

# **The interdependence of public witness and institutional unity in the Dutch Reformed family of churches<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The interdependence of public witness and institutional unity in the Dutch Reformed family of churches**

*The Belhar Confession of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church officially approved in 1986 confesses that the unity of the church should be made visible. Very little has since then come of this visible unity in the family of Dutch Reformed churches. Since 1996, however, new impetus has been given to the effort to bring about institutional unity. It has especially been in their ministries of public witness and service that these churches succeeded to a large extent to give visible and institutional expression to their unity. This would hopefully enable the churches of the Dutch Reformed family to play a more effective public role in the present South African society. They, however, face two serious restrictions in this regard: the limited scope for churches to play a public role within the new liberal democratic dispensation in South Africa and the limited motivation to play a transforming public role in the churches of the Dutch Reformed family. In the article a few pre-conditions for playing an effective public role the churches of the Dutch Reformed family have to meet are discussed. The most important one is that these churches should achieve full institutional unity as soon as possible. The conclusion of the article is therefore that the interdependence of institutional unity and public witness is a reality they will have to deal with effectively if they want to move forward.*

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1 One of the great passions of my friend and colleague Piet Meiring as a Christian and theologian – apart from serving the mission of the church and reconciliation in South Africa and the world at large – has always been to work for the visible and institutional unity of the family of Dutch Reformed churches. I therefore thought it fit to dedicate this article to him. A shorter version was presented by me as a paper at a conference in Berlin on 29 September 2007 in commemoration of the 65th anniversary of prof. Wolfgang Huber, the present chairperson of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany.

## 1 FROM BELHAR TO JOINT DECLARATION

One of the main features of the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) is its emphasis on the public witness of the church. According to the Belhar Confession the unity of the church should be made visible, amongst others, so that the world can believe that separation, enmity and hate among people and groups of people are sin that has already been conquered by Christ (section 1). For the same reason it is confessed that God has entrusted the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ to the church. The church should not only embody this reconciliation in such a way that new life giving possibilities could be introduced in society, but should also, on the basis of it, reject any doctrine that sanctions the forced separation of people of different races and colour in the name of the gospel or the will of God (section 3). As a result of the fact that God has revealed Himself as the One who wants to bring justice and true peace among people, and has shown himself to be in a special way the God of those who are in need, poor and experience injustice, the church is called to follow Him in this. The church has to assist people in whatever need and suffering they experience. It also entails that the church should witness and combat against any form of injustice, including any ideology that legitimates forms of injustice or any doctrine that is unwilling to withstand such an ideology in the name of the gospel (section 4). In a final section the church is called to keep to this confession even when it is rejected by authorities and human ordinances and punishment and suffering are involved (section 5) [cf. Cloete & Smit (1984) and Botha & Naudé (1998) for a discussion of the historical background, content and implications of the Belhar Confession].

In emphasising the public witness of the church the Belhar Confession remains faithful to one of the central convictions of the Reformed tradition, namely that the church is called by God to contribute to the transformation of society (cf Burger 2001:89-104; Leith 1992:8-11; Niebuhr 1951:190-229; Smit 1998:30-34; Troeltsch 1981:576-691). This conviction is based on a belief that is equally central to the Reformed tradition: God the Creator and Governor is also Lord of history. He is working out his divine purposes in human history and calls his people to be instruments in the fulfilment of his purposes. His purposes entail not only the salvation of souls, but also the establishment of a holy community

and the glorification of his name through the entire world (Leith 1992:8). In a world marked by sin, the Christian calling to serve these purposes of God inevitably implies the calling to work for the transformation of the world and, more particularly, society.

It was 21 years ago in 1986 that the final version of the Belhar Confession was officially approved by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. In all these years the confession of visible unity within the Dutch Reformed family of churches has been realised only to a limited extent. The institutional unification of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (“Sendingkerk”: church for so-called Coloureds) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (church for Africans) into the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA) has indeed been a significant step in the process of unification. A segment of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in the Free State and Northern Cape has, however, decided not to join the URCSA and has retained the former name of their church. The white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Indian Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) remain up to this day independent churches.

