

Our calling to service and witness in unity

A theological basis
for the DRC family's
missional ministries

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List of abbreviations

ADD	General Ministry for Service-witness (Algemene Diensgroep vir Diensgetuienis)
AIC	African Initiated Church
AKDB	General Commission for Service of Compassion (Algemene Kommissie vir Diens van Barmhartigheid)
CFW	Commission for Witness
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Church of North America
CRWRC	Christian Reformed World Relief Committee
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
DRCA	Dutch Reformed Church in Africa
DRC family	Dutch Reformed Church family
DRCSA	Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa
DRMC	Dutch Reformed Mission Church
GCFW	General Commission for Witness
GCME	General Commission for Mission and Evangelism
GSCDS	General Synod Commission for Diaconal Services
GSMC	General Synodical Mission Committee
IMM	Integrated Ministry Model
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MSS	Minister in Synodical Service
NBI	Nehemiah Bible Institute
RCA	Reformed Church in Africa
SAPMC	South African Partnership for Missional Congregations
SCFW	Synodical Commission for Witness
TIW	Bureau for Training of Intercultural Workers
UMSW	United Ministry for Service and Witness
UNISA	University of South Africa
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape

Preface

“Go then...”

With the ascension the Lord Jesus said two remarkable things to his disciples. Matthew tells us that Jesus took his disciples to a mountain in Galilee to bid them farewell. It was a rather awkward group who met Him there. Like us, they were ordinary people. They were still trying to digest the unbelievable events of the last few weeks – Jesus’ arrest, his crucifixion and especially his resurrection. They did not know exactly how to respond to these events. Some even doubted. But for them – and for us! – Jesus had a double message (Matt 28:18-20):

His *first* message was: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”*. The disciples had to know: Jesus is the Son of God, who was sent by the Father to bring the tremendous sacrifice through which the world would be saved. But Jesus is also the Lord, the One to whom all authority was given in heaven and on earth. He ascended to heaven to occupy the throne at the right hand of the Father. The reins of history, of everything that happened on earth and that should still happen in future, are in his hands.

While Peter and his friends still stood dumbfounded by the realisation that their Master is Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus gave them the *second* message: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ...”* Thereby Jesus gave them the biggest compliment imaginable: He invited them to be his co-workers! He was establishing his Kingdom, but He would not do it without them. He appointed them as ambassadors of his Kingdom, who had to introduce people from all nations on earth to their King. And, so Jesus promised, they would never be alone. Through his Spirit He would be with them to support and accompany them, for ever, until He would come again.

This is what this book is about: it is about the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, who is intensely involved with our world. It is about the Father who sent the Son, and about the Son who sent the Spirit – and also about us, who are involved in God’s own work on earth, to proclaim and demonstrate God’s message of love to all nations. To speak and to do. To witness and to serve.

In the last few years representatives from all four churches in the DRC family together formed the United Ministry for Service and Witness, to deliberate with each other about our understanding of God and his mission on earth, as well as our own task and mandate to be God's representatives on earth.

Through the years the realisation has grown stronger all the time: none of us, or our churches, can handle this task alone. We cannot do it without each other. We can only begin to understand something of the unfathomable love of the Lord when we discover it together, with each other (Eph 3:18). And there is no way we can convince the world of the reality of Jesus' love if we don't do it as one group, together with each other. Again and again we were overwhelmed by Jesus' prayer for his disciples: *"I pray ... that all of them may be one, ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* (Joh 17:21)

While the unification process in the DRC family remains unfinished, it has been a great source of inspiration and empowerment to us as torchbearers of the service and witness ministry of the DRC family, to shoulder this responsibility as a united group with an irrevocable commitment to the Lord and to each other.

It is our prayer that ministers and church members in all our synods, presbyteries and congregations will read, discuss and use this book. May the Lord also take the DRC family to his mountain again, to let us listen anew to his double message.

Reuben Massisi
Piet Meiring

(Co-chairs of the UMSW)

Chapter 1

On the way with Service and Witness in Unity

This book in your hand is the first publication in a series, *Our calling to service and witness in unity*. The United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family (UMSW) plans to develop a series of workbooks for the church's different missional ministries based on this book.

This book describes the theological foundation of the UMSW's concept of *service and witness in unity* and is the introduction to the series. Our practical theological reflection about the outreach ministries of the DRC family is based on this concept. The compilers hope this book will help ministers and church members to understand the concept and thus inspire them to implement it in their own ministry.

The story of this publication and the planned series of workbooks begins with a decision of the DRC's General Synod in 2007. This synod approved the establishment of the UMSW and the policy document on *service and witness in unity*. The Synod's Ministry for Service and Witness (ADD) was asked to continue the theological reflection in co-operation with the three other churches in the DRC family. (Acts 2007:95)

1.1 A project of the UMSW

The ADD presented this decision to the UMSW and a project team was appointed. It soon became clear that the UMSW's own story should form part of the reflection on the concept. The task was divided into four parts and for every part a sub-group was appointed with representatives from all four the co-operating churches. The four sub-groups had to consider:

- 1.1.1 The history of the UMSW and the development of the theological policy document;
- 1.1.2 The biblical basis for the concept of *service and witness in unity*;
- 1.1.3 The way the concept was handled in theology;

1.1.4 The result of this biblical and theological reflection in the practice of the church's ministries.

1.2 The story gets a wider scope

The idea was also to introduce the concept of *service and witness in unity* to all the synods. The UMSW sent the policy document to the Service and Witness ministries of the different synods, asking them to think about introducing it to congregations in the different areas.

The CFW of the Cape, which is a united activity of the DRC (Western and Southern Cape), the URCSA (Cape) and the RCA, held a conference on this issue in May 2010. The history and theological basis of the process and the model were discussed, as well as the biblical teaching about it and how it is currently applied in practical ministries. They considered further implementation. Representatives of presbyteries and theological faculties attended the conference.

Discussions on the concept and a united ministry were also initiated in other synodical regions, for example: Namibia, KwaZulu-Natal, Highveld, Northern Synod and Northern Cape.

1.3 Ecumenical discussion

The work of the project team was further enriched by a day long workshop with Mr Andrew Ryskamp, executive head of the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA). This organisation is the world mission organisation of the CRCNA. In their history they went through a similar process of conceptualisation and implementation of the concept of *service and witness in unity*.

The workshop was very enlightening. It convinced the project team that it would be necessary to produce a series of workbooks in order to implement the concept of *service and witness in unity* in the four churches of the DRC family. The individual workbooks will further develop the different practical aspects of the model. It will focus on the ministry of congregations with practical examples and make suggestions for possible projects. This introductory book has to precede the workbooks and give an outline of the model.

1.4 Broader missional movement

In time it became clear that the reflection on the concept *service and witness in unity* as part of the church's ministry has points of contact with the work done in other task teams of the General Synod of the DRC (and via the UMSW also in the other churches of the DRC family). A number of examples are: the reflection on a Missional Ecclesiology, the discussion on Evangelism, the project on the Church in Context, the task team on Diversity and the reflections on our Public Witness (like the consultations about the ACCRA declaration on globalisation, economical and ecological justice).

We realised that we actually have a shared theological foundation. This was a broader missional movement, rather than a defined and final blueprint for ministry. Therefore we identify two categories of ministry in this series, namely: ministries that form part of the activities of the UMSW, but also examples of ministries that grew in other places, but demonstrate the same theological basis.

1.5 History and policy

Two important factors play a role in the production of this introductory book, as well as the planned series of practical workbooks. The first factor is the historical process that resulted in forming the UMSW. The second important factor for the framework of the book is the policy document that spells out the theological basis for the united structure of the UMSW.

The policy document is part of the historical development and actually forms the culmination point of a process of theological reflection and practical ministry design. This document functions in two ways. It gives the theological rationale for the practical theological model of service and witness and it supplies the theological framework for ongoing theological reflection and ministry development. Because the policy document is central in this project, it is also central in this introductory chapter.

UMSW Policy document

Our calling to service and witness in unity

The understanding of our calling to service and witness in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Reformed Church in Africa and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa is based on a history of collaboration in and joint reflection on our calling. The following are important beacons along the way: The articles and policies on mission and diaconal services in the Church Orders of the different churches, the Confession of Belhar (1986), the joint Working Definition on Mission in the DRC Family (1986), the Laudium Declaration of the RCA (1990), the Joint Declaration of Intent (AKDB/ASKDD - 2003), the Declaration on mission and our calling to witness in and from Africa (2004), the DRC's declarations on it's calling (2002 and 2004), etc.

In August 2006 the leadership of this family of churches recommitted themselves to covenant for the re-unification of the family. It also entails a recommitment to our united calling to service and witness in and from Southern Africa.

