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## **SPEECH GIVEN ON BEHALF OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA ON OCCASION OF THE *OFFICIAL CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE HELD AT MORGENSTER MISSION ON 14 SEPTEMBER 1991***

Dr CM Pauw

Faculty of Theology

University of Stellenbosch

Mister Master of Ceremonies, Mr Moderator and members of the Synodical Committee, honourable guests, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters in the Lord:

On behalf of the Moderator, the Synodical Committee and the Mission Board I have been asked to convey to you the greetings and best wishes of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa on this memorable occasion.

As sister church the church in the South shares with you the joy and thankfulness for what could be achieved over the past one hundred years. We pray with you for God's guidance and blessing and for the power of his Spirit as you enter into the second century of your history.

I also bring to you the greetings, at the request of its secretary, of the body which joins the whole family of Reformed Churches in Central, Southern and now also East Africa together, the Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches. At its last meeting held a few weeks ago, this body agreed to forge closer ties in order to promote its unity by seeking to replace the Council with an Ecumenical Synod.

### *A time to look back*

Brothers and sisters, an occasion such as this is in the first place *a time to look back*. And in looking back there is indeed much to be thankful for towards God. By his grace there has come into existence a church which can today confidently take up its place and fulfil its role in a proud and beautiful country.

And as we look back we remember in gratitude the work done by so many men and women, both from this country of Zimbabwe and from the South as well as

from elsewhere. Over a period of 100 years they, and the DRC together with the RCZ, have sought to serve in many ways and places. One could point out what has been achieved - there is much

evidence indeed: schools, hospitals, a vibrant church and many thousands of people who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Not only are these things there for all to see, but others have already adequately referred to such. It is therefore not necessary for me to elaborate on this aspect.

Looking back, however, also means it is a time for stock taking and for house cleaning and renewal. And to do that one must also look at less fortunate things. There are darker shadows in our history as well. We should not ignore nor deny them.

It may be that some of you here today may have had experiences with individual missionaries which, due to cultural differences of racial prejudices on their part, had offended or even hurt you. *We apologise for such incidents. Please forgive us.*

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It is also undoubtedly true that over the period of 100 years the DRC Mission itself in its policies as well as practices did make mistakes - mistakes which may have harmed the church and hampered it in its calling to be a true and faithful church of Christ. *We are saddened by this fact. Together we should seek to identify these mistakes and try to rectify them wherever possible...*

But there is an even darker cloud hanging over our history. The -church as well as the people who came from the South to bring the Gospel to this land certainly did so with great love and fervour and a sincere desire to see the church of Christ planted in this land. But as the years went by this church, to which you are linked historically as your "mother", entered into a dark period. In due course it became entangled in supporting the racial policies of South Africa to such an extent that there even was a time when it tried to justify Apartheid from the Bible and failed to speak a clear prophetic word against the injustices being perpetrated against so many people.

This scandalised you as it did many others and it became very painful for you to be associated with such a church.

*Today we wish to say to you we are deeply sorry about this. Please forgive us..*

In all humbleness we wish to inform you that the Dutch Reformed Church is now realising its mistakes and confessing that it was wrong. The General Synod meeting in 1990 admitted that it was wrong to try and give Scriptural support to Apartheid. The Synod condemned racism as a sin.

It recognised that Apartheid was wrong because it discriminated against people on grounds of race and colour and because it unjustly benefitted some people at the expense of others.

Today the country is dismantling Apartheid. We are experiencing the birth pangs of a new South Africa. But there is still much to be done. Discriminating laws can be repealed, church synods can take new decisions, but there is still a long way to go. And therefore we wish to ask you very urgently:

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#### PLEASE PRAY FOR US

- for the church in South Africa, particularly your "sister" the DRC
- for a change in the attitude of people's hearts
- for the distressing situation of violence which is claiming so many lives today
- for all the leaders of our land as they come together to seek a way into a new future

Brothers and sisters, we need your prayers. We need your support. Please stand by us.

#### *A time to look forward*

But on an occasion such as this we not only look back. We must certainly *also look forward*. And the theme which you chose for the centenary celebrations was well chosen indeed because it urges us to do precisely this - to look forward: *The ongoing challenge of the church "*

It is of vital importance to understand what this challenge implies. It is primarily the challenge to be a witness to the world of God's salvation for humanity and of his saving activity in all of his creation. Of this salvation the church is a sign, demonstrating the coming Kingdom of God.

And this witness to the world consists of a threefold task:

#### I. To witness through proclaiming the Word of God

- to all men and women who have not yet heard, calling them to faith, to repentance and to become part of His body
- to humbly witness to people of other faith traditions and to give account of the faith

which is within us

- to proclaim the rule of God over his creation and to care for it as responsible stewards
- to be a prophetic voice to the nation and to all people and to say to them: "**Thus says the Lord**".
- to apply the Word of God to new situations - the cities, the modern youth, problems arising from poverty, urbanisation, development, AIDS, to mention but some.

## 2. To witness through our fellowship and unity as believers

This means that we should build up the church as the Body of Christ in order for it to be an instrument in God's hands. Therefore we need -to serve and minister to God's people. This calls for Spirit filled men and women - "ministers" and leaders who are led by God's Holy Spirit, who live a life of prayer, who are men and women of the Word.

We should also show the world that we are one as Jesus prayed for in John 17, building up our fellowship and our unity in Christ. This unity should begin amongst ourselves as believers, in our congregations and in our church. It should also extend to our fellow Reformed churches in this country as well as within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches in Southern, Central and East Africa and even further away. But finally we must recognise our oneness with all other believers and develop a sense of ecumenical unity, taking hands and working together wherever this is possible as members of the world wide body of Christ.

## 3. To witness by serving the needs of all who suffer

The example set us by Christ compels us to stretch out a helping and loving hand to all who suffer - whether this is because of hunger, poverty, illness (including **AIDS!**), **ignorance**, injustice, oppression or whatever other calamity may befall people. But this also means that we should care for the creation which God has given us to live in, for God's land, for the soil and for the natural resources. It means we should even seek to restore what has been destroyed or over exploited.

Service to others and to God's creation is a sign of His coming Kingdom, a sign of the totality of His salvation and a testimony to His love and care, demonstrated in the life and death of our Saviour.

*A time to look up*

But, brothers and sisters, at an occasion such as this we should not only look back, and not only look forward. Most of all we should look up. As the famous finger rock here at Morgenster constantly reminds us, we need always to look up humbly and prayerfully to God - for guidance, for strength, and in order to know His will. Our eyes should always be on Him as it was in the case of Moses of whom we read that he "endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (Hebr II:27).

I wish to conclude with a word of Scripture. It was spoken by God to his people at another historic and momentous occasion: the dedication of the temple built by Solomon. After the prayer of dedication by Solomon in 2 Chron 6, God answered that whenever there might be a time of tribulation, He would give them the promise of ch 7:I4 (notice the four conditions, followed by the three promises given here):

*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.*

May God indeed fulfil these words and not only hear us, and forgive us but also heal this land of ours, this Africa to which we all belong, and for which we pray for his blessing in many different languages:

*MIungu, dalitsaniAfrika...*

*Ishe, komborera Afrika...*

*Nkosi, sikelel'iAftika Maluphakamis'uphondo lwayo, Yiva imithandazo yethu, Nkosi, sikelela!*

May God bless you and continue to lead you and use you to the glory of His name so that He will truly be Lord and Saviour of all.

I thank you.