

Uniting Reformed Church. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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REV BUYS: Sir, Commissioners, may I present to you Reverend Marcus Maphoto, he is the Assessor of the General Synod of the United Reformed Church.

CHAIRPERSON: You do the honours for him on the other side.

REV MAPHOTO: I take this opportunity Mr Commissioner, to introduce to you my Moderator of the General Synod, James Buys.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH OF SOUTH AFRICA: (sworn states)

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much, I don't know which one of you - the Moderator, are you going to? I keep repeating my sermon, you have 30 minutes in which to do your thing, 20 minutes perhaps of the submission and some time for interaction with the panel, thank you very much.

REV BUYS: Thank you very much Sir.

I think the submission of the United Reformed Church needs to be placed in a context for it to be correctly understood. This church is quite young, established out of the amalgamation of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in 1994.

The history of the former churches being churches established because of racial reasons, separated at the communion from the White Dutch Reformed Church in 1881. From 1881 right up to 1994, four racially divided churches existed, named the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Reformed Church in Africa for so-called Indians and the NG Kerk or Dutch Reformed Church for Whites.

We ourselves even having been set of this church as daughter churches, have always - in the sense in terms of our identity, been accused of being in cahoots with the White church and in many cases not much distinction was made between the Mission Church, the NG Kerk in Afrika, the Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church. The history was intertwined for different reasons. On the one hand you had the influence of a specially dominant leadership of the missionaries within these churches, the whole question of the dependency of these churches on the White church and it's impact on it's theological training within these churches.

If I should leave the rest of the history and come to the idea of our unification in 1994. We understood the ideal ...[indistinct] by these churches and especially in this sense that the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and Mission Church and our own actions in amalgamating the two churches, as being our own departing from our divided and racial history. And this departure Sir, represents to our understanding, our contradiction of the idea of racially divided churches.

The church consists of about 483.000 confessing members and 683 congregations nationally. In our own submission we would like to clarify a few points, the one being that we understand that speaking to the TRC and making submissions on the question of violation of human rights, of our participation thereof, support thereof or the extent to which we were victims of it, comes from both a social as well as a church context.

The popular slogan of the '80's: "The Church - The Sight of Struggle", is relevant in this regard. Historical and contemporary self understanding of the church, I think was portrayed in this slogan. ...[indistinct] as one of the institutions in society that did not remain unaffected but the all encompassing influence of apartheid. The slogan led to the realisation that the same contradictions that are prevalent in society are present and often reflected in the teaching and life of the church.

And in the sense, our submission reflects a church context representing both the struggle within and the struggle of the church outwardly. We understand that speaking to the questions of the violation of human rights, it concerns both those violations by ourselves or our members as well as violations committed against our members or collectively. In this regard we listed in our written submission, various areas where these matters were raised.

If I morally without going into each of those, we in summary say that we believe that the United Reformed Church - even in it's existence as the former Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, did not do enough in opposing apartheid. It did not do enough in speaking clearly against the evils of apartheid. It did not do enough - in terms of our own programmes and actions, to enable and incite our members to actively oppose and struggle against the evils of apartheid in the extent to which this very policy was the cause and the main motivation behind many of the human rights violations - as has been heard by this Commission in the past couple of months.

I therefore continue on to one of the areas I do think we need to highlight : the whole question of the apartheid war and the chaplancy service - it's on page 8 of our submission. Security forces in this country - the police and army, were mainly responsible for both offensive and defensive actions, in defence of apartheid and against the onslaught of terrorism, communism and ant-Christ. In the cause of this war and the development of the total strategy - total onslaught strategy, the Government initiated the whole idea of winning the hearts and the minds of the people.

Some of the organs being used in winning hearts and minds was amongst others - for instance, the christian cultural organisations. Following on this was the low intensity war with all it's covert actions, the result of which - I think, we have heard quite a lot of evidence and submissions before the TRC, but basically the apartheid government relied very strongly on the moral and spiritual undergirding as a means of enabling the forces to carry out their acts in defence of this crime against humanity.