The irony of it all is that the Belhar Confession has been – or more accurately: has been professed to be – the big stumbling block on the way to institutional unification. For many years the perception persisted that the URCSA regarded the official acceptance of the Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis of the new united church by all the involved churches as a pre-condition for institutional unification. The other three churches refused to do so. It has only been since the URCSA a little more than a year ago succeeded to clearly communicate to the other churches of the family that this is not the case that the process of unification has gained momentum. The DRC now officially accepts *that* unification will take place, and that only the *how* of the unification needs to be discussed further.

The most significant expression of visible unity in the family of Dutch Reformed (DR) churches up to date has been with regard to diaconal services and witness to the world. Already in the nineties of the previous century a joint commission for witness action was formed by the regional synods of the DRC and the URCSA in the Western Cape. This was followed by the establishment of a General Commission of Witness Action in 2002 that took over many of the activities of similar commissions of the general synods of the DRC

and the URCSA. When the negotiations for church unification gained new momentum in 2006 a joint declaration of the four churches of the family with the title “Our calling to service and witness in unity” was made in August that year (cf Agenda 2007: 82-83). On the basis of this declaration a constitution for a “United Ministry for Service and Witness” was drawn up. This ministry will in future oversee all the joint diaconal and witness activities of the four churches until full institutional unification has been achieved.

According to the joint declaration the mission of service and witness of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) flows from the mission of the Triune God (*missio Trinitatis Dei*) that is fulfilled in the mission of Christ to the world (*missio Christi*). The salvation that Christ brings about is encompassing. It includes the forgiveness of our sins, our salvation in all spheres of life and the liberation of creation. It is realised in the coming of God’s Kingdom here and now, but will be consummated with the second coming of Christ.

It is declared that an essential feature of the church as body of Christ is to be part of God’s mission in the world. Guided by the Holy Spirit we who are members of the church are called as prophets, priests and kings to:

- a life in the presence of God (*coram Dei*), in obedience to God;
- a ministry in which we worship God and stand in for the world (*leitourgia*);
- minister the gospel of salvation to everyone, by means of words (*kerugma*), deeds (*diakonia*) and unity (*koinonia*);
- promote justice, reconciliation and witness to the hope that lives in us;
- preserve creation and cultivate it to the honour of God and on behalf of everyone and everything living in it.

The declaration takes into account that the church is called to service and witness in the context of Southern Africa. It entails listening with compassion to the voices of those in all the different communities who are in need, and speaking with a prophetic voice and serving in a priestly way to alleviate their need. It also obliges the church to respect, enhance and celebrate the rich and diverse heritage of Southern Africa and to witness by means of respectful

dialogue to people from other faiths and convictions of our faith in the Triune God.

Although in the joint declaration of the four churches of the DR family the point of departure is taken more explicitly in the mission of the Triune God in the world than in the Belhar Confession, the same emphasis on the calling of the church to witness to the world of the comprehensive salvation in Christ and to contribute to the transformation of society is unmistakable. One therefore has to conclude that at long last at least on the leadership level there is a strong theological consensus among the churches of the DR family *that they have a calling to be engaged in transforming society and on what the main means and principles are to accomplish it.*

## **2 RESTRICTIONS TO THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THE CHURCHES OF THE FAMILY**

However, this positive conclusion needs to be qualified. To reach theological consensus among church leaders on the public witness of the churches of the DR family is one thing. To actually and effectively play a transforming public role in Southern Africa is quite another thing. This depends on at least two other things:

- Does the South African context allow them to play such a public role?
- Do the churches have what it takes to play such a role? In other words: are they adequately motivated and qualified to play it?

In my opinion one has to take into account that the South African context in more than one way throws up hindrances for the churches of the DR family to play their public role optimally. And one has to take into account that the response of congregations on the ground to the drastic changes in the South African context during the last one and a half decade and corresponding shifts in spirituality have impacted negatively on the motivation of many church members to play their public role as Christians to the full. In the second part of my article I want to briefly give attention to these two restrictions.

