scriptural justification for apartheid was a theological heresy,[5] and also suspended the membership of both the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK/DRC) and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK) for its support of apartheid[6] (De Beer 2010:191; Gous 1993:360–361; Lubbe 2014:221–222; Kritzinger 2001:255–256).

The decisions taken by the WARC and actions of the RCA's delegates at Ottawa led to tension within the church. Ministers such as Gerrie Lubbe, Klippies Kritzinger and Charl le Roux were enthusiastic about the events and following the direction of Ottawa, they proceeded to distance themselves from the DRC. Kritzinger (2001) records that after Ottawa, the RCA's synodical committee (which acted on

3. Klippies Krtzinger, Gerrie Lubbe and Charl le Roux. This synod followed shortly after the Soweto uprising where school children were massacred while protesting apartheid policies.

4. According to De Beer (2010:191 & 2012:112) Rev Manikkam headed the RCA's delegation; Lubbe (2014:221–222) remembers that Manikkam was not at Ottawa but at the time in India and that Reverends Moodley and Le Roux represented the RCA. I follow Lubbe's recollection in this study.

5. 'We declare with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid ("Separate Development") 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 theological heresy' (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983:170).

6. '… the General Council, reluctantly and painfully, is compelled to suspend the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk in Afrika from the privileges of membership in the WARC' (AS Handelinge 1982:1023; De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983:171–172).

behalf of the church between synodical sessions), discussing the implications of Ottawa, realised that licensing DRC ministers for service in the RCA, now became problematic and determined that a congregation of the RCA could only call a DRC minister to the RCA if '…he was willing to declare that the theological support of Apartheid was a heresy and be willing to be (re)licenced by the RCA' (Kritzinger 2001:256). The three ministers, Gerrie Lubbe, Klippies Kritzinger and Charl le Roux, also relinquished their own ministerial status in the DRC[7] (Lubbe 2014:232; Kritzinger 2001:255–256).

Others in the RCA, De Beer being one, disagreed with this interpretation of Ottawa. De Beer recalled that while the RCA's Synod supported Ottawa's strong rejection of the theological justification and moral defence of apartheid, it reasoned that even though the WARC suspended the DRC, '… it did not 'excommunicate' the DRC from the alliance' (De Beer 2010:191). In addition, the RCA Synod (1994) refrained from calling apartheid a heresy and did not align itself with the Ottawa decision on this. De Beer (2010:191) explained that the RCA understood heresy as '… the rejection or denial of the central and essential doctrines of the Bible, e.g., the inspiration of the scriptures and the divinity of Christ,' and in his view apartheid did not deny these.

Tricameral parliament

The South African government launched the so-called tricameral parliament in 1983–1984, which was to include Coloured and Indian representatives in two separate chambers of parliament. This was controversial as it still excluded Black people from parliament and was also seen as a hollow appeasement that distracted (and undermined) real democracy. Still, some within the RCA supported this and Rev Edward Manikkan even stood as a candidate in the elections; according to the church's rules, he was expected to step down as minister when he entered public office. This was also seen as a support of the apartheid government (Lubbe 2014:218–219).

In response, the RCA's Presbytery of Transvaal, that included pro-Ottawa ministers and was seen as more politically active, issued a pastoral letter calling on RCA members not to vote in the elections, as '…voting in the tricameral elections would amount to open support of racism, since the black majority were left out altogether' (Kritzinger 2001:257–258). In March 1983, the Presbytery of Transvaal submitted their pastoral letter to the Synodical Commission for discussion and (if accepted) for distribution to the whole RCA. Kritzinger (2001:258) believes that this was the final straw that set a process in motion to defrock them, the three tent-making ministers of the Transvaal Presbytery, as well as not recognising Alex Bhiman of the East Rand congregation.

7.As mentioned above, they also believed it was not justifiable to enjoy privileges not available to their Indian colleagues. While they did not have status in both DRC and RCA, their initial licensing by the DRC gave them the right to belong to its medical and pensions funds, from which other RCA ministers were barred since they were not licensed by the DRC. By doing so they were taking '… a concrete and visible stand against structural racism at the time' (Kritzinger 2001:257).