We testify about:

1. The mission of the Triune God

- 1.1 The Church's calling to service and witness in unity flows from the being of the Triune God. The very life of God is characterised by covenant, reaching out, self-communication, mutuality, relation and unity - God is love (*Deus caritas est*), seeking communion. The acts of God, as revealed in creation, scripture and throughout history, are characterised by God's love for the world, inviting people to enter a new world, a Trinitarian space, where the God of communion extends hospitality and care and makes all things new (*Missio Trinitatis Dei*)
- 1.2 The mission of service and witness expresses God's love and compassion to bring salvation in all its dimensions (shalom) to all people and the whole of creation. (Ex 3:7-8, Ex 19:5-6, Ex 34: 6-9, Ps 146: 6-10, Luke 4:18-19, John 17:11, 17, 20-23, Matt 28:18-20, John 20:21-22, Acts 1:8, 1 John 4: 7-21, Eph 4:17, Rev 21:5).

2. The mission of Christ

- 2.1 The Father has sent the Son into the world to gather God's church from all the nations and to send us into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit (John 3:16-17, John 20:21-22).

2.2 The salvation that Christ achieved is all-encompassing. It includes the forgiveness of our sins, our liberation on all levels of life as well as the liberation of creation. God's salvation of the world is realised in that He builds his Kingdom here and now. This Kingdom will, however, only come to full realisation with Christ's second coming, when all things will be new and all nations and people will glorify God. (Ezek 47:12 and Rev 22:2, Rev 21:1-5)

3. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church is sent

3.1 As the body of Christ our Lord and Saviour, the essence of the church is to participate in God's mission in this world (*missio ecclesiae*). The local congregation as primary agent of God's mission, but also the church as a whole and all its members, are under the commission of God. Dependent on and guided by the Holy Spirit, we are called as prophets, priests and kings, to:

3.1.1 live in the presence of God (*coram Deo*), obedient to the word of God

3.1.2 a ministry of worshipping God and praying for the world (*leitourgia*),

3.1.3 minister the Gospel of God's salvation to all people through word (*kerugma*), deed (*diaconia*) and in a relationship of love and unity (*koinonia*),

3.1.4 seek justice, reconciliation and healing, testifying to the hope that we live by and

3.1.5 conserve and cultivate creation in the name of God and for the sake of all who live in it.

This we do with the deepest motive of glorifying God and in service of the coming of the Kingdom (Rom 12:1-2, Eph 1:10 ff) (Matt 4:23-25, 5:13-16, 9:35-38, 10:7-8, 28:18-20, Luke 6:17-19, 9:1-6, 10:25-37, John 20:19-22, Acts 1:8, Heb 3:1, 1 Pet 2:9-10, 1 Pet 3:15)

3.2 The mission of service and witness occurs where we as the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with integrity, in obedience and in following Christ, with compassion and in serving others, in humility but also in boldness, witness about God's love for the world. In the reaching out to all people new borders are continuously crossed and service and witness are not to be separated.

3.3 We are called to service and witness in and from Southern Africa, by

3.3.1 prayerfully, and with others, discerning and obeying God's calling for us in and from this context,

3.3.2 listening with compassion to the voices crying out for deliverance from sin, enslavement, fear, hunger, sickness, pain, violence and injustice - suffering in all its dimensions,

- 3.3.3 making our prophetic voice heard and being of priestly service in alleviating the need of people in all our communities,
 - 3.3.4 respecting, building and celebrating the good in our rich and diverse heritages, cultures, languages, gifts, contributions and the vast potential in all the people of Southern Africa,
 - 3.3.5 entering into meaningful partnerships with other churches, ecumenical bodies and governmental- and non-governmental institutions
 - 3.3.6 witnessing to our faith in the Triune God through respectful dialogue with people of other faiths and convictions.
- 3.4 As the legitimate bearer of this Good News (Gospel), the church of Christ is to be one and to live and work in the likeness of the one triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *"As prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the Unity of Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:1-6)*

1.6 Framework for the book

The framework for the introduction of the different parts of this book and ultimately also for the planned workbooks is based on the policy document. Throughout the four chapters of the book we focus on the concept of *service and witness in unity* in the light of the policy document. Every chapter builds on the formulation of the concept of *service and witness in unity* as it is imbedded in the theological formulation of the policy document.

1.6.1 This **first** chapter

- a) introduces the theological policy document which has already been approved in the four co-operating churches;
- b) explains the methodology of the planned series or workbooks.

The policy document must always be supplemented by article 4 of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) as we continue with this study. The MOA is the agreement on which the UMSW is founded.

The introductory paragraph of the policy document presents the historical documents that played a pivotal role in the process of

developing the UMSW. Among them there are articles and policies in the church orders of the co-operating churches, working definitions, theological declarations and confessions.

The UMSW enhanced this list in September 2008 when the MOA was formulated. Article 4 states that the work of the UMSW is accompanied and influenced by:

- The Three Forms of Unity (the three confessions of the Reformation),
- The Confession of Belhar (1986),
- The *Laudium Declaration* (1990),
- The *Joint Declaration of Intent* (AKDB/ASKDD - 2003),
- The DRC's declarations on its calling (2002, 2004),
- The *Declaration on mission and our calling to witness in and from Africa* (2004).

This is the broad foundation for this book and the concept we want to clarify.

1.6.2 **Chapter 2** tells the story of the origins of the UMSW and the policy document. It helps the reader to trace the journey of the DRC family in forming the united structure of the UMSW.

In this chapter we hear the story of important meetings along the way, crucial decisions and fundamental theological concepts. This is also the story of the writing of the theological basis for the model of *service and witness in unity* as a united ministry of the churches in their outreach to the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The chapter also focuses on the theological framework and historical context within which the UMSW developed. We get to know the documents in which the events are recorded.

1.6.3 The content of **Chapter 3** pays specific attention to the policy document as the theological basis for the concept of *service and witness in unity*.

The chapter explores the biblical and theological points of departure in the document. It presents the UMSW's understanding of its calling to *service and witness in unity* in terms of the three perspectives put forward in the policy document. We focus on the

central ideas and discuss them with reference to the biblical passages indicated in the policy document.

The policy document firstly emphasises that our calling to *service and witness in unity* proceeds from the being of God. The very essence of God is characterised by love, compassion and a desire for fellowship and justice. This is the deepest foundation of mission.

The second part emphasises that Christ was sent to gather the church and send it out to the world. The salvation that Christ brings, is all-inclusive.

The third part indicates that God's mission in the world is fulfilled by the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore mission is an essential characteristic of the church. The whole church, down to every member, was sent by God. We will therefore consider what this mission of the church means in practice, according to the Bible.

1.6.4 **Chapter 4** determines how we practically do *service and witness in unity*. This chapter focuses on the practical ministry of the UMSW and how the model of *service and witness in unity* is already implemented in the practical situation.

The presentation mentions the wide variety of ministries in which the UMSW is involved. We do this with reference to an ecclesiological framework that identifies different manifestations of the church in which *service and witness in unity* is practically implemented:

1. The service of worship (liturgy);
2. The congregation;
3. Relational structures of the church (presbytery, synod, etc);
4. The ecumenical church;
5. Individual believers;
6. Voluntary initiatives and activities;
7. The family.

The chapter explains how ministries, structures and programs within the UMSW framework function in each of these manifestations of the church.

1.7 Format of the workbooks

The planned workbooks will further develop chapter 4, but will investigate specific themes. The issues that came to the fore in the development of the UMSW, will determine the ministry focuses to which we will have to pay attention. These will be matters that have already been identified as key issues for the ministry of the churches that deal with *service and witness in unity*. Our intention is to develop at least eight workbooks covering the following themes:

- The theology of *service and witness in unity* and its biblical basis;
- Justice in the world;
- Partnership in ministry;
- Dialogue and evangelism;
- The unity of the church of Christ;
- Reconciliation;
- Ecology;
- Diaconate / Social welfare.

The workbooks will be designed to assist congregations in developing joint ministries in their local contexts. We will supply examples of what is already happening elsewhere. The stories of other congregations can serve as a guideline and instructional resource for local mobilisation.

The workbooks will equip action groups to build partnerships, analyse their contexts, reflect theologically on the issues at hand, develop practical strategies, and be sustained in all this by a living spirituality.

1.8 Acknowledging our roots

We understand the model for *service and witness in unity* in this book as a reinterpretation of the historical ministries of the *Service of Compassion (or diaconal ministry)* and of *Mission* of the DRC family. There are clear connections with the way in which our predecessors worked, but there are also new elements that must receive attention in the current context and for which we must develop new strategies.

We want to celebrate the ministry of our predecessors with sincere appreciation and take hands as DRC family with the ecumenical church so that God's Kingdom will come.

