

# “I Can’t Breathe”: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the Belhar Confession as a Beacon of Light for denouncing Racism

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## Abstract

Racism continues to divide, separate, oppress and hurt—as was seen by recent global events. The church, because of the very nature of the Gospel of Christ, is called to bring unity, reconciliation, justice, healing and peace. The current crisis and threat of racism call for a time of new opportunity and new resurrections, forged from resistances that breathe a new life, of which the Belhar Confession can be a beacon of light. This article focuses on how the theological framework of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the Belhar Confession provide a historic opportunity to stand in solidarity with the voices of those who are suffocating (“can’t breathe”). It is an emphatic call for the church to denounce and address all forms of racism and injustice.

**Keywords:** Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel; Belhar Confession; racism; apartheid; church; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)



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## Introduction

On May 19, 2020 Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel, whose theology was grounded on a theology of dignity, especially towards vulnerable groups, breathed her last breath. Interestingly, a week later, the “I can’t breathe” slogan became the iconic last words of George Floyd, an African-American man who was killed by police during an arrest in America on May 25, 2020. This incident led to a protest both against Floyd’s death and against police violence on black people. Soon the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement had encouraged numerous indigenous minorities to speak out internationally about racial issues. The BLM movement is, according to Mitchell and Williams (2017, 2), often identified under the Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which was co-created by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. The hashtag was created as an ideological intervention, a call to action, and an affirmation of black peoples’ contributions to society, humanity, and their resilience in the face of deadly oppression. Now, along with being a political affirmation and ideology, BLM represents a hashtag, a national organisation of local chapters, and a global movement (cf. Mitchell and Williams 2017, 2). Although racism is a universal problem, and BLM became a global movement, the crisis also escalated in South Africa, therefore my article will mostly be restricted to the South African context.

In South Africa, reference was made to Collins Khosa and many others who had to die because of law enforcement brutality and racial abuse during the South African lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic highlight various inequalities and injustices, but the racism issue also escalated. Recently, discourses on racism became a hot topic again after various incidents of racially orchestrated violence occurred and South Africans, together with the rest of the world, took to social media and protested in this heated discourse on racism. Various sporting codes and sports figures also took a stand on this topic, as it soon became politically incited, which caused separation and schism. Racism in South Africa is not a new phenomenon. South Africa has a history of racial oppression, institutionalised racism and contemporary challenges with on-going racism, which started long before the apartheid era.

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), has its roots in the struggle against apartheid, law enforcement brutality and a time of racism in southern Africa. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, who experienced the consequences of the racist and patriarchal policies of the past, was a well-known scholar on the Confession of Belhar. Throughout her life, she was at the forefront of church unity discourses and fought for an inclusive church and society. The works of Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the Belhar Confession are now more than ever relevant in our current context as the Confession was seen to represent a Christian view on racism, natural division and suffering from the context of those who bear the brunt of such inhumane conditions.

This *Festschrift* contribution takes an autobiographical approach to celebrate the life and work of the late Plaatjies-Van Huffel and will illuminate how the life, work and theology of Plaatjies-Van Huffel and the Belhar Confession can be a beacon of light amidst a time of racism. The research questions that this article wants to address are:

- How can Plaatjies-Van Huffel's theology that was grounded on a theology of dignity—especially towards vulnerable groups—as well as the Belhar Confession, provide a new historic opportunity for the church to stand in solidarity with those who are suffocating (can't breathe)?
- How does Plaatjies-Van Huffel's life, theology and the Belhar Confession call the church to denounce all forms of racism and injustice?

I will first, briefly discuss the current and historical racial context of South Africa. Thereafter I will discuss the role the Belhar Confession played in the past, present and future. This will be followed by biographical notes of the life, work and theology of Plaatjies-Van Huffel and concluded by the section on the Belhar Confession as a beacon of light and hope. This current crisis and challenges call for a time of new opportunity and new resurrections, forged from resistances that breathe a new life, of which the Belhar Confession can be a beacon of light.

