

The Dutch Reformed Church (1974–2024): From Dancing with the Devil to Waltzing to Heavenly Music

Johan van der Merwe

<https://orcid.org/000-0002-7678-5452>

University of Pretoria, South Africa

johan.vdmerwe@up.ac.za

Abstract

The jubilee celebration of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (SHE) reminds church historians of important events that have taken place during the past 50 years. This article gives an overview of important events that took place in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Being the largest white Afrikaans-speaking church and the church which biblically supported the political policy of apartheid, the history of Christianity in South Africa cannot be understood without taking note of the DRC's journey. For the DRC, 1974 was an important turning point in its history as the policy document *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* (hereinafter *Ras, Volk en Nasie*) was approved by the General Synod of the DRC. This document explained how the church motivated apartheid from a biblical point of view. It was – metaphorically speaking – the official start of the DRC's dance with the devil. During the past 50 years, the DRC has taken important decisions that ended its dance with the devil and started a new dance, waltzing to heavenly music. This happened when the church decided to take a new road to reconciliation which was the primary goal. The article revisits *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, but also some of the important milestones along the road to reconciliation. It concludes with an example of how a congregation of the former apartheid church succeeded in making a difference in the local community. This confirms the fact that the dance with the devil has indeed ended and that many congregations of the church are now waltzing to heavenly music.

Keywords: apartheid; reconciliation; Dutch Reformed Church; Truth and Reconciliation Commission; heresy; confession; human relations; church; society

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
#16729 | 14 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/16729>
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)
© The Author(s) 2024



Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Introduction

The jubilee celebration of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (SHE) challenges church historians to turn the clock back 50 years to 1974. It was a year which not only marked the beginning of SHE, it was also a defining year for the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and for Christianity in South Africa. It was the year in which the General Synod of the DRC, as the largest white Afrikaans-speaking church, officially approved the policy of apartheid by supporting it with a theology of apartheid in the document titled *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkere Verhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* (Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture) (hereinafter *Ras, Volk en Nasie*) (NGK 1974).

It was – metaphorically speaking – the official start of the church’s dance with the devil. By adopting the document and supporting apartheid, the DRC became partners in crime with the ruling National Party government. Although the DRC’s support of apartheid did not happen overnight and was the outcome of a journey which started as early as 1947,¹ the adoption of *Ras, Volk en Nasie* by the General Synod in 1974 became an important marker not only in the history of the DRC, but in the history of Christianity in South Africa. The church’s struggle against apartheid gained important momentum after the adoption of the document. The importance of this struggle was confirmed by the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu when he wrote: “The struggle of the church in South Africa was fundamentally how to bring about a more just society where differences or race, color and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance” (De Gruchy 2004, ix). As we celebrate 50 years of SHE, we must not forget the context in which the journey of SHE took place, and in which the DRC played an important role.

This article starts by giving an overview of the origins, content and reception of *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. It then indicates how the DRC decided to change course and turn away from apartheid with a new document in 1986. A new policy and a new document put the church on a new road to reconciliation. Important beacons on the new road, like the Rustenburg Conference, the so-called General Synod of Reconciliation in 1994, and the appearance of a representative of the DRC before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1997, are revisited to indicate that the DRC’s dance with the devil ended. The article concludes by indicating how the DRC metaphorically started a new dance, waltzing to heavenly music by making a difference in communities through local congregations. In writing the article, the author used primary and secondary

1 A report prepared by Prof. E. P. Groenewald titled *Die Apartheid van die Nasies en Hulle Roeping teenoor Mekaar* (The Apartheid of Nations and Their Calling towards Each Other) was accepted by the Raad van Kerke in 1947. This document was tabled at the Transvaal Synod of the DRC in 1948 and became the basis for the church’s policy on separate development and apartheid (see Lombard 1974, 79–80).

sources as part of a literature study. He also used oral sources on the role of the church in communities.