The details of the defrocking[8] of the three Transvaal ministers do not fall within the scope of this study, but their defrocking in 1984 was experienced by them as an attempt to marginalise their views through the use of church law. During the defrocking saga, De Beer represented the view of the RCA synodical committee, and he justified its position over and against the three. He was also part of the process in 1986 that offered them the possibility to have their status restored, but according to Lubbe, De Beer did not share their conviction, in fact he ' … appeared to ridicule[9] the fact that our consciences dictated that we were not allowed to accept financial support from the NGK any longer' (Lubbe 2014:237–238, 245).

De Beer also recounted these events and conceded that there were strong differences of opinion amongst RCA leaders; while some believed that the RCA had to take a stand against apartheid, others felt that this could hinder the evangelical thrust of the RCA. Thus, the crises that Ottawa and the tricameral parliament brought about, forced the RCA to re-evaluate its theological identity. According to De Beer, the RCA was from the outset an evangelical church, focussing more on sharing the gospel than on participating in local politics. At the same time, apartheid and South Africa's racial politics severely affected the Indian community, and the RCA also shared in the lives of its members. De Beer (2010:192) described the story of the RCA as '… a walk on a tight rope (sic) between the preaching of the Gospel and living the life, between sharing faith and offering life'.

He himself believed that the 'evangelical voice', which he believed was typical of the RCA, should not be compromised: 'Evangelism … was the RCA's first priority, the heart of the RCA', and he feared that a strong political response to apartheid would make the RCA into an 'activist church'. The politics and activism of the day diminished the church's evangelical fervour. He strived rather to hold on to the early pietistic and evangelical theology of the DRC that would not allow any political issues to eclipse the calling to spread the gospel (De Beer 2010:129; 2012:113).

Kritzinger (2001) agreed that the aftermath of the defrocking of himself, Gerrie Lubbe and Charl le Roux, positioned the RCA as a strictly evangelistic church. The '… new-look RCA developed a very strong ideological stand: it identified itself as aggressively evangelical and as totally opposed to liberation theology' (Kritzinger 2001:259).

8.After the pastoral letter, the Actuary (Dr Fourie) of the DRC suggested to the RCA's synodical committee that by relinquishing their status as DRC ministers, these three had also lost their status in the RCA. This view was accepted by the synodical commission, and they were urged to reapply for their status in the RCA by undergoing a colloquium doctum, which they, in turn, refused as they were not accused of any wrongdoing and were also not prepared to be examined by the RCA ministry commission, which contained 50% members of the DRC (which had been found guilty of heresy at Ottawa). In 1986, they were again invited to regain their status by only signing the RCA's oath of legitimisation, but then learned that they were also expected to become full-time ministers subsidised by the same DRC – which they refused. They eventually joined the (African) Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, later URCSA (Lubbe 2014:235–238).

9.Kritzinger remembers De Beer saying they were '…tilting at the windmills' with reference to Cervantes' Don Quixote (Interview on 17 July 2023).

Laudium Declaration on politics

The RCA's evangelical stance was cemented through the LD. As mentioned, it was De Beer who drafted this document. He recalled struggling to discern the RCA's theological place and role in these trying times and he sought God's face in prayer for guidance. Inspired by the Lausanne Declaration, he became convinced that the evangelical position should be strongly espoused. To recapture this evangelical spirit, he drafted a document (subsequently accepted by Synod and labelled as the 'Laudium Declaration') that clearly restated the identity of the RCA as an evangelical church (De Beer 2010:v,193; 2012:113).