Chapter 2

The DRC family's history of Service and Witness in Unity (An Overview)

The United Ministry for Service and Witness (UMSW) was born in October 2006. Representatives from the service and witness ministries of the DRC family in South Africa and Namibia met at Good Shepherd, at the Hartbeespoort Dam near Pretoria. At this founding meeting we settled the issues about the name and purpose of the UMSW. The meeting accepted the policy document which we introduced in chapter 1 of this book as theological basis and drafted basic regulations for the work of the UMSW. Two years later, in September 2008, the UMSW also accepted a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that formulates the ministry agreement between the four churches. In the meantime all four churches in the family (URCSA, DRCA, RCA and DRC) approved these developments at their relevant church meetings.

2.1 It comes a long way

However, the story of the UMSW started a long time ago. It is a story in which all four churches in the family played an important role. But the strongest impetus to bring all of us to this point came from the younger sisters in the DRC family.

There were times when the four churches did not agree about the interpretation of the message of the Bible on the character and witness of the church. Since the 1980s, however, we have been together at several important conferences, listening to the Bible, praying and thinking together. This helped us to grow towards the shared vision and practical ministry of the UMSW.

Currently our greatest challenge is to extend this spirit of unity to other levels of the church. It should take root in local congregations, presbyteries and regional synods. We dream that it will grow in cities and

rural areas, establishing united service and witness ministries everywhere to the glory of the Lord.

If we want to fully appreciate these developments, we must first carefully look at the road along which we came. Then we will also be able to recognise the current challenges.

2.2 Involvement in Service and Witness

The DRC family has always been extensively involved in our immediate context, but also further afield.

2.2.1 *Witness in other countries*

All through its existence the DRC reached out widely. Thus the URCSA, the DRCA and the RCA also came into existence in South Africa. It also gave birth to sister churches in Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Namibia, Kenya and Nigeria. There were also missionary efforts outside of Africa.

It is important to remember that indigenous believers played an essential role in many of these outreaches. They are sometimes referred to as “trailblazers”. They were forerunners who opened the way for the gospel. Interpreters, elders, evangelists, indigenous ministers, often also women. A well-known example is the seven evangelists who took the gospel to the Shona speakers in Zimbabwe before an ordained minister became involved.

These outreaches addressed different needs. Evangelism was usually in the forefront, but those early mission workers also translated the Bible into many languages and created spiritual literature. They strongly emphasised education, establishing many educational institutions, from primary to tertiary levels. Through God’s mercy they offered medical and paramedical services, built clinics and hospitals. They cared for the deaf, blind and orphans, and also developed agriculture and technology.

2.2.2 *Federal Council of DR Churches*

Through this zeal a family of independent churches were established in Southern and Central Africa, with historical and confessional ties and a shared calling. In 1964 this mission policy of establishing self-sufficient, independent churches led to the establishment of a Federal Council of DR

Churches. The idea was to express the unity between the members of this “family of churches” through a federal bond.

However, as a result of serious opposition from the younger sister churches the Federal Council ceased functioning in the 1990s. The specific forms of unity and life that were dominant in the Federal Council, simply were no longer acceptable in the changing circumstances.

2.2.3 *Caring ministries*

But it was not only the mission to other countries that received attention. Locally the different churches of the DRC family effectively established caring ministries in their own contexts. People who were called and equipped to do that, managed diaconal and compassionate services on the synodical level. They established services and infrastructure on a great scale, usually in close co-operation with congregations.

Towards the end of the 20th century the social work organisations of the DRC family formed some of the largest providers of social work services in the RSA. The younger sister churches, however, often were dependent on social work services as subjects of the “mission” of the “mother church”. Still, they also spontaneously developed their own service and established ministries and institutions.

Ultimately the different churches brought into existence a variety of institutions for the deaf, blind, orphans, disabled and substance dependents. They also initiated social work and community development work. These services still provide love and care to great numbers of people all over the country.

The Lord indeed blesses all this good work abundantly

2.3 Ideology rears its head

But the story also has another side that requires our attention. There came a time when the ideology of apartheid exerted a very strong influence on the DRC’s service and witness. At one stage the mission secretary of the Free State DRC even spoke in a publication of “our mission policy of apartheid”.

Extensive research has been done on the influence of the DRC’s 1935 mission policy on the theological justification of apartheid. It also

determined our understanding of the church, its ministries and the Christian life.

Matt 28:16-21 was seen as the Great Commission to go to all the nations and plant separate, indigenous churches for every nation. Other verses that played a decisive role, were Gen 11:1-11, Deut 32:8 and Acts 17:26. These verses were interpreted as providing unchangeable orders of creation or laws of nature that justify the establishment of separate and autonomous ethnic churches.

The so-called “daughter churches” were therefore planted with the ideal that they would be guided by the “mother church” to develop into separate, independent and indigenous churches.

These presuppositions determined not only the DRC’s mission work, but also the shape of its diaconal ministries. These ministries were primarily aimed at socially and economically uplifting the Afrikaner people, often excluding people of other “races”.

Against this background the DRC ultimately came to the point where compassionate work was understood as work among its own “white” members, while the diaconal and social work among the “black” communities was seen as part of “mission”. This approach dominated DRC practice until the end of the 1970s.

2.4 The younger churches resist

At the beginning of the 1980s a strong response arose in the younger churches against this approach to mission and diaconal work. It started the process that would ultimately lead to the establishment of the UMSW.

The younger sister churches struggled to be liberated from the guardianship of the “mother church”. They wanted to become free of the DRC’s ideas on understanding the Bible and the church. As these churches developed theologically, their critical voices resounded ever more clearly.

As a result the mission policy of the DRC and the role of its missionaries in the sister churches were increasingly challenged. At that stage it was a worldwide tendency. Many missionaries had to withdraw from ministry areas and younger churches. The matter also came strongly to the fore in our church family. There was a strong insistence that the

mission policy of the DRC should be revised to get rid of the baggage of an ideological understanding of mission (witness) and diaconal service.

In the 1960s the younger churches already adopted a number of resolutions reflecting a true biblical ecclesiology. In the 1970s the critical voice grew stronger, leading to the formulation of a number of important documents in the early 1980s. In 1982 the DRMC (Dutch Reformed Mission Church), following the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), declared a “state of confession” on apartheid in South Africa. This led to the drafting of the Confession of Belhar (1982), and its endorsement as a fully-fledged confession of the DRMC in 1986.

These examples indicate how the younger sister churches came to resist the mission policy that had for many years maintained and justified separate, independent ethnic churches.

2.5 “What is mission?” (1986)

In April 1986 a watershed conference took place in Bellville. The theme was: “*What is mission?*” The synodical committee for witnessing of the DRMC and the Department of Missiology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) organised the meeting. Representatives from the missions and training institutions of the whole DRC family, inside and outside South Africa, were invited. The fifty participants agreed that it was no longer possible to practise mission or witness in separation.

2.5.1 *What is the situation?*

The conference critically reviewed the history of mission, evangelism and diaconal service of the participating churches, scrutinising the state of affairs in the DRC, DRCA and the DRMC. The prevailing points of departure and definitions of mission were examined, paying specific attention to the influence of the 1935 mission policy of the DRC. The meeting explored the attitudes and ministry practices that resulted from it, and how it had affected the whole DRC family. There was an open, honest and difficult debate. Hannes Adonis clearly showed how, in the context of South Africa, this mission policy was rebuilding the wall of division that Christ broke down. Dawid Snyman took the opposite stand with the view that *multi-formity* can be biblically defended and should *determine* the *borders* for the visible manifestation of the church.

Finally David Bosch emphasised that mission, as *Missio Dei*, proceeds from the triune God and that – as a matter of principle – it *crosses barriers*. On this there was consensus.

The conference agreed that an important part of mission has to do with our social existence. This comes close to the heart of what it means to be the church. Stanley Jones, an influential Christian witness in India for many years, led us to this insight. He said: “The non-Christian faiths carry on reform as they move away from their base, the Christian faith does so as it moves towards its base” (S Jones 1928, “*Christ at the round table*”).

2.5.2 The focus of mission

Looking at the *focus of mission*, the conference agreed that mission, evangelism and diaconal work belong together integrally. There was consensus that a broader view was needed, in which witnessing is to be practised in a more comprehensive and inclusive framework.

The examples of famous missionaries through the centuries were considered. Their involvement with social protests showed the way:

- William Carey’s protest against importing sugar from the West Indian plantations;
- William Wilberforce and the London Missionary Society’s protest against slavery in Britain;
- The protest against the caste system in India;
- Christian Blumhardt of the Basel Mission Society’s action against the injustices against black people;
- Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society choosing to stand between the oppressors and the oppressed;
- Oscar Romero of El Salvador becoming the archbishop for the poor and oppressed in his country.