*Ras, Volk en Nasie*²: A Dance with the Devil

The Origin: The Dance Begins

While the majority of churches in South Africa supported the struggle against apartheid, the DRC – as stated above – was one of the important role players in supporting apartheid. Metaphorically speaking, this was a dance with the devil.³ It was after the Cottesloe Consultation held in Johannesburg from 7–14 December 1960, that different regional synods of the church appointed commissions to study the so called “race problem” in South Africa. The Cape Synod of 1961 was the first synod to react by appointing a permanent commission for the study of race relations (Van der Merwe 2013, 54). Although the first report of this commission was tabled in 1965, it was the revised report that was tabled in 1969 (NG Kerk in Suid Afrika 1969, 193) which became the basis for *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. One of the important consequences of this report was the fact that the General Synod of the DRC decided in 1970 to appoint a permanent commission for the study of race and ecumenical issues (NGK 1970, 785). It was the report of this commission, which was approved by the General Synod of 1974, which was published under the title *Ras, Volk en Nasie* (Van der Merwe 1990, 110). The importance of this document for the DRC was confirmed by a remark of Dr F. E. O’Brien Geldenhuys when he wrote:

With *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* under my arm, I went to Europe to present it to all the important protestant churches in England, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. The request to all of them was: “This is the point of view of the DRC about the South African scene. Please study it and let us discuss it”. (O’Brien Geldenhuys 1982, 81)

The Reception of *Ras, Volk en Nasie*: The Dance in Full Swing

To understand the reception of *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, it is important to understand the content of the document. It was nothing less than a theological support of the apartheid policy of the National Party government. It gave “separate development”⁴ biblical support and “marriage” between people of different races was forbidden, while common worship was only permissible on special occasions (Van der Merwe 1990, 167).

2 The author chooses to use the Afrikaans name for the document because it was more commonly used than the English translation.

3 The author uses this metaphor because apartheid was declared a heresy at the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed churches in Ottawa in 1982.

4 Separate development was the term which the DRC used for the policy which became known as apartheid.

The document soon met fierce resistance from inside and outside the DRC. It was criticised by the more conservative groups in the church as being too liberal, especially the paragraph on fellowship and common worship, which read as follows:

Spiritual communion or fellowship is experienced inter alia where believers are gathered in fellowship with Christ through His Word and Spirit. This fellowship may also be practiced on occasion where believers from various churches are gathered to worship together. How this should be affected in practice, is the responsibility of the local church council. (NGK 1975, 167)

There was negative reaction from congregations, presbyteries and regional synods.⁵ It was clear from the conservative reaction from inside the church, that apartheid was deeply embedded in the hearts of many the members of the DRC. They believed that separate development (apartheid) was a biblical instruction in church and society. They experienced the privileges of it – to them the dance with the devil was enjoyable!

Negative reaction initially came from outside the church, especially from the ecumenical partners of the DRC. They made it clear that it was impossible to support apartheid biblically. The Gereformeerde Kerken (Reformed Churches) in the Netherlands were the first to denounce the document. Their main point of critique was the fact that through this document, the church gave biblical sanction to apartheid (Van der Merwe 1990, 23). The Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches also criticised the policy in the document. Their main points of critique were the interpretation of Scripture; the prophetic calling of the church as described in the document; and the support for separate development. They also drew attention to a large dualism between theology and practice in the document (Van der Merwe 1990, 190). Delegates of the DRC also met with members of the Reformierter Bund in Germany, which in a published report, declared:

We can, therefore, only regard the NG report of 1974 as a theological confirmation of the present political system in South Africa, in which the separation of races means in practice the dominion of the one and discrimination, denial of rights and exploitation of the other. (NGK 1982, 157)

In a press release by the Reformierter Bund on 22 September 1979, they emphasised the problems they had with the policy of the DRC as follows:

Against the backdrop of the terrible consequences of the homeland policy, against the backdrop of the news we get about torture and banning, against the background of a church divided according to race, we have asked their advocating for the disadvantages of the oppressed and their involvement in the struggle for church unity. Our dialogue partner could not give a satisfactory answer, because they had to hold on in general to

5 Examples are the church council of Migdol in Nort West Province, the presbytery of Piet Potgietersrus and the Regional Synod of West Transvaal (Van der Merwe 1990, 136).

the present official line of the NGK as outlined in the 1974 Synod report *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. (NGK 1982, 157)

The fact that the DRC supported apartheid was unacceptable to its ecumenical partners. While many church members were enjoying the dance with the devil, there were also those in the church and society who were repelled by it. This was confirmed by a statement made by Dr Allan Boesak (1974, 1), who was one of the theologians who criticised the Synod's decisions and warned that a major confrontation between the churches in South Africa was on hand.

