

Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Church Unity between former DRMC and DRCA, 1994

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Abstract

Church unity between the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) took place in 1994 under particularly difficult circumstances. South Africa was on the brink of civil war, as the oppressed majority of the country was pressurising the apartheid regime to surrender to their legitimate demands for a democratic dispensation. The regime was relentless and violently resisted any change that would franchise black people. The struggle involved political, social, economic and religious dimensions and many people lost their lives as a result. It was under these circumstances that the DRMC and the DRCA forged ahead with church unity. The most enabling means for survival in the struggle for unity of the two churches was their faith in God as expressed in the Belhar Confession. This article explores the circumstances under which church unification was forged between the two Reformed churches and their eventual unity in 1994, as well as the concrete steps they took in their ritual of unification.

Keywords: Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC); Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA); unity; faith; confession; church; synod

Historical background

In 1994, church unity between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (hereafter DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (hereafter DRCA) took place under particularly difficult circumstances. South Africa was on the brink of civil war as the oppressed majority of the country was confronting the apartheid regime for justice, while the supporters of the status quo were digging trenches in order to resist change. It was said that the commander of the South African Defence Force at the time had mobilised 50 000 to 60 000 men to enter into war against the African National Congress (hereafter ANC) shortly before the 1994 democratic elections (Sunday Independence,



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March 28, 1993). The white government was relentless in its atrocities against the black masses of the country.¹

During this period, the fundamental truth of the Gospel was being eroded for the promotion of a self-serving racial ideology. The system was threatening to bring about the total collapse of a culture of good civility (TRC 1998, 583). It was even more appalling that the system was being defended and justified by the very church that brought the Gospel to South Africa in 1652: the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). As a result, many black South Africans, particularly the youth, were on the verge of forsaking and rejecting the Gospel because of the ambivalent nature of white churches at the time (Kgatla 2006). Most black South Africans perceived these churches as preaching Christ from their pulpit on Sundays but advocating for the rule of Caesar (by the sword) in the communities during the week. There was urgent need not only to correct the wrong policies of apartheid, but also to provide Christian authentic leadership and witness to the world in obedience to God, wherever the basic tenets of the Gospel were being distorted. The church of Jesus Christ had to stand up with an authentic message of unity, reconciliation and justice to the world and protect the essence of its teaching (Toews 2009, 5–16). It was under these circumstances that Allan Boesak made a pertinent call in preaching from 1 Kings 19 (at the height of apartheid) and urged the church to become more involved in the revolution:

I call upon the church, my brothers and my sisters. We are entering now a new phase of persecution of the church in this country. But there can be no turning back. Those of you who have decided to follow Jesus Christ must follow Jesus Christ now, even into the streets of this country and into the face of the casspirs, and the guns, and the water cannons and the teargas ... do not turn back now because this monster has reared its ugly head once again. (Boesak 1989, 30, 31)

This article attempts to explore how faith in Jesus Christ helped the DRMC and the DRCA to follow Jesus in the midst of political, social and religious contradictions. Through their confession of faith, as pronounced in Reformed standards of faith (the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort and Belhar Confession) the two churches stood against material self-interest and religious heresy of the time. They effectively stood against the policy of separateness as promoted by the DRC at the time (DRC Mission Policy of 1935 and 1947). These events in the run-up to church unity in the early 1990s are best articulated by Charles Dickens's theoretical framework, articulated in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*² that was written in 1859 about the situation in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution.

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- 1 According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report of South Africa, 5 695 violent deaths occurred during the period 1990 to 1994 (TRC 1998, 584). This period was marked by an intense negotiation process and according to the TRC this was largely because some political parties realised that they would lose in a democratic election.
 - 2 The novel tells the story of the French Doctor Manette, his 98-year-long imprisonment in the Bastille in Paris and his release to live in London with his daughter Lucie, whom he had never met.