All these examples were efforts to help promote peace and justice, fair dealing and reconciliation in communities. Their purpose was to help bring about God’s *shalom*. They wanted to change the total reality according to God’s will and thus participate in the coming of God’s Kingdom. It was not in any way a case of moving away from the centre of the Christian faith, but rather a definitive movement towards its centre, since this was actually how Jesus performed his ministry (see Luk 4:18-19).

The representatives at the 1986 conference were challenged to follow *in Jesus' footsteps* and to continue *his mission*: to have compassion on the "Samaritans" and heathen, receive sinners and outcasts. In mission the task of the church is to continue Jesus' work of proclamation, healing, education, zeal for justice and peace, breaking down the dividing walls of prejudice and discrimination (Joh 20:21). In new times we will perhaps do it in new ways, but essentially it remains the same task.

"Mission (witness) therefore is much more than saving souls, much more than translating the Bible into new languages, much more than planting young churches. Mission (witness) – of course – is all of these things, but it also is much more than all these things" (Bosch)

In a given context mission can be evangelism, or healing, or development, or prophetic witness, or social action, or projects for justice and peace, or diaconal assistance, or any combination of these. It was agreed that none of these dimensions of mission is more or less central than the others; all of them are indispensable dimensions of the *Missio Dei*.

Mission (witness) therefore is *at the same time* about planting and renewing the church, building a community on the principles of the gospel, *and* the crossing of frontiers (geographical, religious, cultural, ideological; also frontiers of social class, race, language, ethnic group, church denomination). It is not about one or the other. No dimension has inherent precedence over the others.

For that purpose God's mission firstly needs people. Clay vessels according to 2 Cor 4:7. Branches bearing fruit, according to Joh 15. Ambassadors according to 2 Cor 5:20. Secondly it also needs means and resources. Faith is the basic "means" by which the church does mission, but the resources can take different forms: communication channels, media networks, finances, dedication, inventiveness. Thirdly insights and information are also important. We must learn from one another. We must understand the community in which we live. We must clearly comprehend the historical and ideological powers that influence us.

We should understand ourselves not primarily as church people, but as people of the Kingdom (Matt 6:33), clearly distinguishing these two.

Mission (witness) is "the Festival of the Epiphany (of Jesus' reign) that is celebrated on a worldwide scale" (Bosch). It is the celebration "... of the Servant who brings salvation, healing, liberation, restitution and justice

where lack of faith, exploitation, discrimination and violence wanted to take over.”

As a result of these deliberations, the 1986 conference *produced* a new *working definition for mission*.

- It recognised the triune God as the actual author of mission.
- Participants confessed their deep guilt for the lack of unity in their own ranks. They confessed that it was exactly this disunity which made the Lord’s mission in our context suspect. The reunification of the DRC family would therefore determine the credibility of their mission in future.
- Participants committed themselves to begin walking together on a new road. A road on which, in church and state, they would begin to break down the dividing walls between them.

In the earlier understanding of mission barriers were erected between people and groups. In the new setting crossing those barriers would become the new principle of mission!

2.5.3 Working definition for mission (1986)

The full working definition for mission runs:

A. We believe that:

1. Mission is according to the Bible God’s mission; as Father, Son and Holy Spirit God is the Subject of mission.
2. In mission God has the salvation (shalom) of the world in mind and He will accomplish it through the realisation of his Kingdom. Mission gives expression to God’s concern and plan of redemption for the world in all its dimensions.
3. For this purpose the Father sent his Son to the world to gather his church and send it into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. The very essence of the church as the body of Christ is to live a missional life in the world. The entire church and every believer in particular stand under God’s commission, in dependence on and in obedience to the Holy Spirit,
 - 4.1 to perform the ministry of intercession for the world;
 - 4.2 to bring the gospel of God’s salvation, through word and deed, to the entire human race;

- 4.3 in God's Name to cultivate and preserve the earth for all who live on it;
5. The salvation accomplished by Christ, is comprehensive, and achieves forgiveness of sins together with the liberation of the human race in all areas of life, including the whole creation. Mission takes place where the church, in obedience to Christ and following his footsteps, is compassionate about and involved in service to humans and the world in all forms of suffering.
6. God's salvation is ministered to the world through God's action of establishing his Kingdom even here and now. This Kingdom will however be completely realised at the second coming of Christ.
7. There is an unbreakable relation between the credibility of the one church as bearer of the gospel and the ministry of salvation in Christ (Joh 17:11).

B. This means that

with regard to the DRC family in Southern Africa, and in these times especially in South Africa, where the body of Christ is torn apart through hate, violence and mutual bias:

1. the unity of the church is the credibility test for the witness about the Kingdom of God;
2. the church has to embody the principles of the Kingdom of God in its own life and promote it in the society;
3. this unity implies that unification within the DRC family must be urgently pursued on the local as well as the broader level, and that it must be accomplished as an experience of the fellowship of believers on congregational level but also in the broader structures of the church, so that it will break through the above mentioned isolation;
4. this unity will indeed also be desired for the rest of the body of Christ through love.

C. We confess that

in the life of the DRC family in the past and even now there has been a sinful division that runs through the history and a lack of willingness to accept each other as Christ accepted us. In this way the unity of the church has come in jeopardy. This guilt has to be confessed in the deep realisation of the frightening possibility that the Name of God may be blasphemed by the heathen as a result of our conduct (Rom 2:24). Lord, have mercy on us!

D. We declare

1. our humble willingness, in obedience to Christ, and amidst the brokenness on all levels of church life, to pursue reconciliation (the way back to each other);

to carry each other's burdens where we have complaints against each other (Gal 6), and to forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us (Col 3:13).

2. also our willingness to work for the abolition of apartheid and the introduction of a just dispensation for South Africa.

E. Our prayer is

that the world will see the signs of the Kingdom of God in this way and will come to faith.

We make an urgent appeal to the DRC family to give serious attention to this issue.

(Approved at the DRC family from Africa conference on "What is Mission?" - April 1986, Bellville.)

2.6 Consequences of the mission definition

At times the interaction within the DRC family became very uneasy. The debate and reflection in the DRC was turned inward. The church's 1974 report, *Human relations in the light of Scripture (Ras, volk, nasie en volkereverhoudings in die lig van die Skrif)*, caused many ecumenical doors to slam shut during the 1970s. The result was isolation.

In the 1980s the DRC started moving in a new direction with the publication of *Church and Society*. Unfortunately it did not take the Confession of Belhar and the above mentioned working definition for mission into account. The real turning point only came at the beginning of the 1990s. when the DRC at last acknowledged her role in providing a theological basis for the ideology of apartheid. Thereby the DRC openly confessed its active participation in implementing and maintaining apartheid as sin.

In that time the DRC committed itself to a process of reunification with the DRC family. The old mission policy was changed to include the formulations of the 1986 workshop. The colonial mission era (as some have called it) was finally over! A period of withdrawal from the traditional mission fields confirmed this favourable turn.

2.7 Dramatic changes in the 1990s

On 27 April 1994 full democracy became a reality in the RSA. The first democratic election took place. Everyone in our beautiful country could participate.

Fourteen days before that watershed event, on 14 April 1994, the URCSA was formed. The joy of this event was subdued, however, when it became known that some congregations of the former DRCA had decided to formally continue as the DRCA. They ultimately received the support of the supreme court for this decision. Serious tensions developed between the URCSA and the continuing DRCA.

Efforts to reunify the DRC family meanwhile developed by fits and starts. Often it would advance by a step – and then fall back a step or two. For many people the Confession of Belhar became a stumbling block to reunification. The process caused deep wounds and serious divisions developed. Basically there is still no solution to the situation. Difficulties still have to be disentangled. But at least the churches currently tackle the challenges together.

The RCA had their own painful journey and formulated the Laudium Declaration in 1990 to explain its Evangelical Reformed identity within the context of a Hindu and Muslim community.

This clearly shows that it has also become a challenge to accommodate different spiritualities in one family. As sister churches together on the way to church reunification, there is a need to develop a shared spirituality. This must happen while we continue to deal with the painful and heartbreaking heritage of apartheid.

2.8 Focus on congregational activities

Toward the end of the 20th century yet another shift took place. For a very long period, the service and witness ministries of the DRC family had an institutionalised character. The work was mostly done by synods, headed by full time synodical officials, with congregations making proportional contributions to the funding of these projects. Now a significant shift took place in parts of the DRC family. The focus for service and witness ministries shifted to activities of local congregations.

Since 1994 the whole wide world reopened for congregations of the DRC. Many of their members left the country. Some congregations started paying specific attention to unreached groups. Political developments in the country was one catalyst of this process. A strong conviction of being called by Christ to serve and witness to the ends of the earth was another catalyst.

We realised anew that we lacked a fresh focus on the ends of the earth and the unreached peoples. Para-church organisations that mobilised the congregations for mission appeared like mushrooms during the 1990s. Acts 1:8 once again became a significant verse.