## Race and Racism in South Africa: A Brief Historical Overview

On 27 April 1994, South Africa became the “new South Africa” with its first democratic election. This was the beginning of a new dawn and new dream of a rainbow nation after a history of inequality, injustice and a racist past. It was hoped that all traces of racism would be erased and that a new era of non-racialism and peace would dawn in South Africa. In other countries, which did not go through the same brutal institutionalised system of racial oppression, it was also assumed that racism would be a non-issue in South Africa (Nel 2010, 13). Schoeman (2010, 139) postulates that racism is related to an ideology, but also to the level of everyday social practices that construct and reflect hierarchical notions and representations of the “Self” and the “Other.” Racism is deeply rooted in South African society. How did South Africans (after 1994) come to terms with the racist past in order to forge a new national identity and accommodate various identities? Did racism and a brutal past automatically disappear? Or was it just underlying and has now resurfaced? Or was it ignored? Clearly, racism never disappeared; as Pillay (2017, 6) states, while South Africa has now moved to a new democracy since 1994, it still continues to struggle with the issue of racism which has become ever so prevalent in many ways in the country.

According to Kuvuna and Von Sinner (2018, 615), violence, oppression and racism are present and even spreading in the contemporary world. One way of handling it, some may argue, would be to ignore it. However, various theologians have expressed their refusal to keep silent about the great moral issues of the time. They have used the injustices in society to challenge the notion of religious meaning (Kuvuna and Von

Sinner 2018, 615). Racism is today presented as a major killer in the modern world (Cone 2004, 140; cf. Kuvuna and Von Sinner 2018, 615).

Racism is a form of discrimination based on racial identity that has been functioning on multiple levels across various domains throughout history. The definition of the term must necessarily include the power relationship between the dominant (in this case, white) group and historically marginalised groups (Mitchell and Williams 2017, 7).

According to Mitchell and Williams (2017), the four levels on which racism functions are structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalised racism. Structural racism involves those broad policies and societal influences formed throughout history that privilege the dominant group, while disadvantaging and often causing significant harm to people of colour. Institutional racism is racism that functions within the workings of particular institutions, such as schools, hospitals, or prisons. Interpersonal racism is perhaps the form of racism that is most widely recognised, as either explicit or implicit racism from a white person directed towards a person of colour. Finally, internalised racism is the acceptance, whether conscious or unconscious, of society's negative stereotypes of one's own racial group (Mitchell and Williams 2017, 7). However, although Mitchell and Williams (2017, 7) categorise interpersonal racism to be predominantly white on black, it is Matolino (2013, 52) who argues that reverse racism (black on white) is becoming common. He further states:

In the history of South African racial relations, perpetrators of racism appear to have been largely white while the victims have been largely black. In post-independent South Africa, white people appear to condemn racism and all practices and institutions that seek to defend or promote it. The end of colonialism and apartheid together with the introduction of equality among all citizens, the successful debunking of racial difference and the attainment of power by black people—levels the race field so to speak. While it would have been unimaginable to think of a black person as a racist in the past—particularly against white people—it has now become common both in the public political sphere and in private interactions, for white people to accuse black people of being racist as more whites are complaining about certain utterances by important black leaders which either amount to racism or racial incitement. (Matolino 2013, 52–53).

On a similar note, Pillay (2017, 6) states that racism is generally linked with the asserting of whiteness and he further posits that:

In the South African context, it is the affirmation and imposition of whiteness as the superior pigmentation and population group at the extent of oppressing and dehumanising the black majority population which led to black people actually believing that they are inferior human beings. The apartheid policy entrenched the protection of white rights embedded in political privilege, social advantage and economic domination. Economics was racialised not just in terms of production forms and processes but also in terms of processes of distribution and consumption. The job market was systematically geared to protect the economic activity and sustainability of white people. It is clear that economic pressure was exerted and manipulated to sustain

racism and white privilege. Further, apartheid policies activated institutionalised discrimination in such areas as housing, marriage, education, employment and health. The power of whiteness in this sense lies in its capacity to impoverish, starve, contaminate and murder, all seemingly within the bounds of legality.