Reactions from theologians and church bodies from within the church also started to make their voices heard and made it clear that the church's policy was unacceptable. One of the important voices against *Ras, Volk en Nasie* was published on 5 November 1980 in *Die Kerkbode* as *Die Hervormingsdaggetuienis (The Reformed Day Witness)* (Van der Merwe 1990, 205). It was signed by eight DRC theologians⁶ and challenged the church to answer to its prophetic calling with regard to the political situation in South Africa. It also called on the church to strive towards "the elimination of loveless and racist attitudes which caused hurtful incidents" (Van der Merwe 1990, 32). *The Witness*, as it became commonly known, caused a storm in the DRC that lasted for several months. It was, however, a confirmation of the fact that not all the members of the church were appreciative of the church's official policy with regard to apartheid.

A second voice was heard with the publication of the *Open Letter* on 9 June 1982. It was signed by 123 ministers from the DRC family and criticised the legislation of apartheid. The *Open Letter* stated that it was the primary calling of the church in South Africa to work towards reconciliation and defined reconciliation as a prophetic witness in relation to the entire life of society. The church, therefore, dared not remain silent on matters of moral decay, family disintegration and discrimination (Els 2008, 86).

A third important, and probably the strongest, voice came from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). At the 21st General Council Meeting of the WARC in Ottawa, Canada, in August 1982, a *status confessionis* was adopted because the WARC declared apartheid to be a sin: "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" (Van der Merwe 1990, 335). The consequence of this decision was that the DRC's membership was suspended, and the church was charged with heresy based on the misinterpretation of the Bible and the Reformed Confessions to justify apartheid. Gaum (1997, 17) was correct when he wrote that this event made 1982 a decisive year for the DRC.

A fourth important voice came from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, one of the churches in the DRC family. The church declared in 1978 that apartheid was a sin, that

6 The eight theologians were C. F. A. Borchardt, H. J. B. Combrinck, B. A. Muller, W. P. Esterhuysen, J. A. Heyns, W. D. Jonker, H. W. Rossouw and A. B. du Toit.

the moral and theological justification thereof was a mockery of the gospel, and that its consistent disobedience to the Word of God was heresy (Gaum 1997, 17). In 1982, the General Synod of the church went a step further by deciding that it had no choice but to accuse the DRC of theological heresy and idolatry. It also declared a *status confessionis* in the light of the WARC decision (NGK 1982, 602). The importance of this decision is underlined by D. J. Smit when he explains the *status confessionis* as follows:

a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over and against the threat. (Cloete and Smit 1984, 16)

This led to the formulation of a confession which was tabled before the General Synod on 6 October 1982. In 1986, the Belhar Confession was officially adopted as an article of faith.

These voices from within and outside the DRC indicated that the church was wrong in supporting apartheid. Prof. W. D. Jonker described the precarious position in which the DRC found itself correctly when he stated:

This brought the DRC to an unavoidable situation . . . I was convinced that the DRC was put in a situation where it had to take a serious decision. (Jonker 1998, 162)

In the metaphor the author has used for the current article, the church could either keep on dancing with the devil or decide to stop and quit the dance. This realisation came with the decision taken by the General Synod of the DRC in October 1982 when it was decided to revise *Ras, Volk en Nasie*.

First Steps of a New Dance: *Kerk en Samelewing*⁷

The revision of *Ras, Volk en Nasie* led to a new document with a new policy on race and society. The first steps of the new dance became clear during the four years in which the new document became a reality.⁸ Proof of the fact that the winds of change were blowing through the DRC became evident when Prof. J. A. Heyns was chosen as moderator of the General Synod of 1986.⁹ The report was tabled in October 1986 during the General Synod (Els 2008, 90), and became known as *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society). De Gruchy (2004, 195) confirms the above statement when he writes:

7 The author chooses to use the Afrikaans title because it is more commonly known.

8 For a detailed discussion of the process and the struggle to compose a new document, see Van der Merwe (1990).

9 Prof. J. A. Heyns was one of the DRC delegates at Ottawa who had to leave the meeting after the suspension of the DRC. He was also one of the theologians who not only signed the Reformed Day Witness of 1980, but was instrumental in writing *The Witness* with Prof. W. D. Jonker.

But at its General Synod in 1986 the NGK finally, if timidly gave up the attempt to provide biblical and theological justification for apartheid in its report on Church and Society (*Kerk en Samelewing*).