Dickens captures the situation of the time as follows:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. (Dickens 1859)

In line with this phraseology of Dickens, the political, social and religious situation in South Africa during the time under review was depicted in newspaper reports and other documentaries of the period such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, which was published in 1998. According to the South African Press Association (SAPA) of May 27, 1994, the TRC Report (1998) and The O'Malley Archives (n.d.), 14 000 deaths occurred with 22 000 injuries in a period of 46 months between 1990 and 1994. In the last 10 months prior to the elections, the monthly average of politically incited deaths stood at 460 (SAPA 1994). Those responsible for these deaths were the "beneficiaries of apartheid"³ who were defending and perpetuating the power which they had enjoyed through the years (Human Rights Commission report submitted to the TRC 1998) over defenceless black people.⁴ It was during this period (Easter Sunday 1993) in which the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Chris Hani,⁵ was assassinated and three months later in July 1993 the election date was announced. In that month (July 1993) over 600 deaths were recorded and another 4 000 lives were lost before April 1994.

During this period other conflicts and violence escalated to all racial groups, especially political and religious protest groups in South Africa. Frustration, poverty and anger against the system of apartheid were the main causes of the violence. Taxi "wars" among taxi-lords, car hijacking, rape and child abuse were reported daily in the media (The O'Malley Archives n.d.). Economic deprivation, racial subjugation and socio-religious stereotypes were at the centre of all conflicts in the country. The legacy of self-hate and destruction manifested itself on all societal levels (Institute for Security Studies 2013). The system had established itself as a killing machine and turned the country into the crime capital of the world (The Star 1999), while in the poor homelands another crime took shape, namely witchcraft and *muti* killings (Kgatla 2000, 10). The latter was vividly captured by Wroughton:

3 Members of the police force that were responsible for the atrocities were members of the white community and some of them were members of white churches, particularly Reformed churches.

4 Extract from *I am Prepared to Die*. It is Mandela's statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial, Pretoria Supreme Court, 20 April 1964.

5 Chris Hani (28 June 1942–10 April 1993), born Martin Thembisile Hani, was the leader of the South African Communist Party and chief of staff of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC. He was a fierce opponent of the apartheid government, and was assassinated on 10 April 1993 (Rooze, 2013, SAHistory.org. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/thembisile-chris-hani>).

When thunderstorms roll around the normally-parched hills and dusty valleys of the Northern Transvaal, the witch-hunters emerge. The urges to search for those who are skilful enough to manipulate natural forces continue to escalate, despite the formation of police units especially established to combat it. (Wroughton, *Citizen News* February 28, 1995)

The culture of violence had permeated the entire social landscape and sowed anarchy at every societal level (Institute for Security Studies 2013). It had no respect, even for the religious leaders. The atrocities were also meted to the clergy and congregants that supported the struggle for total liberation. The violence was mainly carried out by a specialised unit of the security forces. Some of the clergy had to face forced removals (deportation), detention without trial, torture, persecution, withdrawal of subsidies for black ministers (as was the case with the DRC), destruction of homes and family life, structural and emotional violence, polarisation between members of families, bombings, and indescribable suffering, including psychological torture through the media⁶ (URCSA 1997).

A Bold Move

It was in the midst of this confusion that the two former churches, the DRMC and DRCA—guided by their faith in the Lord Jesus—dared to listen to God and united as the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) when it was not fashionable to do so. In faith they took a bold move to stand for the truth by standing where God stands⁷ (Belhar Confession 1986). In obedience to the call for witness they dared to walk on the path of unity, reconciliation and justice. They became involved in tense negotiations for unity⁸ in spite of life-threatening intimidations. The DRC did not hide its intention to frustrate the process of church unity between the DRMC and the DRCA (URCSA 1997).

Many white DRC missionaries working in the DRCA were furiously fighting the birth of the new church, URCSA. The former constitution of the DRCA had a clause that forbade the formation of a new church without express permission from the mother church—the DRC. Their potent weapon was giving the black church a sense of dependency on the white church. The situation of dependency on the DRC by the DRCA was alarming. In 1990 it was admitted at the General Synod of the DRCA that more

6 Many came to believe that a “hidden hand” or “third force” lay behind the random violence, which included military-style attacks on trains, drive-by shootings and a series of massacres and assassinations. Other organisations such as APLA (PAC military wing) and Inkatha Political party were believed to be involved in the violence (The O’Malley Archives n.d.).