But similar to Matolino (2013, 52–53), Pillay (2017, 6) argues that there is nowadays an ever-increasing accusation of reverse racism often made by white people. He says:

We have seen this in the social media in recent times which has caused hurts and pains in many people. People often think and ask how we can have such racist experiences and expressions in a new democratic South Africa. Do people never learn? Well, racism is often driven by deep-seated insecurities, anxieties and fears which are then expressed in numerous, neurosis-driven expressions of whiteness. But whiteness is not just rooted in fear; it also elicits fear. This is precisely what we are seeing in South Africa with the decline of white power and dominance. (Pillay 2017, 6)

Furthermore, while racism speaks about the racial superiority of one racial group over another, the xenophobic crisis in South Africa was not between white and black people but between black South Africans and mainly black foreigners from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Mozambique, including people from Pakistan, India, and so forth. How should we understand the xenophobic attacks in South Africa? Were they racist or ethnic in their form? Is it black on black racism? While xenophobia is usually differentiated from racism, Pillay (2017, 8) is of the opinion that xenophobia is directly linked to racism and ethnicity when institutionalised measures are undertaken to protect the rights and interest of the “in-group” against the development of the “out-group.” In this sense, it can be directly related to the South African policy of apartheid which entrenched the protection of white privilege against the majority of black people.

Needless to say, racism is a current reality, and the church—especially with the direction of the Belhar Confession—could be a guiding light in the context of racism. It is within this context, as discussed above, that the Belhar Confession which was born in the southern African struggle against apartheid and racial structures, can contribute to the role churches have to play in denouncing racism. The mentioned Confession will now be discussed in the next section.

### The Belhar Confession: Born in the Struggle of Apartheid

According to Adonis (2006, 234), the origins of the Belhar Confession are in a certain sense very closely connected to the 1948 apartheid policy of the National Party. The apartheid era was a very vicious form of racism and people of colour suffered immeasurably under this system—even up to this day there is good reason to think that some black people still suffer as a result of the effects of apartheid (Matolino 2013, 53). In the 1970s, the Theological School of the DRMC, which was at that time a Faculty of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), requested that the apartheid policy should be theologically evaluated. Prof. Jaap Durand (a professor at UWC) and the theology students played an important role in this theological evaluation of the apartheid policy.

The students came to the conclusion that the forced separation of people contradicts the gospel of reconciliation. They expressed the wish that the DRMC should officially endorse this position at the 1978 DRMC Synod. Three ministers, Revs JJF Mettler, IJ Mentor and RJ Stevens presented this position to the synod of the DRMC (Adonis 2006, 235). The 1978 DRMC Synod declared that apartheid and the moral and theological justification of it ridiculed the gospel and that it was a theological heresy (Betha 2017, 350).

In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) held its General Assembly in Ottawa, Canada. The WARC also declared that the political policy of apartheid was considered a sin and that its moral and theological justification was “a travesty of the gospel, and its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.” Later in that same year, the action and decisions of the WARC came before the DRMC Synod in 1982 via its Commission for Ecumenical Matters (Adonis 2006, 235). This crucial matter was discussed at great length on Friday, 1 October 1982 by the synod. The fact that the synod spent the whole day and the morning session of the Saturday (2 October) discussing the report was an indication of its significance for the synod (Loff 1998, 262 in Adonis 2006, 235). The synod firstly had to decide on the following: “... because the secular gospel of Apartheid profoundly endangers the confession of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in its very essence, the DRMC declares that it presents a *status confessionis* for the Church of Jesus Christ.” The second proposal that the synod had to consider read as follows: “We declare that apartheid (separate development) is a sin, that its moral and theological justification makes a travesty of the gospel and that its continued disobedience to the Word of God is a theological heresy.” This second proposal was also accepted by the synod (Adonis 2006, 235). The synod named an ad hoc committee which consisted of Rev. IJ Mentor (moderator), Dr AA Boesak (assessor), Prof. Dr DJ Smit, Prof. Dr JJF Durand and Prof. Dr G Bam (chairperson) to prepare a confession following the *status confessionis* against apartheid (Adonis 2006, 236).

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa (Modise 2016, 32). It was on 26 September 1986 that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in the Synod at Belhar accepted the Belhar Confession as a public confession against the theological justification of apartheid (Beukes and Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2016, 224). The name “Belhar” in the confession refers to the suburb of Belhar (in the Western Cape) where the synod met in 1986 (Modise 2016, 33). In 1994, the DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) became the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) with the Belhar Confession as their confession of faith. The relevance of the Belhar Confession of faith is broader than the South African or religious context. It addresses three key issues of concern in all churches: the unity of the church and unity among all people; reconciliation within the church and society; and God’s justice. URCSA is the carrier of the Belhar Confession of faith, as the Reformed confession on behalf of all Reformed churches throughout the world (Modise 2016, 34). The relevance of the Belhar Confession cuts across all

churches and contexts today, for the reason that it addresses critical issues that are emphasised in the Word of God. Therefore, the Belhar Confession remains important in this crucial time of renewed racial eruption.