### **2.1 The limited scope for the public role of churches within the new liberal democratic dispensation in South Africa**

In the previous political dispensation the four churches in the Dutch Reformed family had some scope to play a public role, be it in

different ways. As a result of the exceptionally close relationship between the Afrikaans Reformed churches and the Nationalist government the theocratic ideal they promoted did not remain a pipe dream<sup>2</sup>. The government shared the conviction that South Africa was a Christian country and even gave expression to it in the 1983 constitution<sup>3</sup>. It for the most part accommodated the wishes of the Afrikaans Reformed churches to introduce legislation regulating public morality – for example on abortion, censorship, gambling and trading on Sundays - that reflected their conservative moral views. And, of course, up to a certain point in time the DRC also legitimised the policy of apartheid by linking it to the will of God as it is expressed in the Bible (cf De Villiers 1984:58-59).

Reformed churches like the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, which were involved in the struggle against the apartheid regime, were just as convinced that the Bible condemned apartheid and that they were called by God to struggle for a new and liberated South Africa. As a result of the fact that the ANC and other liberation movements were banned by the government and many of their leaders were either in exile or in jail, these and other churches played a prominent and vicarious leadership role in the liberation struggle.

With the dawn of the new political dispensation in South Africa in 1994 everything changed. Within a short time span it became apparent that the conviction that Christians have a calling to transform society in accordance with the gospel has almost completely lost its self-evidence and the scope for playing a transforming public role has diminished considerably. In my opinion two major factors have contributed to this development:

(i) *The dismantling of the credibility structures under girding the transformation approach in the previous political dispensation*

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2 In his book *Ontluisterde wêreld: Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderde wêreld* (English translation of the title: *Disenchanted world: The Afrikaner and his church in a changing world*) J Durand (2002:32-39) traces the roots of this close relationship back to the influence of the Reformed pietism prevalent in the Netherlands at the time Jan van Riebeeck founded a Dutch settlement at the Cape.

3 One of the national objectives set out in the constitution was “to maintain Christian values and civilised norms and to recognise and protect freedom of worship” (Lubbe 2002:64).

In the case of the Afrikaans Reformed churches like the DRC this took place in a rather dramatic and even traumatic way. The old constitution that gave political legitimacy to their efforts to ensure that Christian values were recognised in government policies was abolished. The loss of political power of the National Party meant that these churches lost the sympathetic ear of politicians sharing the same theocratic vision. They also lost their position of privileged access to the state owned radio and television and the printed media. All of this amounted to a severe loss of social status and public influence.

As in the case of Germany after unification, South African churches, church leaders and theologians who actively supported the liberation struggle found that appreciation for the role they played in the apartheid era did not translate in the New South Africa into privileged public roles.

*(ii) The introduction and entrenchment of social structures and processes influenced by modernisation*

The one factor that has more than any other restricted the scope for churches to play a public role since the dawn of the new political dispensation has been *the introduction of a new liberal constitution*. The new liberal constitution, for the first time in South African history, clearly insists on the separation of religion and state. This makes it difficult – if not impossible – for the government to implement the distinctive views of a particular religious group, leave alone the distinctive views of a particular religious denomination within that religious group. Apparently, the view that society should be transformed in accordance with the Christian gospel, is discredited by the new liberal constitution as politically illegitimate.

The separation of religion and state is but one example of the entrenchment of *pluralism* in the present South Africa. Already in the previous political dispensation the influence of modernisation could not be completely abated. Especially in the eighties it became clear that not only politics, but also other social systems like economics, science and the arts, increasingly asserted their independence from religion and moral systems other than the liberal. With the dawn of the New South Africa the demise of the theocratic worldview of the Reformed tradition and the introduction of a liberal constitution allowed modernisation processes, including pluralism, to proceed seemingly unabatedly. The autonomy of the different

social systems, even of a social system such as education that was previously strongly based on Christian religious values, has been increasingly acknowledged. The concomitant result was the increasing loss of legitimacy of the traditional Reformed conviction that all spheres of life should be brought to obedience to the law of God.

## **2.2 The limited motivation to play a transforming public role in the churches of the Dutch Reformed family**

The two factors we have just discussed also have a subjective side. The loss of political influence and the uncertainty regarding the scope that is left for the public influence of the church by the liberal constitution also had a negative impact on the motivation of the members of the churches of the DR family to actively play a transforming public role in the South African society.

The negative impact of the discussed two factors on the motivation of church members to support and be involved in the public witness of the church in the South African society is especially true for the white DRC. As the members of the DRC are on average more affluent and better educated than the members of the other three churches of the family their lack of motivation can seriously hamper the effectiveness of the public witness the United Ministry for Service and Witness envisage for the churches of the family.