Must we see it as an escape from the SA context? Or was it a short interruption that forced us to reassess our priorities? Will there be a next phase in which we will afresh realise the importance of good coordination? The current emphasis on networks and partnerships certainly points in that direction.

Of course, these developments also coincided with the growth of the charismatic churches and a reduction in the numbers of members in all the mainstream churches, including our own church family. This also forced us to think together about new ways of fulfilling our task of service and witness in society today, close at hand and also far away.

2.9 A new era

In the process we sometimes still talked separately, but often also came together in the context of *service and witness in unity*. The interaction initially was intermittent and inadequate, but a shared vision gradually developed among us.

2.9.1 African context

In our church family it was emphasised at different points that we are indeed from Africa. Therefore we must also develop our focus on *service and witness in unity* from our African context.

Various meetings of our church family's synods and different ministries described the challenges of our context in declarations. These declarations were mainly on visible unity, true reconciliation between people and compassionate justice for those who suffer need. These challenges come in a context of growing poverty, pandemic diseases like HIV and Aids, ecological decline, discrimination and ethnic violence.

The confession resounded: We have a Lord – we are here – we are his church here in Africa. We have been called to contribute to the healing of the land, in humility, together with one another – “mission in unity and unity in mission” (Bosch 1991).

This also forms the foundation for the new focus on *service and witness in partnership* that especially started developing in the new century.

2.9.2 Two stories come together

Finally one can say that two developments preceded the establishment of the current United Ministry for Service and Witness. Two stories gradually came together and led to the UMSW becoming a core ministry of the whole DRC family.

2.9.2.1 United structure for witness

It took much labour and time to build up a united structure for our witnessing task. The process of negotiation and consultation started at a conference held on 21 March 1994 on the “*missional congregation*”. The then General Synod Commission for Mission and Evangelism (GSCME) of the General Synod of the DRC organised the conference. The participants came from the DRC family inside South Africa (ISWEN Kommunikasie 1994, Jrg 16, no1).

This led to a decision to establish a united structure for witness on national level. A representative steering committee was appointed to the do preparatory work. The General Commission for Witness (GCFW) of the DRC family came into being in 2001 as a result of this process. The URCSA, DRC and RCA were founding members and the DRCA joined as an observer.

The formation of the GCFW was a breakthrough from the Lord! On other forums the church leaders were rather hesitant in the discussions about unity. Failed efforts limited their options. But with the establishment of the GCFW the three churches united their witness ministries! Now there was only one witnessing agenda for the participating churches. Thus the vision of the 1986 conference on “*What is Mission?*” at last started getting hands and feet.

In 2004 the 1986 conference was formally followed up within the structures of the GCFW with a similar conference at the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch University. It was just before Pentecost when about 40 representatives from the DRC family from the length and breadth of Africa again met to discuss our joint calling to witness.

Different speakers emphasised important perspectives. Rian Venter again underlined that mission is the work of the triune God. Russel Botman focused on the fact that in Christ there is a message of hope for and from Africa. We agreed that we have a calling to public witness about Christ's dominion. Martin Pauw emphasised that we have indeed been called to do this together and that we must live out this calling in fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another for the sake of our credibility. Our study of John 17 and Eph 4 confirmed and strengthened this conviction.

Ultimately we reformulated 1986's working definition for mission. The points of departure were the same as before, but the current African context had to be incorporated. The 2004 working definition for mission therefore built on the one of 1986 and formulated the new motto: "*Called to witness in and from Africa today*".

2.9.2.2 United ministry of compassion

A similar unifying process developed in the *ministry of compassion* (diaconal ministries) of the church family. Already in 1991 the ministries of compassion and mission in the DRC Synod agreed that diaconate must be done over church borders. Diaconate is indeed about social matters in the wider community like poverty, justice and social evils, to be distinguished from mutual assistance within denominations.

In 1992 an important discussion on "Diaconate in context" took place. All members of the DRC family in South Africa were present (RCA, DRMC, DRCA en DRC). Their vision was to establish one peace diaconate for the whole DRC family. A follow-up conference in the same year focused at synod level on vision, programming and structuring.

Their ultimate declaration of intention starts with a reference to one denomination for the DRC family (inside South Africa). A draft regulation for founding a *General Commission for Compassionate Ministry and Justice* already served at the founding synod of the URC in 1994 and was approved. The General Synod of the DRC also accepted it in the same year. Due to certain operational factors and the tension between the churches in the 1990s this commission never got under way.

Discussions did actually continue on the ministry level. The ministry management committees of both the URCSA and DRC decided in 1997 to involve the RCA in future discussions and to continue "extending the joint

diaconate of the family of DR Churches”. Meanwhile the regulations remained dormant with the hope that it would later be implemented.

In 2004 the churches made a “Declaration of Intent” to continue with the joint activities. But they had to admit that the fact of the existence of separate churches hampered the reunification of the ministries. The divergent church laws made it difficult.

The discussion on *missional diaconate* also got under way in the church family in the 1990s. In the DRCA context they have been managing mission, compassion and evangelism together in their Commission for the Work of the Church since long ago. The URCSA started since 1996 with a process of theological reassessment of the synod’s ministries, with the purpose to reposition and integrate. This church identifies three core ministries:

- *Service of worship and Proclamation,*
- *Congregational Ministries and*
- *Service and Witness.*

Since 2005 the URC handles and focuses her different ministries in this way in an Integrated Ministry Model.

At the 1998 General Synod of the DRC the General Synod Mission Committee (GSMC) of that time tabled the matter of the missional diaconate. The Synod approved a number of guidelines in this regard. The Synod also decided to focus on promoting reconciliation, combating poverty and opposing moral decline during the recess. This resulted in the “Year of Hope” (2001).

The gain from the process was that the issue of the missional diaconate moved to the centre of the calling of the church (GS Agenda 2002:239). Missional diaconate is about witnessing by deeds (witnessing by service) aimed at the world. This service is delivered in the local context of the congregation. However, it also supports the ministries of other congregations in their own contexts.

The GSMC also proposed the term service-witness (in Afrikaans: *diensgetuënis*). But at that stage they were already part of the united GCFW. Gradually different other synodical role players became involved.

The realisation grew that with fewer resources we must encourage actions of spontaneous compassion and loving fellowship. This requires

that everyone should have a simpler, ecologically sustainable lifestyle and show compassion to the underprivileged in their need (1 Joh 3:18). Moreover, the *service and witness projects* must be undertaken by the whole DRC family. This is about service and witness *in unity* (as we would later formulate it in the UMSW policy document). Therefore partnerships are of vital importance and it is essential to co-ordinate projects. At the same time sustainable resources must be identified.

2.10 United ministry for Service and Witness

Due to these two lines of development the committees for *Mission* and the *Ministry of Compassion (or diaconal service)* of the DRC started asking themselves whether separate commissions for mission and diaconate are still justifiable. Their 2004 General Synod already received a combined report from these different committees under the title *Service-Witness*. The way the General Ministry for Service-Witness (*ADD in Afrikaans*) would function in future was described in this report.

Thus everyone in that context realised that *service and witness* belong together and that the two should not be divided in principle or in practice. By this time the DRCA was already dealing with *service and witness* together. The RCA was part of the reflection in the GCFW. The URCSA also combined *service and witness* in the Integrated Ministry Model.

The time was therefore ripe to also make it practical in the ministry structures of the churches. On 6 February 2006 a steering group came together in Bellville to draw up the theological foundation. On 22 June 2006 at Esselen Park a more representative meeting started setting up guidelines for the ministry practice. A smaller group was appointed to complete the preparatory work.

In October 2006, at Good Shepherd near Pretoria, representatives of the four churches in the DRC family in the RSA and Namibia approved the policy document ("*Our calling to service and witness in unity*") and the regulations for the UMSW. The united ministry was officially constituted there.

From this time the service and witness ministries of the four churches began working with one agenda to unite activities where it was at all possible.

Of course, these efforts run parallel with the ongoing dedication to the full reunification of the four churches. It is significant that these other developments actually happened in 2006 when leaders of the sister churches reached a breakthrough with one another at Esselen Park and made a covenant to reunite the DRC family. The moderators of the joint leadership there also extended their blessings to the process of the UMSW.

2.11 Our calling to serve and witness in unity

The policy document of the UMSW (discussed in chapters 1 and 3 of this book) deliberately defined the mission of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) as involvement in the mission of the triune God (*missio Trinitatis Dei*). Love, care and unity flow from the being of the triune God. *Service and witness in unity* is therefore understood as a holistic calling of being in the world. This obviously also includes active loving service in and a united witness about Christ as the Saviour and King. In order to fulfil this calling, we must first carefully distinguish the challenges in the South African context.