De Gruchy (2004, 195) continues with the following very important remark:

History has unfolded in such a way, however, that the new position of the NGK was totally inadequate, in fact, it was nothing more than a theological rationalization of the government's own attempt to reform apartheid. But apartheid was beyond reform: it was a heresy that had to be rejected as contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These remarks by De Gruchy clearly indicate that *Kerk en Samelewing* was not a whole new dance. It was only the first steps. The content of *Kerk en Samelewing* confirmed this by stating that on apartheid:

The Dutch Reformed Church is convinced that the application of apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another, cannot be accepted on Christian ethical grounds because it contravenes the very essence of neighbourly love and righteousness and inevitably human dignity. (Gaum 1997, 19)

On the one hand, although the DRC rejected scriptural grounds for apartheid in *Kerk en Samelewing*, it did not confess that it was heresy and a sin. This was a serious shortcoming. On the other hand, the DRC proved that it was serious in its attempt to turn away from apartheid by deciding that the doors and membership of the church were now open to people of all races. Regarding mixed marriages, the General Synod took the following decision:

The Scriptures do not forbid racially mixed marriages. In its pastoral work, however, the church must give due warning that social circumstances, as well ideological, philosophical, cultural and socio-economic differences and other factors, may cause serious tensions. Where such marriages do take place, those involved must receive pastoral guidance in all aspects of marriage. (NGK 1986b, 61)

The reaction to *Kerk en Samelewing*, especially the storm that broke loose in the DRC, confirmed that something important happened at the General Synod of 1986. The church decided – metaphorically speaking – to embark on a new dance, a dance which was unacceptable to thousands of its members.¹⁰ The next step of the new dance came at the General Synod of 1990 where *Kerk en Samelewing* was revised. Although apartheid was not specifically named, the Synod decided that any political system that allowed forced separation and division of peoples was unacceptable and that to defend such a system biblically and ethically must be seen as a serious fallacy (NGK 1986b, 39–40).

10 Reaction to “Church and Society” led to the founding of a new church by DRC members in 1987, which became known as the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk.

Looking back over 50 years it can be argued that *Kerk en Samelewing* was not the perfect document as stated by Kinghorn (1990, 21–36) and De Gruchy (2004, 195). What it was, was the first steps of a new dance for the DRC. The church decided to stop the dance with the devil and to embark on a new dance.

Reconciliation

The DRC's new dance did not happen overnight. It took a few important steps to come into the rhythm with this new dance. These steps were important events during the history of the past 50 years of the DRC to reconcile with other churches and the people of South Africa.

The first of these important events was the Church Conference that took place in Rustenburg from 5–9 November 1990, where the DRC made its first confession of guilt. The importance of this conference is described by Alberts and Chikane (1991, 15):

Not since the Cottesloe Consultation in the 1960s has the church been presented with so significant a challenge to rediscover its calling and to unite Christian witness in a changing South Africa.

The events that took place during the conference confirmed this remark. It was the address of one of the keynote speakers, Jonker, which set the tone for the conference. Jonker (1998, 205), who was also a member of the DRC, decided under the impression of the enormity of the moment to change the content of his address to include the following confession:

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

After Jonker's address, Tutu reacted by saying:

Prof. Jonker made a statement that certainly touched me, and I think touched others of us when he made a public confession and asked to be forgiven. I believe that I certainly stand under pressure of God's Holy Spirit to say that, as I said in my sermon that when confession is made, then those of us who have been wronged must say "We forgive you", so that together we may move to the reconstruction of our land. That confession is not cheaply made, and the response is not cheaply given. (Alberts and Chikane 1991, 96)

Jonker (1998, 205) describes the events that followed:

At that moment everybody stood up. There were tears. There was a feeling of affection. Something like which I have never experienced in my life. It felt as if I were embraced and accepted by co-believers who took the guilt from our shoulders.

The fact that Jonker's confession was supported by the DRC delegation indicated that the church was well and truly committed to its new cause.