Thus, addressing evangelistic witness and compassionate service, the LD (1990) affirms that the church '… must demonstrate God's love visibly by caring for those who are deprived of justice, dignity, food and shelter', but also warns that:

> [G]overnments, religious bodies and nations will continue to be involved with social responsibilities but should the church fail in her mandate to preach the Gospel no other body will do so' (LD of the RCA 1990). The apolitical position is stated sharper in section 3.5 on Prophetic witness:
>
> We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice, peace and holiness demands the denunciation of all injustice, oppression and immorality. We will not shrink from this prophetic witness.
>
> We affirm the freedom in Christ of the church of Jesus Christ and refuse the alignment of the church to any ideology or current political trend, power or movement.
>
> We affirm our solidarity with those who suffer for the Gospel and will seek to prepare ourselves for the same possibility.
>
> We affirm the right of the believer to conscientious objection. In our demonstration and witness against evil we determine not to use carnal weapons but to act in the spirit of Christ and through spiritual warfare and constant prayer enter into Christ's victory over the principalities and powers of evil. We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice, peace and holiness demands the denunciation of all injustice, oppression and immorality. We will not shrink from this prophetic witness. (section 3.3.)

The RCA's approach in dealing with the political tension and the perceived threat of liberation theology, according to the LD calls Christians to demonstrate God's love for all, caring for those deprived of justice, dignity, food and shelter, calling the church to transcend barriers such as race, class and gender, and rejecting racism as a denial of the gospel. But it also sees social justice as the primary mandate of the government, while evangelism is the primary mandate of the church. Thus, the church must not align itself with any political programme or action.

Appraisal of the Laudium Declaration on politics

De Beer considered the adoption of the LD to be significant for the character of the RCA which '… despite a flood of liberal theological thinking, (held) … zealously to her Reformed Evangelical position'. In addition, he believed that it strengthened the hearts and minds of members, leading to numerical growth, enhancing unity among members, and strengthening their faith (2012:113).

The current leadership of the RCA agrees. Maniraj Sukdaven (2009:60) explains that the RCA was always vocal against racism and apartheid as it hindered the proclamation of the gospel to Hindus and Muslims. Yet, the RCA tempered its reaction to apartheid as it feared that a social and liberation gospel could compromise '… the evangelistic thrust of the gospel …'. The LD then restated the RCA's evangelical reformed approach (2009:60–61).

Kritzinger fears that the RCA's apolitical stance might, in contrast, have played into the hand of racism, as the RCA singular focus on evangelism, obstructed its role among all races in South Africa: 'Should racially constituted denominations such as the RCA be regarded as legitimate churches or as illegitimate sects with no theological right of existence?' (2001:259). Fortunately, the RCA is (now) addressing this concern, aiming its mission to all demographics of South Africa as recorded by the research of Verster et al. (2008:373).

Recently, Sukdaven also developed a theology on the 'twofold mandate' of mission for the RCA that seeks to respect both the social and evangelistic mandates and works towards the total liberation and restoration of humans (2009:65–70).

Between deliverance or dialogue

De Beer (2010:87) took 'The Church between the Temple and the Mosque', the title of a book by Dutch missiologist J.H. Bavinck, as an apt depiction of the RCA missionary work among Muslims and Hindus in the South African Indian community. It was certainly the case.

Exclusivist position

The RCA's evangelical theology gave rise to an exclusivist theology of religions, in which other religions were not only seen as insufficient but also as contrary and in conflict with Christianity. Hinduism was seen as occult, and its adherents first needed to be delivered: '… (ignoring) the existence of Hindu spirits and gods would be tantamount to adding Christ to the Hindu pantheon' (De Beer 2010:175).

De Beer noted that the ministry of deliverance (exorcism) was initially ignored by the white ministers in the RCA. The Indian workers, in turn, made them aware of the important role that the occult and spirits played in Hinduism, and the ministry of deliverance became an important part of the RCA's missionary work. Klippies Kritzinger stated in an interview on 17 July 2023, that De Beer himself experienced a radical conversion – influenced by the then theological student, Gregory (Greg) Denysschen who performed exorcisms in the Charisma congregation in 1977–1978 – in which he turned from the traditional reformed theology to a

more evangelical theology of deliverance. De Beer recalled that he and his fellow workers often experienced spirits that tried to disrupt their services and preaching, but that prayers of deliverance could bring about breakthroughs in the hearts of Hindus. This, De Beer maintains, is in keeping with Calvin's[10] own views who accepted the existence of demons and devils, and the calling to stand against them (2010:178).