The chaplancy services of both the police and army became - to our understanding, the means of attaining this ideal and so we had the whole holy war concept that became operative. Although individual members of the synods of the former churches opposed the idea of participation in the chaplancy services, the church continued to avail ministers for this service and through this act the church participated in this holy war and even blessed it.

It did not resist, neither did it guide it's members in opposing it. Thus the church contributed to gross human rights violation, polarisation and the indescribable suffering and grief many people suffered. Precariously we also need to acknowledge that the very presence of the members of our churches in these services - in actual fact, was our own guilt - a part of it, in these violations.

I'd like to go onto section 5 Sir, speaking to the issue of the failure of these churches to live up to our principles of faith. This Uniting Reformed Church does not claim sole responsibility for the insights we have for what is normative in both the questions of faith, morals, ethics, etc. The Uniting Reformed Church is rooted in the reformed tradition. This tradition boasts the fact that scripture alone is normative for teaching and living.

In Jesus Christ, God confirmed the dignity of human kind. Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, God reconciled human kind with himself and each other by breaking down the walls of divisions, destroying ...[indistinct] and establishing peace. Further defined, this church strongly relied on the calvarious doctrine on Church/State relationships. This doctrine clearly teaches the responsibility of the church as an institution and it's individual members.

Calvary teaches that God through Jesus Christ, reigns supreme. Within this theological perspective, the State is a servant of God to the benefit of it's subjects. The State is burdened with the responsibility to restrict ...[indistinct], restrain chaos and fight evil and in this sense, the State is servant of God. To enable the State in it's task, it is invested with the sword as a means of effective or effecting authority of it's calling - according to Romans XIII.

In contrast, the State that diverts from this calling is described as the beast that acts in contravention of it's mandate. Kelvin, in view of his understanding of scripture, was convinced that resistance against the unjust States and tyranny is not only justified ...[indistinct] true faith and obligation. The failure to denounce, resist and incite to

resist against apartheid and it's resulting violation of human rights, constitutes our failure, failure to live up to our faith's convictions.

Rather, the church often got involved in debates on the legitimacy and right of resistance against authority. These debates were often dominated by the question of violence and armed struggle and this furthermore happened under circumstances in which ...**[End of tape 3]**

... the failure of the structure of the church to give the necessary support for youth suffering, other members did so in their personal capacity. For this they deserve recognition and honour. Therefore having acknowledged this, the United Reformed church wishes to use this opportunity in view of acts or commission or omission, to consequently oppose human rights' violations in view of its subtle recognition of the illegitimate apartheid regime's liaison, (indistinct) and negotiations. In view of its silence and conscious and unconscious lack of clarity in word and deed, we confess unreservedly (indistinct) its members' guilt.

We herewith plead for forgiveness of opposed citizens and the Supreme God. I wish to however on this very note indicate that the nature of our confession before this house is not one defined purely for the sake of appearing before the TRC.

In our own struggling with our identity in 1982, and having had the status (indistinct) and the adoption of the confession (indistinct), this very church in 1982 in looking at itself and how it functioned in this society said along with many others, we confess our guilt that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin, and confessed to be so, or should have been experienced as and confessed to be sin, have grown in time so seem self evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to scripture.

This confession sir, you find in the accompanying letter, paragraph 1 to the confession on (indistinct) So we wish to say that even though in the last few days and even in the last times, you may have heard people and churches come before, seemingly the one after the other confessing sin and seeking forgiveness, we would truly hope that this occasion would never denigrate what happened in sense of the confession and we wish to say that in the same sense, in the urgency in which we for ourselves in 1982 defined our own confession of guilt in a sense, that today just becomes a continuation and logical consequence of it.