The second important event that took place as part of the new dance of the DRC was the role that the leadership of the church played en route to the first democratic election held in South Africa in 1994. Against the background of political chaos and a possible revolution, the leaders of the church met several times with Nelson Mandela as well as the leaders of important political parties (Van der Merwe 2014). The Executive of the Moderature of the DRC and Mandela met four times. Dr F. M. Gaum, who was the secretary of the Executive of the Moderature of the DRC, recalled the following about the meetings:

The discussions between Mr Mandela and the Executive of the Moderature focused on two specific aspects of the violence in the country – violent resistance from the far-right Afrikaners, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) and violent protests by the African National Congress (ANC) and its partners to overthrow the National Party “regime” of F. W. de Klerk. Notwithstanding the negotiations of CODESA 1 and CODESA 2 there were rumours that certain factions in the ANC had plans to take power by military force. Rumours about a “Third Force” which was used by the government to instigate violence between the ANC and Inkatha in KwaZulu Natal, were also part of the discussions. (Gaum 2014)

The fact that Mandela trusted the leaders of the DRC enough to ask them to assist with preventing civil war in the country was evidence of how the DRC's position had changed. It was the very church that had supported the apartheid government – and which sent Mandela to prison for 27 years – that was now entrusted with an important role in the peace process in South Africa.

The third important event that took place, which can also be described metaphorically as a next step in the new dance, was the General Synod of the DRC which took place in October 1994. On 13 October 1994, Mandela, the newly elected president of South Africa, addressed the synod (NGK 1994, 536). In his address, Mandela challenged the church to apologise to members of the church who had acted as prophets in the past. He specifically named Prof. B. J. Marais and Dr Beyers Naude (NGK 1994, 536). The synod responded by taking the following decision:

In die lig van die klag van politieke dienstigheid deur die Ned. Geref. Kerk, wys die Algemene Sinode lidmate daarop dat daar deur die jare heen steeds lidmate, ampsdraers (en selfs kerklike vergaderings) was wat krities was oor apartheid en kerklike besluite in hierdie verband. Die Algemene Sinode erken met spyt dat daar in die verlede dikwels

van kerklike kant op 'n onbarmhartige en onsaaklike wyse teenoor sulke persone gehandel is.¹¹ (NGK 1994, 374)

In the following days, both Marais and Naude visited the synod, and the decision was read to them. Mandela's visit, and the way in which the synod reacted to his challenge by receiving Marais and Naude at the meeting, indicated that the DRC was serious about reconciliation.

The fourth important event was the appearance of the Rev. Freek Swanepoel, moderator of the 1994 General Synod of the DRC,¹² at the special hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in November 1997. One of the challenging questions within the DRC was whether the church should appear in front of the TRC (Du Toit et al. 2002, 119). After much deliberation in the Moderature of the DRC, it was decided that Swanepoel could attend the special day for churches on 19 November 1997 in East London. Although a certain conservative faction in the church was unhappy about his appearance in front of the TRC, the presence of the DRC on the day was an important proof that the church was serious about reconciliation. Swanepoel (2021, 132) was there to witness the role of the DRC in the future of South Africa. After his speech, Tutu thanked Swanepoel for being present. He referred to the long road the DRC took to arrive at that moment and then said: "I feel inclined to tell the devil: 'Watch out! Here comes the DRC'." He then continued by saying that he was glad that the DRC was part of the process of reconciliation in South Africa (Du Toit et al. 2002, 126).

The fifth important event in the new dance was the readmittance of the DRC to world ecumenical bodies. This was important confirmation that the church was dancing a new dance. The DRC rejoined the WARC on 13 October 1998 after the General Synod renounced apartheid. This came after negotiations with the WARC persuaded the church to renounce apartheid by name in its theological policies. Since the DRC had been suspended from the WARC in 1982, this was an important step back into the ecumenical world (SA History Online 2024). A further important step was the readmittance of the DRC to the World Council of Churches (WCC). After a visit by a fact-finding team of the WCC in 2013, they reported as follows:

The Dutch Reformed Church officially rejected "all forms of racism", took a strong stance against apartheid and asked for forgiveness. Its readmission in WARC/WCRC was preceded by a careful process which concluded that Dutch Reformed Church broke away with the past. Apart of [sic] the official statement, the WCC delegation certifies

-
- 11 "In the light of the complaint that the DRC was a servant to a specific political system, the General Synod draws the attention to the fact that there have been members, officials (and Church assemblies) who were critical on the church's decisions to support apartheid. The General Synod recognise with regret that the actions of the church in the past was often unbusinesslike and merciless" (translated by the author).
 - 12 Rev. Freek Swanepoel was elected as moderator at the General Synod of Dutch Reformed Church in 1994.

that the Dutch Reformed Church shows, at different levels, a genuine repentance regarding the mistakes done in the past (Buda 2018, 4).