Many members of the DRC experienced the loss of power of both the political party they supported and the churches to which they belonged as rather traumatic. The fact that primarily Afrikaner people experienced the brunt of accusations in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, of retrenchment and unemployment as a result of the implementation of affirmative action in the civil service and of the threat of expropriation as a result of the new government's land reform programme, added to this experience. This has led to a negative attitude to what is happening in the South African society among many members that has only grown stronger over the last few years. To this especially the increased exposure of church members to crime, and in particular violent crime, contributed. The fact that ANC led municipalities have increasingly changed the names of towns and cities with an Afrikaner connotation to names that have significance only for black people, as well as the perception that the education of Afrikaans speaking

pupils and students in their mother tongue is increasingly under threat, have also played a role. The result of this has been a renewed ethnic awareness and mobilisation among Afrikaner people. Racist sentiments are now more openly expressed among them than ten years ago when Nelson Mandela was still president. As a result of the fact that almost all the members of the DRC are Afrikaners these developments also have a very negative impact on the motivation of its members to become constructively involved in the South African society. There is the tendency to regard the local congregation as a safe haven against the onslaughts of society. Many members expect their ministers to give exclusive attention to the priestly dimension of the ministry. All the emphasis in the ministry should be on emotionally healing and cathartic experiences that comfort the members and strengthen their endurance against the onslaughts of society.

What we are experiencing in many congregations of the DRC is a shift to a more inwardly directed spirituality. This means that the transformation approach has not only lost much of its legitimacy in broader society, but also for many members of the DRC. One even notices within the DRC the increasing adherence to two other traditional approaches that stand in opposition to the transformation approach of the Reformed tradition: the 'two kingdom' approach of Lutheranism, which accepts that other principles apply to politics and economics than Biblical principles, and the sectarian approach, which conceives society as evil and hostile and denies the social ethical responsibility of Christians.

I must hasten to add that although this may be true of a great number of the members of the DRC, there are also a significant number of members who strongly care for people who are in need – whatever their race or culture may be – and do sterling work in alleviating their need. For example, a recent survey of poverty alleviation projects in congregations of the Highveld Synod of the DRC has shown that a considerable number of church members in almost every congregation that falls under the auspices of this synod, are actively involved in such projects: soup kitchens, provision of warm clothing and blankets during winter, needle work classes, literacy training, setting up bureaus for linking jobless people with existing job opportunities, job creation, care for AIDS orphans, etc. (NG Barmhartigheidsdiens Suid-Transvaal 2005). It seems that the pattern often is that one or more visionary members initiate a

particular poverty alleviation project in a congregation and then influence and inspire other members to join them in their initiative. The experience is that once members overcome their hesitancy to become involved in such projects they lose their racial prejudices and often become dedicated participants who really care for the people in need they come into contact with.

What also has to be taken account of is that the so-called Emerging Church Movement has since 2002 gained considerable influence among ministers of religion and in congregations of the DR family. This movement, which originated in the USA under the leadership of the Lutheran theologian prof. Pat Keifert, strongly emphasises the missional directedness of the church to the world, which includes its responsibility to work for the transformation of society in accordance with God's will. This approach is promoted in South Africa by two influential institutions, the Bureau for Continuing Education and Research at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria and the Institute for Contextual Ministry at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria. Their efforts have led to the foundation of the South African Partnership for Missional Churches to which an increasing number of congregations in the DR family belong (cf Niemandt 2007:46-58).

### **3 THE WAY FORWARD**

The challenge the uniting family of DR churches faces with regard to the implementation of their laudable policy statement regarding their public witness in the South African society, is to effectively overcome these restrictions. In conclusion I would like to name a number of pre-conditions for effectively playing a public role in the South African society these churches will have to meet.