7 The main tenets of the Belhar Confession are captured in five articles: belief that Jesus is Lord (Article 5) and that faith in Him (Article 1) leads to action (Brunsdon 2015). The confession appeals for a visible unity (Article 2) among believers, for unity is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit. A call for reconciliation is made in the same Article 3 and lastly a call for compassionate justice is made in Article 4.

8 Church unity was mooted in the sitting synods of these two churches two decades earlier (Modise 2016, 388).

than 80 per cent of the ministers were financially dependent on the DRC for stipends, maintenance of the buildings and pensions for the ministers (Kgatla 2011, 10). Thus, when ministers took a stand against apartheid, their white financial support could be withdrawn. This happened at the DRCA Northern Synod in 1988, when many ministers were warned that should they vote for the Belhar Confession,⁹ their salaries would be cut (DRCA 1988, Acta).

This dependency was also visible on the level of theological training. The majority of black ministers were trained at theological seminaries headed and controlled by white theologians. The white theologians decided what was suitable theology and episteme that black ministers should receive. Theological branches such as “Liberation Theology” and “Black Theology” were either taught as a case of false theologies or communist-inspired ideologies. Thus, the underpinnings of the apartheid ideology were dominant. Although the liberation struggle was waged in black students’ townships and homelands, the students were indoctrinated to view the salvation of their souls as paramount. They were taught how to resist all forms of teachings that viewed human salvation holistically and only viewed it in a narrow spiritualistic way. Although some of the black theologians realised the brutality of apartheid, they could not comprehend that theology should be contextualised. Instead they understood theology as universal and packaged in Western idioms.

At the TRC, the DRC was accorded the opportunity to confess its guilt in supporting the outrageous system of apartheid. However, some of its members blatantly argued that there was no wrongdoing in what they did during the time of apartheid (Thesnaar 2013, 7). They retreated into the pseudo cocoon of private sin and individual confession between the believer and God. Their members in the South African Police Service and South African National Defence Force did not come forward to disclose the atrocities they had committed (Malan n.d.).

One could argue that the DRC was a paid servant of the state’s propaganda, as it provided theological and biblical sanction for the political praxis of apartheid, even though some like Ben Marais and many other prominent DRC theologians at the DRC seminaries sacrificed their freedom for the freedom of all (*Journey with Apartheid* 1997, 36). Church theology, blended with state theology, shaped the thinking of many ministers and members of the DRC to become compliant with the policy and critical of those who opposed it. This anomaly gripped the minds of many black ministers, especially those who thought that God spoke to them through white people.¹⁰ The DRC

9 In 1988 the DRCA was involved in negotiations around the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as a way of paving the way for church unification with the DRMC.

10 There is a derogatory idiomatic expression in Sesotho that says *Sehlare sa Mosotho ke lekgowa* (the remedy to extract black person obedience in the presence of a white person). This mentality was demonstrated when URCSA was debating whether to allow children at the Lord’s Supper. Some elderly ministers were strongly opposed to the idea and they only consented when they heard that the white DRC had already accepted the practice.

allowed itself to be dictated to and guided by politicians on how people of colour should be treated (Thesnaar 2013, 1). It was during this time that prominent leaders of the DRMC and the DRCA intensified their condemnation of the DRC theological justification of apartheid (Thesnaar 2013, 6). Earlier on, this precarious position of the DRC with regard to the apartheid state led the DRMC to declare a *status confessionis* (in 1982) which later led to a clear statement of faith in the form of the Belhar Confession.

By Faith Alone

This article argues that the two churches (the DRMC and the DRCA) were guided “by faith alone” (*ex sola fide*) when they went against the grain and established a new church (URCSA). Faith is a relationship with God based on trust and obedience and compels self-denial (Van Aarde 2017); and this guided the two churches to stand where God was standing, as the Belhar Confession would declare (Belhar Confession 1986). These two churches became the voice of the voiceless and protested against the dishonesty of the white Reformed churches (Van Wyk 2017). They founded a church that was based on the Word of God being the supreme and ultimate authority. By embracing a radical confession that spoke to political, social, economic and religious praxis of the time—and taking a public stance—the two churches became inspiring and challenging to other Reformed churches in the world (Smit 2008, 330).