## The Life, Work and Theology of Plaatjies-Van Huffel

The name, Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel, cannot be mentioned without thinking of URCSA and vice versa. She was a distinguished leader in URCSA and a household name for many congregants. When thinking of Plaatjies-Van Huffel, I will always remember that she was the first of many things. She was the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the DRMC, the first woman to serve as Actuarius of the Cape Synod of URCSA, the first woman to serve as Assessor of the General Synod of URCSA, the first woman to be elected as Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA, and she was also elected as one of the vice-presidents of the World Council of Churches, thus becoming the WCC President of Africa (Flaendorp 2014).

Her theology, life and work were rooted in URCSA. She left deep footprints in the church and in addition to being an academic, she was also a co-minister in the congregation URCSA Scottsdene with her husband, Dawid van Huffel, who also served in the same congregation as the fulltime (and senior) minister. URCSA consists of all 11 cultural groups and languages in South Africa, namely, English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Sepedi, Xhosa, Venda, Tswana, Southern Sotho, Zulu, Swazi or SiSwati and Tsonga, as well the 11 cultural and language groups in Namibia, namely, English, Afrikaans, Rukwangali, Silozi, Setswana, Damara>Nama, Herero and Oshiwambo (Van Huffel 2017, 319). Although URCSA can boast with a diversity that few other denominations can match, internal unity remains a struggle within this specific denomination. URCSA does not necessarily reflect this diversity on the local level, however, on General Synodical level the church is confronted with this reality and, therefore, must take otherness and diversity seriously. Luckily, due to demographic changes, the make-up of some congregations in URCSA is changing with regards to its diversity and multicultural demographic setup. For example, in squatter camps, informal settlements, new human settlements (the human settlement programme of the government) and in the inner-city, people from different cultural and ethnic groups are forced to live next to each other. Large groups of people from the townships are now moving to the inner-city (Van Huffel 2017, 319). The congregation, URCSA Scottsdene (where Plaatjies-Van Huffel and her husband served) is one of the few congregations in URCSA who were making a concerted effort to become a multi-ethnic and a multicultural church; and in doing so embracing diversity and experiencing the rich value thereof (Van Huffel 2017, 320), as they have both Afrikaans, English and Xhosa-speaking members.

Racism may occur in any societal structure, as argued above. Therefore, with regards to institutionalised racism it means that racism even occurs in the church, as was evident in South Africa at the time of apartheid when scripture was used to enforce the separation of black and white. It is still apparent today, as many churches, worldwide, are characterised by the skin colour of their followers. In South Africa as well as in other

countries, mixed churches are randomly found (Kuvuna and Von Sinner 2018, 616). Resane (2017, 7) states that in South Africa, communion ecclesiology cannot be experienced when the church is silent about the evils of colonialism, apartheid, corruption, and so forth.

Within a racially divided, pluralistic and diverse South Africa, the broader “Church” (with a capital letter) itself is not much different, as Sunday morning is still the “most racially segregated hour in South Africa” (Van der Borgh 2009, 4–29). However, at the congregation URCSA Scottsdene, the multi-ethnic-multicultural pastoral team, which consisted of Rev. Dawid van Huffel, Rev. Clive Rademeyer, Prof. Dr Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Prof. Xolile Simon, soon realised that to achieve greater racial and cultural integration in the congregation, they should focus on issues of racial diversity. The congregation had mostly been dominated by one culture in the past but changed drastically during the last decade due to changing demographic landscapes. The church council affirmed the value of diverse cultures coexisting creatively in one congregation (Van Huffel 2017, 324). URCSA Scottsdene realised that a multi-ethnic-multicultural church is all about accepting and embracing a diversity of peoples; it is about drawing diverse cultural voices into the decision-making structures of the congregation (Van Huffel 2017, 325).

Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s contribution in the congregation of URCSA Scottsdene and her previous congregation, URCSA Robertson-East where she served from 1992 for 17 years, was immense (Flaendorp 2014, 54–57). Throughout her career she had to break down patriarchal systems and stereotypes. To restore the dignity of her congregants was one of her main goals as a minister of a congregation. She also transcended racial boundaries (cf. Flaendorp 2014, 56) as she embodied the Belhar Confession of faith.

Not only was Plaatjies-Van Huffel a distinguished church leader but she was also a profound theologian and academic. She was appointed as a lecturer in church history and church polity in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch and was soon instructed to be the co-supervisor together with Prof. Swart for my PhD studies. I was privileged and honoured to be her first PhD student to graduate under her supervision. This year (2020) she would have been inaugurated as full professor in church history and church polity. Her theological framework was founded on three pillars, namely: 1) a theology of dignity especially towards vulnerable groups; 2) the theological disciplines of church history and church polity; and 3) a theology of ecology and justice. For a further and detailed exploration of these three pillars, see Flaendorp (2014). For the purpose of this article, I will briefly give an overview of a theology of human dignity, as this was also what Plaatjies-Van Huffel stood and fought for throughout her career.

### **A Theology of Human Dignity**

Plaatjies-Van Huffel started her ministerial career by operating in an apartheid ideology context. Her theology was, therefore, focused on vulnerable groups as it was also a

context where women were still marginalised in South Africa. “She took the struggle for marginalised people a step further when she became instrumental in the legitimisation of the first deaf (woman) person to be licensed in URCSA” (Flaendorp 2014, 59). Her fight was for human dignity for all, but especially towards those on the periphery. This was evident in her time as minister at URCSA Robertson-East, co-minister at URCSA Scottsdene, her various leadership roles in the church and her academic publications.

In her academic article, “The Belhar Confession: Born in the Struggle against Apartheid in Southern Africa,” she argued why the mentioned Confession is a guiding light for social justice issues, especially racism, both in the global North and the global South. She was of the opinion that the Belhar Confession originated in a specific historical context, like all the other classical Reformed confessions (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013). The socio-political realities in pre-democratic South Africa compelled the DRMC Synod in South Africa to accept Belhar as a confession in 1982. It was a Christian view on racism and suffering. Plaatjies-Van Huffel traced the origin of this racism and suffering in the church back to 1857, when the DRC decided to separate Holy Communion services for the different race groups, thus supporting the policy of segregation (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013, 186). She further argued that due to the infringements on human dignity through apartheid laws, the DRMC was led to a confession like Belhar (Flaendorp 2014, 60–61).

## The Belhar Confession as a Beacon of Light

Pillay (2017, 10) suggests that in addressing the issues of racism and xenophobia in South Africa, the church has to lead the way, so that all may have the fullness of life in the context of racial harmony, economic justice, peace and inclusivity. Therefore, he proposes that the church must engage the issue of racism and xenophobia from a biblical and theological perspective. The church should not get caught up with the economic order and practice of the day; instead, the church needs to do proper analysis and speak prophetically into the context.

Therefore, URCSA, by way of its Belhar Confession, unequivocally declared racism as a serious sin which no person or church may defend or practise. On 22 January 2016, the moderamen<sup>1</sup> of URCSA (2016), under the leadership (moderatorship) of Plaatjies-Van Huffel, issued a pastoral letter regarding the upsurge of racism in post-apartheid South Africa (Kuyler 2017, 224). In this document, the moderamen gave guidance to URCSA on how to address racism in church and society. The response of URCSA to racism, however, is not the first or the last word by URCSA on this burning issue. From

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1 Members of the moderamen of URCSA were: Prof. Dr Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (moderator), Rev. Motlalentwa Betha (vice-moderator), Dr Dawid Kuyler (scribe), Prof. Leepo Modise (church law expert), Rev. Colin Goeiman (representative of the Northern Synod), Rev. Thamsanqa Ngema (representative of the KwaZulu-Natal Synod), and Rev. W. Julius (representative of the Namibia Synod). (cf. Kuyler 2017, 224).