Evangelism in the RCA thus typically included prayers of deliverance from demons, prayers for breakthroughs, prayers for divine healing, and *prayer walks* aimed at delivering Muslims during Ramadan. Contact with other religions was apologetic, as when Rev D.J. Pypers publicly debated the truth of the Gospel with the Muslim apologist, Ahmad Deedat in 1961 (De Beer 2010:176–178, 294–296).

In contrast, the ministers who were defrocked for their political activism and liberation theology, ended up at UNISA, where (according to de Beer and the RCA)[11] they discovered and developed pluralist views on other religions. Lubbe, for example, became a leader in the interfaith movement in South Africa, and Kritzinger and Le Roux shared his sentiments in their academic careers. This was not well received among many in the RCA – as Lubbe (2014:331) recalls that his colleagues were distrustful of his interfaith work and even questioned whether he was still a Christian.

Laudium Declaration on pluralism

Addressing the question of pluralism, the LD (1990) then rather echoed De Beer and other more evangelical church leaders' views, and took a strong stand against a pluralist appreciation of religions:

> We AFFIRM that men are born in sin and guilty, and lost without Christ and totally depraved.
>
> We AFFIRM that other religions and ideologies are not alternative paths to God, and there is no other name given among men whereby we can be saved but the name of Jesus.
>
> We reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through other religions and ideologies. To proclaim Jesus as the saviour of the world is not to affirm that all men are either automatically or ultimately saved. (section 1).

According to Sukdaven (2009:61), the LD rejects any dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through other religions, and holds that proclaiming Jesus as the Saviour of the world does not mean that all humans will be ultimately or automatically saved.

The LD (1990) then offers a passionate call to witness in order to address the sin of humanity and the inadequacy of other religions:

> We AFFIRM that the congregation of believers should turn itself outward to its local community in evangelistic witness and compassionate service.
>
> We AFFIRM that God has committed the whole Gospel to the whole Church and to every member the task of making Christ known throughout the world.
>
> We long to see all lay and ordained persons mobilized and trained for the task. We determine to proclaim the Gospel faithfully, urgently, passionately and sacrificially, until He comes. (section 1)

Dialogue?

De Beer's own position seems to be more complicated. He claimed to follow the Dutch Theologian, Prof Jo Verkuyl, when he granted that God is also working with people of other religions and that only God knows how this happens in a specific religion, situation or person. Simultaneously, De Beer rejected any notion that other religious systems can offer as a means of salvation. He concurred with Barth that any attempt to bring salvation through human beings or their religions have failed, so that God gave his Son to restore the relationship (2010:300–301).

De Beer added his voice to the debate on pluralism in the (DR) church, when in 2002 he rejected the proposal in front of the DRC Synod that 'the God of the Jews and Muslims is the same as the God of the Christians, which can only be known and worshipped in Christ',[12] arguing that this belief diminished the uniqueness of Christ (Base 2002:303). De Beer (2010) explained his rejection of pluralism clearly:

> Die oomblik dat die geloof in Christus as die enigste Verlosser op losse skroewe begin staan, bly daar min van die Christelike geloof oor, en staar jy 'n toekoms sonder hoop en sonder God in die gesig.[13] (p. 303)

Interestingly, De Beer also ventured on the dialogue path. He followed the global reconciliation walk of 1996–1998 (which remembered the Crusades a 1000 years before) to apologise for atrocities committed in the name of Christ during the Crusades. De Beer (2010) echoed this initiative locally, presenting such a statement of reconciliation to the Imam of the Jewel Street Mosque in Pretoria:

> Nine hundred years ago, our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fuelled by fear, greed and hatred, they betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. The Crusades lifted the banner of the Cross above your people. By this act they corrupted the true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness and selfless love.