What Did it Mean to Confess Jesus as Lord in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s?

The socio-political and religious situation in South Africa during the time under review resembled that within which the early church found itself. In the Roman Empire there was only one politically acknowledged lord. Caesar was lord and any dissenting voice was regarded as treason (Toews 2000, 5–16). The messages throughout society were ever-reminders that Caesar was lord. Christians refused to participate in the acknowledgement of Caesar as lord and in that way put their lives in danger. Many were burnt alive while others were thrown into lions’ dens (Bird 2015). However, the early Christians’ confession clearly stood *against* something. To confess that Jesus was Lord was to boldly and publicly assert that someone else was not the lord, and it was understood that they were saying that Caesar was not the lord but Jesus was (Toews 2000). Their confession had political, social and religious implications. An authentic confession of faith stands against some other confession. It has some clear allegiance and rejects all other gods and idolatry in all their forms. This allegiance rejects all other allegiances, including all other claims that may be framed in biblical and theological language to have a hidden agenda to dethrone Jesus. The confession that Jesus is Lord calls total surrender to Christ so that he can rule politically, socially and religiously—with no exception.

In South Africa, the DRMC and the DRCA found themselves confronted with a reality in which the powerful and religiously acclaimed church leaders changed the core

message of the Gospel and led many people astray (Zandman n.d.). With the Belhar Confession, the DRMC and the DRCA expressed the genuineness of their faith and obligated themselves to distinguish between truth and falsehood, even if that led to suffering (Belhar Confession 1986, Paragraph 5). They defended truth against falsehood from within, in order to maintain the veracity of biblical teaching in a world of ideology, greed and deceit in pursuance of racism.

Members of the DRMC and the DRCA, as part of the community of believers groaning and struggling for true freedom and justice, forged ahead with the process of unity despite the smoke from “roaring guns and burning tyres, eclipsing the skies” of the black townships. Schools were reduced to battlegrounds and historically disadvantaged tertiary institutions became military barracks. In the corporate world many workers were retrenched because of protracted industrial actions (Boesak 2017, 42–43). White industrialists could not tolerate black revolt and they used retrenchment to get rid of “troublemakers.”

The Church of Jesus Christ was a confessing church from the beginning. The political and socio-economic situation of the early church compelled all Roman citizens to confess that Caesar was lord. The Christians refused to confess that Caesar was lord but insisted on their lives that Jesus was Lord (Romans 10:9). They faced considerable social, economic, and political challenges, and many of them were very similar to the ones we have been facing in South Africa. The political establishment wanted to define them in terms of what they (politicians) wanted them to be, but the Christians refused. The Christians perceived themselves as church, called and held together by Jesus Christ Himself, and they lived only through the continued renewal of that fundamental confession of faith (Kgatla 2006). The early church could clearly see what they were and what they were called for by God. Despite the political consequences, these first Christians did not shrink from their bold proclamation—“Jesus is Lord!” (Romans 10:9).

The members of the DRCA and the DRMC saw themselves as part of the church of Jesus Christ from the beginning. They were caught up in “labour pains” to give birth to the united and visible church in a country in which racism, violence, inequalities, religious heresy and all forms of oppression were running supreme. The militant township youth, who were chanting the slogan “freedom first and education later,” were providing a different challenge—even to church leadership (Kgatla 2006).

A very important and indispensable role, that the DRMC and the DRCA played and lived out, was being a confessional church.¹¹ They took a bold step in the midst of a system that viciously killed those who opposed it and did unimaginable things by uniting against the institutionalised policy of racial separateness. They undermined the voice of the white DRC policy of 1935, 1947 and 1974, which profoundly supported apartheid laws such as the notorious Urban Areas Act (1923), the Natives and Land Trust Act (1936), the Black Administration Act No. 38 (1927) and the Group Areas Act (1950).