1978, the DRMC (and since 1994 URCSA) issued numerous resolutions and statements on racism. During 2004, URCSA called on all her members to act towards the issue of xenophobia in the spirit of Article 4 of the Belhar Confession. In 2015, the moderator of the General Synod of URCSA commissioned the Moderator of the General Synod of URCSA, Plaatjies-Van Huffel, to draft a press statement regarding the upsurge of xenophobia in the country. This statement was issued on 16 April 2015 (Kuyler 2017, 224–225).

In her endeavours to address racism in society, URCSA acknowledged and confessed in the pastoral letter that URCSA, which consists of differences races, cultures and language groups, is not an example of a non-racist church. The fact that at some places people of different races are worshipping together, does not mean that URCSA is a truly multicultural church. In a multicultural society, every member feels worthy of being a part of the community. Multiculturalism does not represent a means to an equal society, but an alternative to one where equality has given way to the toleration of difference and inequality. From the standpoint of multiculturalism, however, differences are welcomed as expressions of cultural diversity and equality (Kuyler 2017, 225).

In 2014, the General Synodical Commission of URCSA approved the “Churches Addressing Racism in Southern Africa” programme. The General Synod of URCSA acknowledged:

- that racism is prevailing on various levels, personal and institutional, and is toxic to interpersonal relations and society;
- that racism destroys the core of communion in the church among God’s people and in society;
- that racism operates with the assumption that certain persons or groups of people are superior to others;
- that these assumptions determine our thinking, our attitudes and our actions towards others;
- that racism prevents people from contributing to one another so that all may benefit in the fullness of life;
- that because racism perpetuates itself within society if left unchallenged, it cripples society; and
- that racism scares people, harms people and society and destroys people and society. (URCSA, Minutes, “Churches Addressing Racism in South Africa” 2014, 7; cf. Kuyler 2017, 221)

In order to foster human dignity by constructively addressing racism, URCSA made the following statement:

- In South Africa churches have been directly and indirectly involved in the establishment of racism and racist attitudes and behaviour. Churches provided a theological basis for race discrimination. The churches owe it to themselves and to society to embark on a journey to undo their legacy.

- The church is witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that brought salvation to all humankind. In Christ, all is restored in their human dignity.
- According to Ephesians, Christ has broken down the walls that separated people.
- The church has the ministry of reconciliation.
- The church has the ministry of justice. (cf. Kuyler 2017).

The church is strategically placed in society by having congregations everywhere and is, therefore, able to reach people from all walks of life at the grassroots level (URCSA. Minutes, “Churches Addressing Racism in South Africa” 2014, 7). The “Churches Addressing Racism in Southern Africa” programme aims to address racism in church and society. With this programme, URCSA wants to bring dignity and healing in church and society. The programme follows a hermeneutical approach in order to enhance the understanding of people concerning:

- The dynamics of society and church that created and perpetuate racism.
- The teachings of scripture about human dignity.
- The teachings of Christ who came to be our peace and to destroy the barriers between people.
- The role of the church as a healing community in society.

URCSA also initiated a programme to address racism. At a meeting of the leadership of URCSA and the DRC in February 2014, racism was identified as a serious stumbling block on the way to unity (cf. Belhar Confession Art. 2), reconciliation (cf. Belhar Confession Art. 3) and justice (cf. Belhar Confession Art. 4). The following statement was issued after the meeting:

Recognising the destructive power of racism so embedded in all our communities, we resolve to jointly develop and implement a programme for our churches to help us all to address this challenge in a way that will bring us closer together and enhance the healing we so long for. (Minutes of the Meeting of the Four Moderamen of the DRC Family 2014, 1–4)

Although URCSA already approved the “Churches Addressing Racism in South Africa” programme, it is not the purpose of this article to evaluate the impact or effectiveness of this programme. This rather illustrates that URCSA acknowledges the seriousness of the racism crisis and that the Belhar Confession obligates URCSA to embody her confession.

The Belhar Confession offers the church new hope and understanding of their social conditions in the light of God’s revelatory word. The Belhar Confession ushered us into a new common human good that is warm, rich, and self-correcting, despite the pain we had to endure. The Belhar Confession gives us a new understanding of who we are and recognises ourselves and each other in our common history; hoping, grappling with our

collective pasts, struggling creatively for freedom, working, celebrating, worshipping, and welcoming all in our midst, including those who benefited from our oppression, without any hint of bitterness and arrogance (Betha 2017, 350).