#### **3.1 A more inclusive transformation approach should be developed**

It should be accepted that the exclusive transformation approach of the Reformed tradition that was still dominant in the churches of the DR family in the previous political dispensation is no longer viable in the new liberal democratic political dispensation in South Africa. The exclusive approach had the Christianising of all the spheres of society as goal. Apart from not being viable anymore in the liberal democratic South African society in which religion and state are separated, the realisation of such a goal would be unjust in our religiously plural society, because the freedom of conscience of the

adherents of other religions would be disregarded. The churches of the DR family should rather consider Karl Barth's suggestion to make the goal of transformation the *humanising* of society<sup>4</sup>. The humanising of society is a goal with which non-Christians can also identify. As Barth, however, demonstrated in *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* the humanising of society does not necessarily mean the acceptance of a universally recognised set of criteria. Christians can still develop their own criteria for the humanising of society. To avoid the accusation of being guilty of an anthropocentric bias they can, in my opinion, consider adding the *optimal protection and enhancement of all life on earth* or the *flourishing of all God's creatures* as more comprehensive goals of their transformation efforts (cf Agenda 2004:131-137; De Villiers 2005:526).

The transformation approach of the churches in the DR family in the previous dispensation was also exclusive in the sense that Biblical moral values were absolutised and regarded as the only values on the basis of which even political policies (such as apartheid) or political strategies (such as the liberation struggle) could be legitimised. The churches of the DR family should today rather accept the differentiation of social spheres and the validity of other value systems such as the political, economic and cultural. What they should not accept is the absolutising of these value systems and the imperialistic encroachment of the values of a particular social sphere (for example the economic values of the free market system) on other social spheres (cf Schweiker 2000:128-138). For that reason they should uphold the *relative* priority of moral values in all social spheres. In my opinion such recognition of both the validity of social sphere related values and the relative priority of moral values is typical of a Christian ethics of responsibility. I would therefore plead for the adoption of a

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4 In *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* Barth (1946:14) has the following to say about the purpose of the state: "Die in seiner Existenz stattfindende Auswirkung göttlicher Anordnung besteht darin, dass es da Menschen (ganz abgesehen von Gottes Offenbarung und ihrem Glauben) faktisch übertragen ist 'nach dem Mass menschlichen Einsicht und menschlichen Vermögens' für zeitliches Recht und zeitlichen Frieden, für eine äusserliche, relative, vorläufige Humanisierung der menschliche Existenz zu sorgen".

responsibility ethics approach by the churches of the DR family (cf De Villiers 2003:23-38; 2005:521-535 and 2007:8-23).

### **3.2 A strong consensus on a Christian vision for a good South African society has to be formulated**

It would only be possible for the churches of the DR family to be consistent in their public witness if they do not only agree on a number of Biblical means and principles, which should guide their public witness, but also have a shared, comprehensive and integrated Christian vision of a good South African society that inspire and orientate them. The vision of a good South African society will, of course, have a greater impact if it expresses a strong consensus within the churches of the DR family. Partly as a result of the institutional divisiveness of the churches such a consensus still does not exist, at least not among rank and file members. There is rather the tendency to think along the lines of a future South Africa that will serve only the interests of particular groups represented by the members of the own church.

### **3.3 Church views on government policy should be translated by making use of arguments that can also be accepted by non-Christians**

In his book *Waakzaam en nuchter: Over Christelijke ethiek in een democratie* (English translation of the title: *Vigilant and level-headed: On Christian ethics in a democracy*) the Dutch Reformed theologian Gerrit de Kruijf argues that it is irresponsible for the church to suffice with a distinctively Christian vision. The Barthian approach of prophetic Christian witness in public on political and economic matters is, in his opinion, not appropriate in contemporary liberal democracies (De Kruijf 1994:40-52; 236-240). He does not deny that there may come a moment that faith in Christ cannot tolerate developments within a particular liberal democratic state and that faithfulness to Christ and political disobedience may coincide. Such a “status confessionis” is, however, something extraordinarily (De Kruijf 1994:182). In normal circumstances the witness or prophetic approach is incompatible with a liberal democracy, because it insists that the Christian view should be the basis of policy and legislation and that other views need not be taken into account. In addition, it is not in his opinion a constructive approach, because the church knows in advance that its prophetic Christian witness cannot be accepted in plural democracies as basis for policy

and legislation. If churches and individual Christians want to responsibly contribute to consensus and policy formation they should not – in De Kruijf’s opinion - make public pronouncements on societal issues on the basis of their own “thick” or strong Christian morality, but do so rather on the basis of the “thin” cultural values shared by all in plural societies (De Kruijf 1994:188; 195)<sup>5</sup>.

