

RCA adopts apartheid-era confession: The Belhar Confession

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For some 400 years, the small Reformed Church in America has relied on only three confessional statements of belief, all of them forged in the crucible of the Reformation. Now they have added a fourth, and its unlikely origins—apartheid-era South Africa—speak volumes about the changing nature of global Christianity and its impact on one of America's oldest denominations.

The RCA formally accepted the Belhar Confession on June 10 at the church's General Synod held at North western College in Orange City, Iowa. The confession is a declaration of unity, justice and reconciliation that was written by Reformed church leaders in the Cape Town suburb of Belhar, South Africa, in 1982.

"It is historic and it adds a needed component to the confessions, the social dimension," said Mitch Kinsinger, a religion professor at RCA-affiliated North western College. "For a denomination that has been historically Dutch and white, it opens the windows to a broader sense of what this church is and what it should be."

The document instructs people to "love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obliged to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another."

In March, two-thirds of the RCA's 46 regional bodies voted to officially add Belhar as their fourth foundational statement of belief, and June's General Synod ratified the earlier action with a 163-41 vote.

The Christian Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also have considered adopting the statement.

The adoption of this South African document is an important landmark for the RCA, said Harold Delhagen, the executive of the RCA's Albany (New York) Synod. "We are just so delighted that the first new confession we adopt comes from the Southern Hemisphere," Delhagen said.

The most vibrant and growing sectors of Christianity are in the so-called Global South. By 2100, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimates, the 2.8 billion Christians south of the equator will be more than triple the 775 million in the north.

“This is a way to ground our commitment to justice and to reconciliation and to unity,” said the RCA’s general secretary, Wes Granberg-Michaelson. “This means that every theological student will be shaping their faith in light of not only the Heidelberg, the Belgic and the Canons of Dort but also the Belhar Confession.”

With a little more than 150,000 members in the United States, the RCA is the oldest Protestant denomination (founded in 1628) with a continuous ministry in North America, according to the *2010 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*.

Granberg-Michaelson, in his report to the meeting, said the most critical challenge facing the Reformed Church in America is making the transition from being a settled denomination to becoming a missional church. The denomination has seen an overall membership decline of 8 percent since 2003, he noted.

He said he was encouraged that the RCA has 249 new congregations with more than 17,500 in attendance, and that more than one-third of the churches are racially or ethnically different from the RCA Anglo majority. The denomination must address a “relationship gap” between new and old congregations, calling their lack of connection “the greatest threat to the RCA’s life together as a whole.”

Emboldened by the new church confession and his observations from an overseas tour, James Seawood, the RCA’s second black president, said he wants the church to be a bigger advocate for social justice.

“We have not listened as we should to learn with the ear and the heart of Jesus about the need for justice, nor have we acted as we should as his hands and feet to ensure justice comes,” said Seawood. He proposed a social justice strategy that would draw upon such organizations as Bread for the World, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility and Sojourners. *—Religion News Service*