The DRC subsequently became a full member of the WCC at a meeting of the Central Committee which took place in Trondheim, Norway, from 22 to 28 June 2016 (Buda 2018, 5).¹³

A New Dance

Although the DRC was officially dancing a new dance the question in the current post-Apartheid South Africa is still: “How can the church change perceptions on grass roots level?” The importance of this question is emphasised on the one hand by the fact that the DRC has become mostly irrelevant in a post-apartheid South African society. According to De Gruchy (2013, 1), this is illustrated by the fact that a Google search for NGK (abbreviation for Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) today, will come up with NGK sparkplugs, whereas a search for DRC (abbreviation for Dutch Reformed Church) will result in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He is correct when he says that this is indicative of a major shift in public interest in church affairs and to the status of the DRC compared to 70 years ago. On the other hand, it is not only the emerging irrelevance of the church that influences its evangelising capacity. In a rapidly changing South Africa, where identities are continually being contested, the DRC is one significant source of identity, an identity which is a matter of both concern and contestation. “There is, as a result, considerable unease about the legacy of the apartheid years and how to understand and appropriate the now more fluid identity that has emerged” (De Gruchy 2013, 1).

For millions of South Africans the DRC has lost all its integrity due to its support of apartheid. There is only one way to change this perception. Congregations of the church must get involved in needy communities. The church’s new dance can no longer only be danced at church meetings, it must take place in communities and members of communities must be invited to take part. This point of view is supported by the decisions of the General Synod on apartheid in 2013. In a report named: *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* (The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid), the church again confirmed that apartheid was wrong and unjustifiable, and the church accepted its responsibility in the injustices of the past (NGK 2013a, 251). This whole report was approved as a pastoral message to all the members of the DRC (NGK 2013b, 48).¹⁴ It was emphasised by the synod that the report should assist members and congregations of the church to get involved in the recovery and healing of South Africa (NGK 2013a, 233).

13 For a more complete history of the re-admittance of the DRC to ecumenical bodies, see NGK (2019, 33–37).

14 Die Algemene Sinode keur die dokument *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* goed as ’n pastorale woord aan die lidmate van die NG Kerk (NGK 2013b, 48) (The General Synod approves the document *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* as a pastoral message to members of the DRC.)

There are many examples of this happening in congregations. As proof, I want to refer to only one example – the events that took place in Steynsrus, a small rural town in the Free State, between 2015 and 2021. It all started with the drought of 2015 when Steynsrus had no water and donors started bringing water to the town (Jackson 2018, 1). The DRC congregation in Steynsrus, which has a big sandstone church and extended facilities in the centre of the town, became the place where water was stored. All members of the community who needed water, got it from the church. One of the groups who brought water to the town, was Echo from Kyalami in the North of Johannesburg. They were a community group who reached out to teach communities how to take care of their horses. Through the drought relief and water programme, they got involved in the community of Steynsrus.

At first, they brought fodder for the horses but soon realised that much more was needed. According to the then minister of the congregation, Dr Arnold Smit (2023), it was decided to make the church grounds available to Echo. The church grounds of the DRC became the place where poor people from the community brought their horses to be taken care of. Smit emphasises that the congregation started doing what they learnt from missional theology. They saw that God was working in the community and they became an instrumental part of the movement (Smit 2023). As a result of the drought and caring for the horses, the former apartheid church gained the trust of the community. The project gained momentum when another group got involved. The Society for Animals in Distress started taking care of the dogs in the community, also using the church hall which was transformed in a temporary animal hospital (Jackson 2018, 1). According to Smit (2023), more than 1 000 dogs were sterilised in one week. Smit comments that the Lord was taking the congregation of Steynsrus to strange places. By working together to combat the drought and help the horses and the dogs, the communities of the predominantly white town, Steynsrus, and the black township, Matlwangtlwang, got to know each other.

The church buildings and grounds of the DRC congregation became a beacon of reconciliation, healing, and hope to all the people of the community. The proof of this was an event that took place during a funeral service in the DRC. Black and white attended the funeral service, and when the family asked that holy communion be served during the service, black and white took part together in celebrating the death and resurrection of the Lord – in a congregation and a building of the former apartheid church, Steynsrus, where common worship had not been allowed for many years since 1974 (Smit 2023).

