From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world, “Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do.” These statements of faith, including the ecumenical creeds and the historic Reformed confessions, though centuries old and far removed from their place of origin, still guide our understanding of Scripture and of faith today, and of the life they call us to live.

In the late 20th century the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, like Christian leaders centuries before them, stepped forward to confront yet another critical issue that threatened the very core of the gospel message. The church and the society in which it ministered were torn by internal conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and subjugation of the disenfranchised. From this crucible of suffering emerged the Belhar Confession, a biblically based doctrinal standard of justice, reconciliation, and unity. This confession is intended to guide not only the personal lives of God’s children but also the whole body of Christ as it speaks and lives out God’s will—“to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” with God (Mic. 6:8).

Like the confessions that preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from a particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world—a testimony for all of God’s people in our time. South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the disenfranchised. The history of oppression in our own countries, and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time call for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—to confess that the Lord of life, who entrusted to us the “message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), is the Lord of our hopes and aspirations for a just and reconciled people.

Our South African brothers and sisters have asked us to join them in confession, forgiveness, and healing by formal adoption of the Belhar Confession, that we might together say it aloud and live by it. May our prayer as we respond mirror the words in the “Accompanying Letter” to be read as a preface to the confession: “Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. . . . ”

(*Agenda for Synod 2009*, pp. 282-83)