I am personally of the opinion that De Kruijf’s views are – in the case of the South African society – only valid with regard to certain aspects of the participation of the church in public debate. De Kruijf is right in saying that Christians can hardly expect legislation in liberal democracies to be based on strong Christian values. Legislation – for example on abortion – has to allow different-minded groups and individuals to act in accordance with their own consciences. Christians can, however, strive to shift the moral consensus in society to bring it more in harmony with Christian moral values and in this way indirectly influence legislation. They can do this by using arguments for their views that can also be accepted by non-Christians. In a society like South Africa it can also be done by giving adequate publicity to official church views on societal issues. The majority of South Africans are Christian and are therefore perfectly capable to understand typical Christian arguments.

### **3.4 The institutional unity of the churches of the Dutch Reformed family should be accomplished as soon as possible**

There is little doubt that in the end the most important pre-condition for effective public witness in the South African society by the churches of the DR family is institutional unity. The first reason for this is that there is very little chance that the four churches will reach adequate consensus on a vision for a good South African society and even less chance that they will agree on particular public issues as long as they are institutionally divided and are tempted to represent the ethnic group interests of their members. The only chance to overcome conflicting and prejudiced views on public issues by the

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5 See for the distinction “thick” and “thin” used with regard to morality and ethics: M Walzer, *Thick and thin: Moral argument at home and abroad* (1994), xi, footnote 1. Walzer utilizes the term “thick” to point to a kind of moral argument that is “richly referential, culturally resonant, locked into a locally established symbolic system or network of meanings”. “Thin” is simply the contrasting term.

four churches is to form one church institution and build a more inclusive loyalty among members to this new united church and to one another.

The second reason is that institutional unity is a prerequisite for restoring the legitimacy of the public witness of the churches of the DR family. The simple rule of: “Practice what you preach!” clearly also applies in this context. The churches of the DR family can hardly expect the state and other civil society organisations in South Africa to unconditionally accept their admonishments against intolerance, irreconcilability and racial prejudice as long as their inability to form one church institution witness to their own irreconcilability. Like other churches the churches of the DR family are called to publicly witness to their faith by being alternative societies that exemplify the moral principles of the gospel of Christ. There is no way in which they could be publicly attractive examples of such an alternative society without becoming one church institution.

The third reason is that institutional unity is a pre-condition for an effective and comprehensive ministry of the churches of the DR family to the poor and the needy in South Africa. At the moment many members of the white and affluent DRC are pre-occupied with their own fears and security and do not really care for the more than 40% South Africans who are absolutely poor and many others who are suffering in other ways. The only chance we have that they will open their hearts to the poor and suffering and become involved in the alleviation of their need is that they would be to a greater extent exposed to needy people and be able to build relationships with them in one church institution. Institutional unity would not only bring about greater exposure to people in need, but would also create more opportunities to become directly involved in alleviating their need.

The fourth reason is that it has been in the past a denigrating experience for poor congregations of the URCSA, the DRC in Africa and the RCA to receive financial and other material support from synods and rich white congregations of the DRC. They were often forced by circumstances to accept such support, sometimes even with strict conditions on how the money should be spent, attached to it. It is only in one unified church denomination that the sharp division between a rich and dominant white church and poor and dependent black churches would be overcome.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The conclusion we have to come to in the end is a rather curious one. On the one hand, the most visible expression of the unity of the family of DR churches has been until now in their ministries of diaconal service and public witness. They have not only succeeded to cooperate closely with regard to these ministries, but have set up joint institutional structures that coordinate and execute joint projects. One can also put it this way: the institutional unity of the four churches of the family thus far has depended heavily on the cooperation and institutionalisation of their diaconal services and public witness.

On the other hand, the effective implementation of the diaconal services and public witness of these churches also depends heavily on the completion of their institutional unification. Only then would they be able to speak with one mouth on specific public issues, would their public witness have legitimacy, would they be in a position to effectively address the need of the poor in South Africa and would the denigrating dependency of poor black churches on a rich white church be overcome. This interdependence of institutional unity and public witness in the Dutch Reformed family of churches is a reality these churches will have to effectively deal with if they want to move forward.

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