Conclusion

Although many of the facts revisited in the article may be deemed as old news with little relevance for today, it is not exactly true. It is by revisiting the past that the present can really be appreciated and an even better future anticipated. Looking back over 50 years, the DRC has come a long way from metaphorically dancing with the devil because of the church's support of apartheid to waltzing to heavenly music through the

contributions of local congregations like Steynsrus. The DRC Steynsrus is only one example of how congregations of the former church of apartheid, is now making a difference in communities all over the country, and is struggling in and with communities against poverty, poor education, and corruption. Although it took 50 years to arrive at this point, and a lot of challenges remain, the DRC can look back over 50 years and thank the Lord for guiding it on a new journey.

References

- Alberts, L., and F. Chikane, eds. 1991. *The Road to Rustenburg*. Cape Towns: Struik Christian Books.
- Boesak, A. A. 1974. *Die Burger*, October 22.
- Buda, D. 2018. "From Cottesloe (1961) to Trondheim (2016): The Journey of the Dutch Reformed Church Back into the Ecumenical Family of the World Council of Churches." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74 (4): a5170. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.5170>
- Cloete, G. D., and D. J. Smit. 1984. *A Moment of Truth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- De Gruchy, J. W. 2004. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. London: SCM Press.
- De Gruchy, J. W. 2013. "University of Cape Town: The Contest for Reformed Identity in South Africa during the Church Struggle against Apartheid." *NGTT* 54 (1 & 2): 1–10.
- Du Toit, F. R., W. HOFFIE, P. Strauss, and J. M. van der Merwe. 2002. *Moeisame Pad na Vernuwung: Die NG Kerk se Pad van Isolasing en die Soeke na Nuwe Relevansie 1974–2002*. Bloemfontein: Barnabas.
- Els, C. W. 2008. "Reconciliation in South Africa: The Role of the Afrikaans Churches." PhD diss., University of Pretoria.
- Gaum, F. M. 1997. *Die Verhaal van die Ned Geref Kerk se Reis met Apartheid*. Wellington: Bolandpers.
- Gaum, F. M. 2014. Personal correspondence, 20 May.
- Jackson, N. 2018. "Steynsrus Is Op Reis met God." *Die Kerkbode*, 15 October. Accessed February 1, 2024. <https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2018/10/15/steynsrus-is-op-reis-met-god/>
- Jonker, W. D. 1998. *Selfs die Kerk Kan Verander*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Kinghorn, J. 1990. "On the Theology of Church and Society in the DRC." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 70: 21–36.

- Lombard, R. T. J. 1974. *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en Rassepolitiek*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel van Transvaal.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1969. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1970. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1974. *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif*. Bloemfontein: NG Kerk.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1982. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1986a. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1986b. *Kerk en Samelewing – 'n Getuienis van die Ned. Geref. Kerk*. Bloemfontein: NG Sendingspers.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 1994. *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 2013a. *Agenda van die Algemene Sinode*.
- NGK (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk). 2013b. *Notule van die Algemene Sinode*.
- O'Brien Geldenhuys, F. E. 1982. *In die Stroomvernellings: Vyftig Jaar van die NG Kerk*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- SA History Online. "The Dutch Reformed Church rejoins the World Alliance of Reformed Churches." Accessed February 1, 2024. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/dutch-reformed-church-rejoins-world-alliance-reformed-churches>
- Smit, A. 2024. Unpublished manuscript in possession of the author.
- Swanepoel, F. 2021. *Die Eerste Tree. Die NG Kerk Ken Versoening*. Cape Town: Cordis Trust.
- Van der Merwe, J. M. 1990. "'Ras, Volk en Nasie' en 'Kerk en Samelewing' as Beleidstukke van die Ned. Geref. Kerk – 'n Kerkhistoriese Studie." PhD diss., University of Pretoria. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/29877>
- Van der Merwe, J. M. 2013. "The Dutch Reformed Church from *Ras, Volk en Nasie* to *Kerk en Samelewing*: The Struggle Goes On." In *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice*, edited by M-A. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and R. Vosloo, 52–66. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.
- Van der Merwe, J. M. 2014. "Between War and Peace: The Dutch Reformed Church Agent for Peace 1990–1994." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40 (2): 85–103. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1017-04992014000300007&lng=en&nrm=iso