According to Pillay (2017, 10–16), the church must, therefore, be able to analyse the context, conduct research and establish the facts about the situation. It is not acceptable that we simply accept the government's position on racism and xenophobia and rely on the media and social networks to inform our thinking and position on matters. The church must be able to get to the grassroots causes of the issues surrounding racism and xenophobia. What does scripture teach us about pilgrims and co-pilgrims, this world, the use of the earth and its resources, economic sharing and solidarity, the care of the poor and needy, the Kingdom of God, justice, peace and righteousness? These are important theological themes the church often displaces in the quest to identify with power and privilege. The church needs to engage a prophetic role in light of injustices and the dehumanising of human beings. The church needs to ensure that the government does have a plan to combat racism and xenophobia. The church should take the lead in education, reorientation and the building of relationships. It is true that children learn racism as they grow up, from the society around them—and too often the stereotypes are reinforced, deliberately or inadvertently, by mass media. Therefore, the church should address racism at its deepest level. The church in South Africa must return to helping people confront and address deep-seated racist beliefs and practices and take the lead to welcome and assist strangers. We also need to be church *together* with others, as Plaatjies-Van Huffel illustrated through her ministry. In building the human community, the church must work at ensuring and securing the rights of human beings. The church has the responsibility to work towards the fullness of life for all people on earth, and in this regard, it has the duty of upholding and defending human rights where they are violated. The church has a vital role to play in bringing about racial reconciliation and healing in South Africa, and here it needs to embrace a pastoral-prophetic approach. It ought to do this because many of its own members have become victims themselves or they have been affected in some way or another. Likewise, the church can also encourage its members, who have promoted the evils of apartheid, in whatever way, to seek repentance and forgiveness (Pillay 2017, 6–10).

We are constantly reminded by the Belhar Confession to be vigilant against any in-creeching ideology that feeds on racial prejudices. Already in the 1980s, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared that the moral and theological justification of apartheid (racism) is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a theological heresy (WARC 1983, 177f; 1990, 173–175, 279–281). We are called by the Belhar Confession to see in others the image of the liberating God who seeks to liberate others through us (Betha 2017, 351).

The Belhar Confession keeps on prompting us to ask: What kind of church are we? What kind of church members are we? What kind of church must we become? It keeps reminding us to live authentically—that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably,

responsibly—under the dictates of the reign of God and to guard against falling into the distortion and deformation of other people. It calls us to be a *united* Uniting Reformed Church, for we cannot be a uniting church without first becoming united ourselves.

## Conclusion

It was during the apartheid era that God intervened and blessed the church with the gift of a confession that will remain a guiding light forever. The church needs to be mindful of the fact that although apartheid may be a thing of the past, its legacy of hurts, sufferings, wounds and painful experiences continues to surface in the present. Therefore, these are but a few examples of the ways that the Belhar Confession can help shape the ways that religious denominations respond to racism. There are thousands of other ways to engage in this response, and ultimately, those ways cannot be prescriptive but need to be determined in local contexts and interracial spaces. The church holds great potential to raise awareness, to provide a space for reconciliation, and to lessen the burden of racist violence—and religious leaders who take scripture and its message seriously will recognise that to be for a God who is on the side of the oppressed, is preaching and embodying the Belhar Confession.

I have argued that racism functions at various levels. It can be on a personal level, but it can also be institutionalised and entrenched in systems. As children of God, we do not have the luxury to choose whether we would like to engage in the struggle against racism. The Belhar Confession commands us and spells out the basic points of departure from which we should get involved. It challenges us to set an example or to embody what a non-racist society should look like. Obedience to Jesus Christ is the bottom-line. Not obedience to my own race, culture, language or social-economic position. Jesus Christ, the only head of the church, called us to confess and to do all these things (Kuyler 2017, 227).

Our calling as children of the Belhar Confession is to build relationships across cultural, language and ethnic boundaries. URCSA envisaged to address racism constructively in all its forms in church and society through academic, theological and other programmes, such as “Churches Addressing Racism” in Southern Africa, to assist and empower churches to restore people’s human dignity and bring about healing ... this was also what Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel fought and stood for.

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