After the UMSW constituted in 2006, the churches also formulated and approved a “*Memorandum of Agreement*” (MOA) in 2008. Article 4 of the MOA says:

“The work of UMSW is guided and informed by: the Three formulae of Unity, the Confession of Belhar (1986), the Laudium Declaration (1990), the Joint Declaration of Intent (AKDB/ASKDD - 2003), the DRC declarations about calling (2002, 2004), the Declaration on mission and our calling to witness in and from Africa (2004) as included in the 2006 vision document of the UMSW.”

Since constituting the UMSW, we focus, among other things, on a number of projects with ecumenical partners. We work with churches from the USA, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands in different diaconal projects. We also pay attention to the reception of the ACCRA declaration on globalisation and economic-ecological justice (2004). We participate in inter-cultural exchange programs for youth. Violence in communities and possibilities for reconciliation are on our agenda. The UMSW also took the initiative in establishing a joint HIV and Aids forum. We also work together in providing literature and are involved on other levels of Public Witness.

2.12 Relationship between UMSW and SAPMC

Together with other ministries and organisations (such as the South African Partnership for Missional Congregations – SAPMC), the UMSW began reflecting on our identity and calling, our motivation and practice as sent churches (or missional congregations). Different scholars have influenced these developments, but Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch remain the two most influential theologians in this regard.

The SAPMC specifically focuses on local congregations, on their “missional identity” of having been sent, and help them with a good program to transform their identity to a self-understanding and practice of being missional. They especially focus on the congregation’s life as people who have been sent by God into the local context. Lifestyle gets the major emphasis, rather than specific missional or diaconal programs of action. The missional movement wants to find answers for a new generation in a post-modern, secularised context. Consequently they are strongly committed to the emerging church movement in North America.

The UMSW has a broader focus, which includes the following: the work of the broader church (on institutional level); the calling and work of congregations, ministries in partnership; public witness, projects and programs; evangelism and diaconal ministries – within the local context, but also further away. The UMSW’s focus also is clearly on Africa, which is neither post-modern nor post-Christianity.

The great gain of the interaction between the UMSW and SAPMC is that it deepened our insights into the missional identity of the church. Both strongly focus on the Triune God and on the church’s essential involvement in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). If we look at it in this way, mission is not only one of the functions of the church, but much more. The church in her different manifestations is the agent of the *missio Dei*. Therefore we are also deliberately and essentially missional (missionary) in every aspect of our self-understanding and ministries.

The UMSW is of the opinion that the terms missional and missionary essentially have the same focus.

2.13 Together as partners in and from Africa

In September 2009 there was a follow-up to the 2004 conference. This time the focus was especially on forming partnerships.

At the meeting there were representatives from our church family in Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho, Namibia, Nigeria, Mozambique and Kenya. Other churches from Angola and the Congo were also represented. Together we reflected on our calling to service and witness in and from Africa in *partnership* with one another. Our focus was on the characteristics that we as leaders here in Africa should demonstrate in service and witness. We also looked at how this *service and witness in unity* can extend from Africa to the rest of the world.

We came to the conclusion that service and witness must be understood more and more in terms of relationships (*koinonia*), unity, communality and respect, co-operation and fellowship, inter-dependence and joint responsibility.

The loss of momentum with reunification on the levels of leadership and the decision making processes of the church also hinders the growth of legitimate, credible mission in unity among us.

Mercifully the UMSW is already an established institution. All the churches in our church family in the RSA and Namibia have approved and accepted the UMSW. It therefore has the sanction of all these churches.

The structure of the ministries are established and clear-cut. The UMSW itself has a good focus and gives focus to others. It establishes policy in different areas and supports a variety of projects.

Thus we promote the issue of *service and witness in unity* further and further. In the process we sometimes press against barriers, frequently witness and move against the stream, against the seeming stagnation of visible church unity and reconciliation. We continue regardless, because we confess courageously that we have been *called together to service and witness in and from Africa*, in partnership with all our brothers and sisters in the DRC family and further afield.

Chapter 3

Biblical and theological foundation of the UMSW policy document

3.1 Background of the policy document

The introductory part of the policy document draws the attention to some aspects that explain the DRC family's understanding of their calling to service and witness. Firstly, it calls the co-operating churches by name and emphasises specific beacons on the journey of our joint reflections on a united calling. Secondly the policy document interprets these beacons as historical anchoring points on the road. It specifically refers to articles and policies in church ordinances of the co-operating churches, working definitions, theological declarations and creeds. Thirdly the document emphasises the covenant of August 2006 to reunify our church family. The covenant represents a calling to unity.

Another important beacon on the journey, namely the MOA of September 2008, supplements the formulations in the policy document. The UMSW compiled this MOA and then the different General Synods of the co-operating churches accepted it. For the purpose of the current chapter as commentary on the biblical and theological foundations of the policy document, the formulations in article 4 of the MOA are important. It stresses the fact that certain documents accompany and influence the work of the UMSW. These documents are:

- the Three Forms of Unity (the Reformed Confessions),
- the Confession of Belhar (1986),
- the Laudium Declaration (1990),
- the Joint Declaration of Intent (AKDB/ASKDD - 2003),
- the DRC's declarations on its calling (2002, 2004),
- the Declaration on mission and our calling to witness in and from Africa (2004), as included in the 2006 vision document of the UMSW.

Besides the historical development of the UMSW that was traced in chapter 2, and the reference to the theological positioning of the policy

document in the previous two paragraphs, we can take note of another document that gives a perspective on the theological-historical framework of the UMSW and the policy document. At the CFW conference in May 2010 there was a presentation on “Perspectives in Creeds and Liturgies”.

This presentation identified the different frameworks for evaluating the UMSW’s policy document. It dealt with the factors in the confessional tradition of our group of churches that could have led to the model of Service and Witness in the DRC family.

The conclusion was that the current reflection and processes in the DRC family and UMSW are imbedded in at least four bigger connections:

1. God’s history of salvation in our world;
2. The ongoing process of forming creeds in the reformed tradition;
3. The search for unity within the ecumenical church in the light of the challenges of human need in the world;
4. The unification of the church’s ministries that are aimed on the world, i.e. Service and Witness.

According to many theologians we are now in the third phase of forming creeds:

1. Convocations, creeds and symbols in the early church;
2. Confessions during the Reformation;
3. Begins with the Barmen Declaration.

In the light of all these frames of reference we will now pay attention to commentary on the policy document of the UMSW.

3.2 Mission of the Triune God

The first part of the policy document deals with the mission of the Triune God and contains three core ideas that underlie the theological and biblical basis for the formulations in the document.

3.2.1 Our calling comes from the heart of God

The policy document starts with a significant statement, namely: *Our calling to service and witness in unity flows from the being of God.*

This statement forms the basis for the whole document. It says: We have this calling to service and witness *because God is who God is.* If we

want to understand this calling, we must therefore first understand who God really is. If we can understand something of God's being, how God lives and thinks and works, this calling to service and witness will be self-evident. It flows from God's being. It is not something which we must do simply because God commanded us to do it. It is not based on a few Bible verses. It does not even depend on the Great Commission. It comes to us from God's heart. It is what God is doing.

Therefore the policy document speaks of "God's mission" (the *missio Dei*). This insight, which in our time is accepted all over the world as the leading concept for missional vision, simply emphasises that mission is God's own work. This is in fact what God is doing. God therefore calls us to become involved in what God Himself is doing in the world. God does not leave it to us, but involves us in it. This, the policy document says, is what we are doing when we practise *service and witness in unity*. We join hands with God. We join what God is doing. It flows forth from God's being!

Therefore the big question is: How do we understand the being of God?

3.2.2 God's being

According to the policy document the *deepest being of God is characterised by love, compassion and a desire for communion*.

We may perhaps look for these characteristics in the New Testament. But the Scripture passages recorded in part 1 of the policy document describe God's being in the first place with reference to his dealings with Israel. These dealings reveal who God is, show us God's divine characteristics.

It is especially the exodus from Egypt that made an indelible impression on the Israelites. Right through their history they always look back to this story when they want to understand who God is. They specifically get to know God there as the One who sees the affliction of his people and who hears their pleadings (Ex 3:7-8). With love and compassion God reaches out to helpless and vulnerable people who call for help. God is revealed as the One who delivers from misery, slavery and oppression. God wants to be their God and to make them his people.

When God repeatedly makes a covenant with Israel, it expresses God's desire to live in communion with those that He created. God wants to be their God and they must be his people. God wants to take care of them and teach them to accept responsibility for one another. Even the journey through the desert describes God's continuous shaping of the covenant people. At Sinai a special meeting with God takes place where the law is given as guideline to this people chosen to be God's own. God calls Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The whole nation, not just the priests, is dedicated to serve God (Ex 19:5-6).