The Foundations of URCSA Were Laid in Four Days¹²

The inaugural synod of URCSA¹³ met at the Belhar Centre (the office of URCSA Cape Synod) in the Western Cape on April 14, 1994—13 days before the first South African democratic election. The meeting started at 11:05 and the last moderators of the former DRMC and the DRCA (Rev. N.A. Apollis and Dr S.P.E. Buti) jointly chaired the meeting. Rev. Apollis read from Nehemiah 2:11–20 and Dr T.A. Mofokeng led in prayer. Both secretaries of the DRMC and the DRCA, Rev. L.A. Appies and Dr M.S. Pitikoe, took the minutes.

Constituting the Inaugural Synod

The secretaries of both synods were requested to confirm the legality of their delegates, that their credentials were in terms of their respective synods, and that a quorum was reached. After going through the lists of delegates from both synods and presentations, and after a quorum was confirmed by both secretaries, the meeting was declared an official meeting of the uniting churches by the chairperson. The meeting strictly adhered to the set procedures agreed on during the negotiations for unity.

Acceptance of the Draft Church Ordinance

Each moderator of the two churches outlined the principal decisions of their churches about the acceptance of the draft church ordinance, according to which the new church was to be established. At the request of the chairperson, the meeting confirmed that the new church would be constituted on the basis that the accepted draft church ordinance

11 The Confessing Church (German: *Bekennende Kirche*) was a movement within German Protestantism during Nazi Germany that arose in opposition to government-sponsored efforts to unify all Protestant churches into a single pro-Nazi Protestant Reich Church. It was founded in 1933 by Martin Niemoeller. The Pastors' Emergency League was systematically opposed to the Nazi-sponsored German Christian Church. The immediate occasion for the opposition was the attempt by the Nazis soon after their rise to power to purge the German Evangelical Church of converted Jews and to make the church subservient to the state. At the Synod of Barmen (May 1934) the Confessing Church set up an administration and proclaimed itself the true Protestant Church in Germany (<https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Confessional+Church>).

12 The sources in this section are taken from the Acta of the first URCSA inaugurating synod in 1994.

13 The sources on the inaugurating synod are found in the Acta of URCSA, 14–17 April 1994.

was read and accepted. Together all the delegates to the meeting (with each one standing) read the “constituting confirmation” with the following words¹⁴:

Seeing that we believe that both our churches are members of the one holy Catholic Christian church, assembled by the Triune God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, through His Spirit and Word to form the one body of Jesus Christ on earth; that the unity of his church is not only a gift from God, but also an obligation that should be pursued and sought; and that this unity should be visible to ensure that the world can believe that God had sent his Son, we as the DRCA and the DRMC have decided in principle to become one unified church and in so doing to abolish the division of so many years which was caused by the weakness of the flesh and the sinfulness of the human heart. This caused the clear message of the scripture about the visible unity of the church to be undermined; we undertook to officiate this principle decision and not to allow any interference of any nature to prevent this; because we further believe that the biblical appeal to unity in the church is not limited to us, but ripples outwards to the whole church of Christ. Therefore, we pray that the unification of the DRCA and the DRMC will only be the first step in the total unification of the whole family of the DRC inside and outside of South Africa; that this act of faith on our side will be witnessed by God in his mercy and will be used as a testimony to ourselves and to all believers that it is impossible that the body of Christ can be divided, because there is only one body and only one Spirit, as there is only one hope to which God has called us, only one Lord through whom everybody works and who lives in everybody. (URCSA, Acta of Inaugurating Synod, 14–17 April 1994)

After the pronouncement of the acceptance of the draft church ordinance, the congregation sang: “Die kerk se hoop en ere” after which the chairperson, Rev. Apollis, read the “Charter of the Church Amalgamation” of the two churches. It was then signed by both moderatures¹⁵ in the presence of the delegates. The charter is as follows:

1. On this extraordinary historical day in the history of the DRCA and the DRMC we praise God the Lord of all, giving us the unity of the church as a gift and obligation, as a witness to the nations.
2. Through numerous tussles and laborious negotiations over many years by the grace of God, the belief grew within the DRCA and the DRMC that we must make this unification among us visible.
3. Today, with much gratitude, we think back to the years of clear and decisive testimonies by men and women on the ideal of unity. Distinct beacons in this birth process are the following:
 - The synod of the DRMC of 1966 decided that the family of the DRC should unite in one synodical structure.
 - In 1975 the synod of the DRCA decided to seek for unification with the family of the DRC.