10.Institute 14 January 2019 shows that De Beer states, 'we must refute those who pretend that the devils are nothing but evil affections or perturbations, which our flesh obtrudes on our minds …' (Calvin, 1909:166–167).

11.While these views were held by De Beer and others in the RCA, they are not necessarily accurate and they remained ministers of local congregations, preaching the gospel from Sunday to Sunday, even baptising converts from other faiths from time to time … (Interview with Kritzinger 17 July 2023).

12.In 7.3 AANBEVELINGS: GODSBESKOUING – die Algemene Sinode aanvaar dat die God van wie die Jood praat as JHWH en vir wie die Moslem Allah noem, nie 'n ander God as die lewende God is nie, maar handhaaf sy belydenis dat God net in Christus reg geken en gedien kan word (Algemene Sinode van die NGK 2002:2019).

13.When faith in Christ as the only Saviour is being questioned, little remains of the Christian faith, and then you face a future without hope and without God (*author's own translation*).

> On the anniversary of the first Crusade, we also carry the name of Christ as we wish to retrace the footsteps of the Crusaders in apology for their deeds in demonstration of the true meaning of the Cross. We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by all our predecessors. We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.
>
> Where they were motivated by hatred and prejudice, we offer love and brotherhood. Jesus the Messiah came to give love. Forgive us for allowing His name to be associated with death. Please accept again the true meaning of the Messiah's words:
>
> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (pp. 297–298)

De Beer (2010:298) remembered that the Moulana's reaction '… was extremely positive'.

Likewise, in August 1999, De Beer participated in a symposium on faith and tolerance at the Rand Afrikaanse Universiteit (now University of Johannesburg). He described it as a meeting with a difference, where the participants sought out ways to work together rather than debate their respective beliefs. De Beer felt that this kind of conversation (perhaps dialogue) was conducive to faith sharing.

De Beer (2010) seemed to try holding onto both deliverance and dialogue; adding that while many theologians tend to play the proclamation of the gospel off against dialogue as if these are opposites, this '… is useless and idolatry' (De Beer 2010:300–301).

Unity

Unity on the agenda

The RCA is part of the Dutch Reformed family of churches. It was established through the mission work of the DRC – first in the Cape and subsequently by missions throughout South Africa. The RCA's first synod was convened in 1968 with four congregations and 360 communicant members. At that first synod, a church order was adopted, and the Indian Reformed Church was born (Verster et al. 2008:361).

The RCA early on envisaged a united Reformed church, referencing unity already in 1970. This was also part of the reason for the name change (as mentioned above) from 'Indian Reformed Church' to 'Reformed Church in Africa', believing that the connotation 'Indian' would turn the church into a church only for Indians. Such a racial connotation, the Synod of 27 August 1968[14] decided, '… would be unacceptable and damaging to the work of the RCA'. Again, at the Synodical Committee of 1978, the church reconfirmed itself to be an open church ministering to all the people of South Africa (De Beer 2010:161; also Verster et al. 2008:262).

14.While De Beer dated the name change to the Synod of 1968, Verster et al. (2008:362) places it at the Synod of 1976.

Laudium Declaration on unity

The LD boldly follows this non-racial stance. It states that: 'We AFFIRM that we who claim to be members of the body of Christ must transcend within the church the barriers of race, gender and class' (LD, Section 4.2). Verster et al. (2008:370–372) more recently emphasised this inclusivity of the LD as a call on RCA churches to extend their ministry beyond the scope of only Indian people, but rather to minister to all.

The LD (1990) also strives towards structural unity within the Reformed family:

> We AFFIRM our God given unity at the deepest level with all born again blood washed believers. We determine to foster such unity across all denominational barriers. In the immediate circle of our church we will foster structural unity with those who share the same confession provided that such structural unity will not stifle the evangelical witness of the Reformed Church in Africa. (section 4.1)

According to Sukdaven (2009:62) the LD calls the church to foster unity across denominational barriers and among the DRC family to also foster structural unity ' … provided these churches share the same confession and evangelical witness as the RCA', which I will show below, all do not.