God's love and desire for communion is specially expressed in God's presence with his people. Even when they anger God by worshiping a golden calf, and God threatens to turn his back on them (Ex 32 and 33), Once again God chooses to remain true to their covenant with each other. Therefore God again appears to Moses and confirms that the promise of love and goodness will remain valid. Exactly in those circumstances God's being is revealed as full of compassion and pity, patient, loving and faithful. God forgives evil, wrongdoing and sins (Ex 34:5-9). God cannot do otherwise (see also 2 Tim 2:11-13). It is who God is. It is God's being. Walter Brueggemann calls it "a credo of adjectives".

3.2.3 Invited into a new world

The next core idea of the policy document is *that God invites people to enter a new world in which everything has been made new and whole in communion with the Triune God.*

One of the Scripture references is Ps 146. It is the touching confession of Old Testament believers about the God whom they want to praise and worship with their whole being, as long as they live (vss 1-2). Therefore the poet summons everyone to trust in this God and not in people (vss 3-4). People cannot save. Even the mighty ones pass away. All their plans come to nothing. Those who trust in the Lord – they are happy (vs 5). Why? Because God makes a huge difference to the world in which we live.

The picture painted in Ps 146:6-10 is indeed one of a new world. It is a world in which the oppressed are treated fairly, the hungry are fed, the prisoners are set free, the blind can see again, the strangers are

protected, the widows and orphans get support. There is help and salvation for everyone who suffers.

How does this happen? This psalm says it is what God does. It happens because the Lord reigns – for ever (vs 10). It is the result of God's dominion. God is King. God's Kingdom comes. Justice and righteousness prevail. God makes people and communities whole and new.

This same picture again emerges when Jesus reads from Is 61 in the synagogue and claims that this prophecy is being fulfilled, there and then, in his own ministry (Luk 4:16-21). Thus He actually says He Himself is the anointed One, the Messiah, the One on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests. So doing He also agrees that Is 61 defines his own calling:

- To proclaim good news to the poor;
- To bind up the brokenhearted;
- To proclaim freedom for the captives;
- To announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.

It is against this background that the Confession of Belhar says that in a world of injustice and enmity, God is in a special way the God of the needy, the poor and the oppressed, and that He calls his church to follow Him in these things. It was indeed the heart of Jesus' ministry. It becomes the program that He follows in his ministry. This is how the Kingdom of God comes, how the new world becomes visible.

But the policy document describes this new world specifically as a "Trinitarian space" and stresses that the Triune God, who makes everything new and whole within this space, is a "God of communion". Jesus' prayer in John 17 gives us a unique perspective on this. He specifically prays for the unity of those who belong to Him (vss 11, 20-23). They took God's word to heart (vs 6) and therefore they knew the only, true God, and Jesus Christ who was sent by God (vs 3). To know God like this, says John, is eternal life. It is clear: this knowledge of God is communion with God. It is an intimate relationship with God. Therefore it also determines their relationship to one another. Communion with God guarantees communion with one another. Whoever is one with God, must necessarily also be one with others who belong to God. And this unity is

imprinted by the unity in Godself, according to John 17. The unity between Father, Son and Spirit. This is what Jesus prays for in vs 20-21: *My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

This unity is therefore a distinguishing characteristic of God's new world. It demonstrates something of the being of the Triune God. It shows that God's deepest being is indeed characterised by love, compassion and a desire for communion. And that it is also God's purpose with his children.

In his prayer Jesus emphasises that the credibility of our witness depends on this unity (vs 21). Therefore it is part of our calling in the DRC family. A calling which is not negotiable.

3.2.4 God's salvation is comprehensive

From the above it is clear that God is not only interested in our souls. The salvation which God brings is total and comprehensive. The policy document emphasises that *our service and witness* is part of this comprehensive vision. It says: Service and witness express God's love and compassion and bring salvation in all its dimensions (*shalom*) to all people and the whole of creation.

One of the clearest pictures of the *shalom* we are discussing here is found in Rev 21:1-5. John sees a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. God, who is sitting on the throne, declares that He *makes everything new* (vs 5). A new heaven *and a new earth* are coming. God makes his home among the people (vs 3). God Himself will wipe the tears from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will also not be any mourning, crying and pain (vs 4). There is total harmony between God and the people. He is their God and they are his people (vs 3). It is the comprehensive salvation that God is achieving for the whole creation.

In Rom 8:18-25 Paul paints a picture of the desire of the whole creation for this future. He says creation is *subjected to frustration* (vs 20). This is not how it should be. It is broken, in bondage to decay (vs 21). And it is groaning for salvation. With eager longing it waits for the day on which God will make everything totally whole (vs 19). And the hope exists,

because we as God's children, heirs with Christ (vs 17), have already received the Spirit as the firstfruits of that future (vs 23).

Our calling is, by the power of God, to start erecting signs, here and now, of that *shalom* by rendering *service and witness in unity*. It is the task that Jesus gives to his church (his followers) in Matt 28:18-20, Joh 20:21-22 and Acts 1:8. The church is sent out – just as the Father sent Jesus (Joh 20:21). With the authority that was given to Jesus (Matt 28:18) and the promise of his permanent presence (vs 20). We receive the Holy Spirit and so also the power to be witnesses of what God is doing (Joh 20:22; Acts 1:8).

3.3 Christ's mission

The Father sent the Son into the world. What was said about the nature of the Trinity in part 1, now becomes visible in part 2, it starts moving, it becomes history, as the Father sends the Son to this world. In part 2 of the policy document there are three basic ideas underlying the theological and biblical formulations in the document:

3.3.1 Christ gathers and sends the church

According to the policy document the Father sends Christ to gather the church and send it out to the world.

The biblical basis for this statement is taken mainly from the writings of John. The community to whom John writes generally held on to *both sides* of the wonder of Jesus' existence: his *Divinity* (Joh 1:1; 10:30; 1 Joh 2:22-23), and his *incarnation* (Joh 1:14; 1 Joh 4:2). Thus they resist the tremendous powers of unbelief and heresy. They confess: *The Word (who was God) became flesh* (Joh 1:14), and the light that gives life came into the dark world (Joh 1:4-10).

3.3.1.1 The Father sends the Son

God the Father **sends** the Son into this world. The Son of God becomes the Son of David, Jesus of Nazareth, with an address, a birth date and a date of death. His Name appears in the annals of the rulers of that time, often with a lack of understanding of what is really happening. Pilate engraves it on wood: "*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*" (Joh 19:19-22). He who was from all time and will be for ever (Joh 1:1; 1:30;

Rev 22:13), becomes the One who IS, Immanuel, God with us. He comes into our history, into our spaces and times full of grief and suffering, division and conflict.

What He comes to do, is to gather, to bring back, to take away division and conflict, to reconcile and restore, to heal and fill up, to bring full, complete joy. In a word, He comes (as the policy document says) ...

- a. to gather God's church ...
- b. from all the nations ...
- c. and to send us into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

3.3.1.2 The Son gathers a church

This means He brings people back, both to God and to one another. The background is the reality of division among human beings and God. The relationship was broken. Division came, as a result of human mistrust and unfaithfulness (Joh 2:24-25). This division swept over everything to come between people and between nations.

God sends his Son to these frightened, broken people to gather a church, an *ekklesia* (those who have been called out). It is a new people, but at the same time the continuation of God's people, the *qahal Jahweh* (the assembly) of the Old Testament.

Not all scholars accept that Jesus came to gather a church. Some of them say Jesus thought the breakthrough of the Kingdom of God was imminent. He therefore only had to prepare his disciples for it. But when his return was delayed, his followers proceeded to establish the church.

Against this point of view the Gospels clearly proclaim the Good News that Jesus indeed came to gather the church of God! Therefore He chooses *twelve* disciples (a symbolic act which identifies them as the new people of God). In his ministry He coaches them for the task they will have to continue when He will not be with them any more.

If all his words and parables about the Kingdom are read together, it is clear that He really thought the Kingdom was imminent. On the other hand it is already present (Matt 13:24-35) ... and at the same time something that can stay away for such a long time that the believers can fall asleep (Matt 25:5). All the work He is commanding them to do makes it clear that they will have to continue his work when He leaves them.

3.3.1.3 *The assembly of people who received mercy*

Perhaps many people are disappointed with the church. Therefore we must understand what Jesus meant by “church”. According to John’s Gospel the church that Jesus came to establish, was open to all, especially to the people who were rejected by others, the disabled (Joh 5:1-9) and sinners (Joh 8:1-11), those who were not welcome (Joh 4:40-42) and were pushed away (Joh 9:35). The admission was after all not by human achievements or status, but by grace and mercy, given to anybody who would accept it by faith (Joh 3:16; 20:31).