If I may go on to the matter of decisions and actions with regards or in resistance of human rights' violations, once again if I could shortly just highlight the context of the church. When we speak of our own actions and decisions, we never claim to be the only church who has had certain insights, certain commitments. We understand that the context which exist, was one in which we shared communally with other people.

So for instance, some of the main moments for this church in terms of becoming clear on certain matters, are represented in the matters before you, the attack by the Minister Schlebusch in 1979 against the SACC with regards to civil disobedience and the resulting letter of Dr Allan Boesak to the Minister.

The confession of Belhar as stated and the vice-Chairperson will later make some comment on this. The document and its own and clear witness that one cannot reconcile good and evil, one cannot reconcile God and Satan.

The church clearly need to be involved in activities that would transform, liberate society as part of God's mission.

I said earlier on our own failure to remain true to our calling, was the main cause for the struggle within the church itself. In this sense certain moments needed to be highlighted without going into detail.

One being for instance the Christian institute, its own actions and confessions. The extent to which it sought to enable people to clearly understand and act in the society.

The confessing circle within the framework of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and what it stood for, (indistinct) and many others, that is the context from which our own understanding grew.

Speaking of the struggle of this church itself, I wish to say that for quite a period one did not see clear decisions in the minutes of Synod, neither actions that would to some extent indicate this church's struggle against apartheid.

We however, recognise that this very same period right up to the beginning of the 1960's was one in terms of my earlier reference, where a very strong dominance of Dutch Reformed Church missionaries functioning in these churches, and it is only since 1961 in the case of the former mission church and 1963 in the case of the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, that one has seen the up come of indigenous leaders in the church and so greater clarity within the church's teaching and actions.

You have a list before you of some of the issues dealt with by the church. The members of the former church primarily as students, on a student level, were at the centre of historical events at that time. They took the lead at many campuses and schools. I mention a few with regards to the University of the Western Cape and other institutions.

(Indistinct) youth and student revolt resulted in expulsions and detentions, going into exile. The conviction and imprisonment of members of this church, disruption of academic careers as well as the deaths of others as I referred to earlier on.

During the 1988 Synod the church declared that this policy of irreconcilability leads to polarisation and conflicts and this conflicts was then used by both government and in many church circles as an alibi to maintain the separation of people at all costs.

Decisions of this church itself, contributed to decisions made at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 when the question of apartheid was clearly stated not to be only a practical or political matter, but a question of fait and therefore the declaration of the status (indistinct) in 1982. This led to the adoption of the confession of Belhar to which my brother will also shortly refer.

I think maybe I should just pass on to the question of our own contribution in the question of reconciliation. In a very short reference to the confession of Belhar, this church has in the past two years in the strategic planning, has taken on as its vision the whole idea of unity, reconciliation and justice.

Not only in the sense in which it was confessed in 1982 and 1986, but in terms of our own grappling on how this church can make contributions in the renewal as well as reconciliation in this country.

I just shortly list a few points we have mentioned in this document with regards to the idea of pastoral counselling of victims, (indistinct), the confession of guilt, service of the church in forgiveness and reconciliation, the sense in which a church could be able in continuing acts of reconciliation bring people to public reconciliation, (indistinct) of reconciliation (indistinct) and transforming worship into acts of reconciliation.

Reconciliation services for local, regional and national groups, (indistinct) of rehabilitation programmes holistically seeking the renewal of perpetrators.

We believe that the religious community can contribute to a profound religious or theological statements and the erection of some memorial in remembrance to the martyrs and the victims of human rights' abuses.

But one point I think we would like to emphasise comes under what we think could happen nationally, that is within this country of ours, for the sake of reconciliation but also for the sake of accountability, that there should be a presentation of a report of a civil audit and social comments on the part or the progress in and the promotion of human rights by the authorities, followed by a policy declaration or manifesto, the declaration of intent by the State itself.

We know that there are many organs functioning in a sense as watchdogs of what happens, but I believe that the whole idea of holding government accountable in view of our history, could be one of the means in which we would ensure that what happened in the past, will never again happen in the future.