Options for unity

De Beer (2012) argued that the LD contributed greatly to unity within the RCA. It was unanimously accepted at the 1990 Synod and this consensus bound members and congregations together. It also gave the RCA a 'new impetus … and a fresh understanding of (its) ministry' (De Beer 2012:116). Conceding that LD did not solve all problems in the RCA, De Beer nonetheless believes that this document strengthened unity in the RCA by providing a united calling for its members. On the contrary, the LD and the theology behind it did not restore the already broken relationship with the erstwhile more ecumenically minded ministers and members who had by this time joined the URCSA (Lubbe).

Within the family of DR Churches, De Beer (2012) recorded the view of the former General Secretary of the DRC, Dr J.J. Gerber, who was apparently very enthusiastic about the contribution of the LD. They agreed that evangelism – boldly proclaiming the gospel in word and deed – was more important than unification: 'Would it not perhaps be more viable to launch a gigantic ministry of evangelism instead of having numerous meetings on unification' and they concluded that no structural unity be allowed to harm the RCA's evangelical worship (De Beer 2012:115–116).

It seems that De Beer was seeking alternative ways for the DRC family churches to cooperate without structural unity. The qualification in the LD – that structural unity 'not stifle the evangelical witness' – meant that the LD inhibited the reunification process in the DRC family of churches. While it was widely lauded by the other churches and appreciated for

its strong testimony on evangelism, it represented a specific theological emphasis that did not accommodate other, more ecumenical views in the bigger family – especially the concurrent Belhar Confession that followed a more politically aware, social justice type of theology (which LD opposed). The Belhar confession is seen by the URCSA as an indispensable part of any unification process. Within the RCA, the gains made through the LD, strictly emphasising the evangelical dimension, was feared to be jeopardised by reunification. Perhaps concerned that unification may diminish its evangelistic character, De Beer (2012:117) explained that for the RCA, being '… the smallest and youngest member of the DRC family, there is some apprehension that with church unity it may lose its character encapsulated in the Laudium Declaration …'.

Ambiguous on unity

The role of the LD in unifying the DR Churches is then quite ambiguous. Commenting on the LD, De Beer (2012) urged the fellow DR Churches to put their fears aside and to move towards a union that confesses and celebrates Christian unity. He also believed that the LD could become a basis for unification, a confession around which these churches could find one another and unite structurally. This would make the RCA '… the proverbial small child that would lead us all' (De Beer 2012:115–117).

Simultaneously, De Beer contended that any unity would depend on the other DR Churches' acceptance of LD (and the evangelical theology behind it), leaving little room for compromise and negotiation – or appreciation of the other theologies within the DRC family.

De Beer (2010:209) finally hinted at a way forward. He understood that the Belhar Confession encapsulated the URCSA's deepest convictions, and posited the LD as a balance to that, seemingly allowing the different partners' theological convictions. He ultimately advocated a structural unity in which the RCA's 'evangelical credo and unique spirituality' could be accommodated in a separate presbytery or regional synod within a united church (De Beer 2010:225).

Conclusion

Dr Perold de Beer played an important role as church leader and theologian in the RCA and in doing so contributed to the theology in the wider DRC family of churches (Smit 2003:9–10). His passionate evangelical orientation – as espoused in the LD – withdrew the RCA from issues of social justice and activism and complicated the unity in the DR Churches. De Beer's convictions also highlight those of his contemporaries in the RCA who disagreed with him and whose voices and opinions were eventually overshadowed by the uncompromising stance of the LD.

The chapter on church history, recorded in this article, once again raises the questions of social justice, interfaith dialogue and church unity, as well as how these interact to one another. Kritzinger (2001:259) asks, for example, whether politics (taking a stand against racism) justifies division (which threats unity)?

Verster et al. (2008:373) hoped that the LD would be widely used, taught, and developed within the RCA. A more critical reflection of the LD by both its supporters in the RCA and its critics in the DRC family may be even more useful in divining a path for the future.

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