14 The draft church ordinance was based on the fourth URCSA confession (Belhar Confession) which was unanimously accepted by the uniting synod in 1994; prior to the inaugurating synod the two churches had adopted the confession as their fourth standard of faith.

15 Moderatures consisted of the chairperson, deputy chair, secretary and actuary of each synod.

- At the 1987 synod of the DRMC¹⁶ strong pleas were made for church unity from a grassroots level up and the practical implications were spelt out.
 - At the important Unity Conference of March 1989¹⁷ the whole delegation of the DRC family decided as follows: “We solemnly promise to work towards one unified, non-racial reformed church in Southern and Central Africa.”
4. Today we are gathered here as the DRCA and the DRMC because we could finish our preparations to take the first step on the road to keep this solemn promise.
 5. This process is being directed by our anchorage in the biblical doctrine, our association to the Reformed tradition and devoutness, and our frank testimony through the Confession of Belhar (1986), which is the inspiration for the unification we are now undertaking. In the Confession of Belhar we declare:
 - That this unity of the people of God will be visible in various ways and that it should be active so that we experience, seek and practise fellowship and that we are compelled to give ourselves with bliss to the advantage and salvation of each other.
 6. Now that the possible obstacles have been removed by the synods of both churches we can, through the grace of our Lord and in answer to His prayer (John 17), give stature to the ideal of unity. For the one church which is formed today, the glory of God and obedience to his Word are foremost.
 7. We declare that this is the first step to bring about unity in the whole DRC family. For this unity we will pray with dedication, and work in urgency, longing for the day when all of us will proclaim the glory of the Lord.
 8. We undertake to deal with fears and doubts, the hesitations and problems which may wait on the road ahead, with the conviction that under such circumstances we may not abandon each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.
 9. Therefore, we solemnly promise before God and before each other through the conviction of our Saviour and the power of the Spirit, that we will bear one another’s burdens, that we will reinforce each other’s faith and learn from one another along the way. In the spirit of mutual love and consolation, of humbleness and confession of guilt, of forgiveness and hope, we now walk the road together and search for all our brothers and sisters to walk together as the bride of the Lamb (Revelations 19:7–9).
 10. To the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who made us his through the blood of his Son, is due the honour, the power and the glory, forever. (URCSA, Acta of Inaugurating Synod, 14–17 April 1994)

This charter was signed on 14 April 1994 at Belhar Centre at the inaugural synod of the church unity between the DRMC and the DRCA.

Concluding Observations

From all that has been argued up to this point, one can conclude that the DRMC and the DRCA declared their belief in Jesus Christ and allowed themselves to be led by His

16 At Umtata DRCSA synod a clear intention for church unity was made.

17 Modise 2016.

Spirit to church unification on 14 April 1994. The message of Christ is about unity, reconciliation and justice and being continuously brought to obedience when it is difficult to do so. They professed adherence to Christ and articulated it in word and deed. They saw it as sin and error to allow divisions within the church of Jesus Christ and opted for the mandatory preservation and promotion of authentic unity.

The overarching conclusion in this article is that the confession that guided the two churches to unity was simultaneously theological, political, social and economic. By asserting that Jesus was Lord (Romans 10:9) they were categorically saying that the apartheid system that assumed a position of empire should be annulled. As Paul admonished the members of the Corinthian (8:5) church against the “many gods and many lords,” the leaders of URCSA led their members to confess and live as members of one “Uniting Reformed Church” whose total allegiance is to their risen Lord.

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