I thank you sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Now your Moderator has eaten up a lunch of 30 minutes, there is actually nothing left but in the interest of church unity I think we will let you have maybe five minutes.

REV MAPHOTO: Thank you. It is an honour and a privilege for me to openly say in affirming what my Moderator has said in short. I wish I was speaking at a time where we are not a Uniting Reformed Church but a United Reformed Church with our fellow Dutch Reformed Church.

We are guilty both of the same type of sin. We have sinned against the nation, we have misrepresented God's word in whatever we did. From the Uniting Reformed Church I must simply say we have been throughout the time, been a testing ground of any legislation from the National Party parliament.

One example as a young student in the church, at training college, on a Sunday an honourable Minister of Religion came to offer holy communion and baptism and he decided not to do that, but tried to explain to us the new coming legislation over the separate development.

Children were not baptised on that day, holy communion was not served on that day but a clear picture was put to us of the benefits that we would get from separate development. I looked upon those present and I knew nobody could question that and it went on, he explained at the end, he offered another time to come and give holy communion and serve holy communion.

The important issue was to use the time to introduce the separate development into the country. We had been total guinea pigs of our mother, to say to the world that you are the only church that understands. If chaplains were needed for the Police and the Defence, it will only come mostly largely, almost 90 percent from the ranks of the United Reformed Church, for both Defence and the Police, but we are aware that we as a church had never had peace within ourselves, within ourselves, within our mother and those were sent by the mother to help us. There has been an undiminishing intensity of war within us.

That is the bedroom war, which ended up with the births of the Belhar confession where we say up to here can no more longer. A status confession has to be declared in which we say any difference on this question of apartheid, can never be reconciled with the Word of God.

Now, we want to say our church as a testing ground served the National Party with many informers. People outside, they know some of the things that we do not know, that some of our ministers were used to serve the interest and we want to openly this afternoon confess to the nation that we have sinned against you. We knew the truth and we avoided to live with the truth.

Some of the things that are not known to us, that our members were involved in, are those things that we want to say to the nation, may God grant us grace. His grace is immeasurable, it can never be measured by a human being. He loves us and we want to say as my Moderator said create a conducive atmosphere for reparations and for the better way forward.

We have sinned against the nation, and we confess of our sins, thank you sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

REV XUNDU: Thank you for your submission which I think you gave elaborately and very clearly. I want to say like the others, you have come to confess and come and share to what degree your own (indistinct) took part in the struggle or in taking part in collusion with the system in the struggle against apartheid whilst you yourselves, you had your own struggle.

That struggle has been expressed in many ways and I am grateful that you are able to confess and for the whole of South Africa to realise that you do, you have come to terms with that.

I realise that in paragraph 8, in page 21 or 158, you have listed the things which you are saying are things that take you through the road of reconciliation, as a way of addressing that this should not happen again and I think that those things speak for themselves and I think they are a repetition of some things that were said by other people who gave testimony.

I therefore thank you and I am not wanting to make any more comments.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

DR MANTHATA: In the likelihood of there being quite a number of perpetrators in the pews of your churches, is there any organised way of addressing these people and their families and further with that kind of knowledge, could you be of value to reconciling processes because we shall need the perpetrators who have come to the fore, who shall have been healed, who shall have been counselled, to help this process?

MR BUYS: Our clear understanding of the process we started as I said about two years ago, of which we had two sessions last year, has in this overall vision of the church one that we clearly need to understand, the nature of the remnants of apartheid and of the history of the former churches within this church.

Similarly we understand that it would include our having to deal with our past, having to deal through our own ministry of reconciliation and especially in view of our own paragraph 3 in the confession of Belhar.



Both the victims within the church as well as the perpetrators, the principal area in which this should happen to our understanding if I should speak within the framework of our church, is the devise and development of this programme within regional Synods for it to take effect right down to grassroots level within congregations.

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