The church is an assembly of those who received grace and mercy. For the early church the point of departure in spreading the gospel was the fact that they were not strong, had no authority, and could not pose a threat to anyone. Yet, Jesus’ followers who received his mercy soon began to quarrel about who among their little group was the most important. They did not know what they should do with the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus (Joh 12:20-22). And it would take a long time (until far into Acts) to learn that this new people of God comes from all nations. This, while God’s plan was that they would actually be his instruments to gather in those nations. This is what Jesus means when He says they will do “even greater things” than He Himself (Joh 14:12).

3.3.1.4 *A space where everyone can belong*

Thus the mission of the Son to the world creates a trinitarian space that is open, does not exclude, but invites people to come closer (Rev 3:20; 22:17). It creates space for people who stand in opposition to one another, are estranged from one another, people from all languages and tribes and nations (Re 5:9), different genders (Joh 19:26-27). It creates a space with peace, friendship, love – between God and human beings (Joh 14:1,23, 27; 15:15), but also human being to human being. In this space there is no distress, no fear, no domination and no slavery, but mutual service.

This becomes a reality for his disciples when He invites them to the Passover meal and washes their feet there in the upper room (Joh 13). This washing of feet also pointed to something else, where all four Gospels want us to pause for a long time: the mighty meeting of world and Redeemer that happens at Golgotha, where love becomes a hard cross, a

broken body. There we see the world, ourselves, stripped of all pretence – the disciples who flee, the hypocritical Pharisees, Pilate, the cowardly judge, and the masses who are incited until God’s image in them becomes so dark that they become passive instruments in the murder of the Innocent One. But it is exactly there that the Gospels show us God’s love for this world.

It is important to John that before we hear the words at the cross: “It is finished”, we must also hear the whisper: “Woman, here is your son”, and for the disciple: “Here is your mother.” Until the end Jesus’ purpose is for people to feel at home, be cared for, be protected, made whole. Therefore the Gospel of John also cannot conclude with Joh 20:31. A second concluding chapter is necessary to bring Peter back into that space where there is love. He comes cold and wet from the sea and is welcomed back into the circle of the Lord and the other disciples around the fire.

3.3.1.5 *The church is sent*

But it does not end there. Jesus makes it clear that those who came home, must go out to fetch those who are still outside. Three times Peter receives the command to be a shepherd, protector and care-giver. And when the risen Jesus appears to the gathered disciples in Joh 20:21, He sends them as the Father sent Him.

When the believers later look back and witness to these events, that which they heard and saw and felt with their hands, they also do this in order to continue Jesus’ work, to let people feel at home. “We write to you so that you might share in our communion (*koinonia*).” And the surprising purpose is: “...*to make our joy complete* (1 Joh 1:4). The others who arrive (or return!) are not a threat to them any longer, but a reason for joy.

Our *calling to service and witness in unity* is a calling to really become part of these events, this history, this communion, these restored relationships, of God’s gathered church, of one another! It is based on our shared faith and Saviour. The role of the UMSW (and the whole church) is to participate in Christ’s mission through service and witness.

3.3.1.6 *The church crosses barriers*

This *koinonia*, this communion, cannot possibly remain stagnant, motionless, turned inwardly, because it is communion with the Father and

the Son (1 Joh 1:3) – whose concern is the world. Therefore the Gospel of John cannot put a full stop at Joh 11:51, but must add: “...also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”

We must not imagine that the world to which we are sent, is far away. The barriers that we must cross, are not only physical. The world is also around us. One can be at such a distance from the one closest to you that it is indeed only through the power of the Holy Spirit that you can cross that barrier, can reach out, bring back and reconcile. Often it would perhaps be easier to go and work somewhere far away. We must also not imagine the world as too big – it begins with yourself as object of God’s love, and with your home. While the Gospel of John sheds the light on the world, it also focuses on the individual, the “everyone”, his/her faith, his/her broken relationship which waits to be restored, his/her calling to take care of others.

3.3.2 Christ brings comprehensive salvation

The salvation accomplished by Christ is all-encompassing, says the policy document. It includes:

- a. the forgiveness of our sins;
- b. our liberation on all levels of life;
- c. as well as the liberation of creation.

The Gospel of John, on which this part focuses, also looks comprehensively at salvation. Therefore it is described as being born again (Joh 3:3), new life, life in abundance (Joh 10:10). Christ indeed accomplished it on the cross (Joh 19:30).

The implication is that we do not need anyone or anything else, only Christ, the One who was sent, the One who was empowered, the One who was crucified. Whoever has the Son, receives the Spirit, is born again, and has eternal life (1 Joh 5:12).

In Revelation we ultimately also find that the whole creation is being born again, restored. That which is old is overturned, folded up like a scroll (Re 6:12-14) and in its place come a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Salvation in Revelation also includes the righteousness of God that will prevail. Rome, with all its pomp and circumstance, and its caesars who would bring the so-called *pax romana*, is exposed as a

murderous beast, an oppressor that must be punished for all the blood of innocent people shed inside its walls (Rev 18:24).

In this all-encompassing salvation the forgiveness of sins stands in the centre. As the Gospels pay most attention to the cross of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Jesus is the heart of this salvation that we receive (cf. Eph 1:6). The way of salvation – to the new heaven and earth, to eternal life – runs through the cross. There we must break with our sins, rich and poor, ruler and slave (Rev 6:15-17) and be washed in the blood of the Lamb (1 Joh 1:5-10). Then Satan, our accuser, falls from heaven (Rev 12:10-11), everything becomes whole and we are set free – free to serve, as priest-kings (Rev 5:9).

3.3.3 Manifestations of salvation – Kingdom and return

According to the policy document, God's salvation of the world is manifested in the coming of God's Kingdom here and now, but in fullness when Christ returns.

The eternal life of which John often speaks, is nothing but a new life, a life of love (Joh 13:34) which after all is the constitution of God's Kingdom! And whoever loves God, obeys his commandments (1 Joh 3:24).

John's emphasis actually differs from the other Gospels, but therefore it is particularly important for us in our own context today. We could interpret the idea of a "kingdom" in terms of too much activism or legalism and thereby neglect the relational aspect, the dimension of love. We must understand that we are a kingdom of priests; rulers/teachers who serve and wash feet; shepherds who protect others and allow them to graze (Joh 21:15). We could (as regrettably has often happened in the history of the church) abuse the idea of a "kingdom" to justify crusades or palaces with high walls and moats around them, instead of a home with open doors to all sides. This Kingdom already comes here and now, but it will only be accomplished fully with Christ's return.

Some scholars found only a realised (spiritual) eschatology in the Gospel of John (this means the Kingdom of God has already been accomplished, but in a spiritual sense). However, this Gospel emphasises both the "already" of the Kingdom (Joh 11:25-26) and the "not yet" – the

homecoming that we are still waiting for (Joh 14:1-3), the resurrection that will come (Joh 5:28), just as in the rest of the New Testament.

What are the implications of this for our service and witness? The “already” brings rest, contentment, the ability to stand still, sit still, to appreciate the moment. We can appreciate and enjoy the people around us, because we are not only on the way to the Kingdom, but we already experience the coming of the Kingdom in serving and witnessing together.

On the other hand it brings unrest, haste, longing, about those who must still be made whole and new, those who are still outside, the nations that must come in so that they too can praise God. The Spirit creates both in us: a) joy at what already exists, even if it is a smile of faith through tears, or even if there are only tears about the brokenness of the world; b) discontent with what still does not exist. So the “already” and the “not yet” of the Kingdom give both depth and direction, quality and continuation, to our service and witness. Eventually everything will be made new and all nations will praise God.

Later, in the time of Domitian, at the end of the first Christian century, 55 years after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, it would have appeared as if *everything* was lost, with persecution from outside (Rev 2:10,13) and heresy from inside (Rev 2:14-15). The Christians were tempted to doubt whether Jesus really was the *Kurios* (King) and *Soter* (Saviour), because all the nations went after the Caesar and nobody could stand their ground against him (Rev 13:3-4). At that time the message came to John on the island of Patmos: *I am making everything new*, says God (Rev 21:5). Not: “I destroy everything”, but “I am making everything new”. True, the sea is destroyed, thrown into the pool of fire, but as symbolic origin of everything that is evil. True, the dragon that deceives and persecutes is destroyed. True, those who destroy God’s creation are destroyed themselves (Rev 11:18). But that destruction of evil is how God will finally make everything new.

God’s judgements wash over creation three times, but it happens so that the nations may be converted (Rev 9:20). Afterwards, when it appears as if the nations have already been discarded and digested by the fire (Rev 19:18-21; 20:7-0), they arrive at the gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24), to find healing from the leaves of the tree of life (Rev 22:2). And with them are their kings. Those kings now bring their

treasures to glorify God (Rev 21:24). The promise to Abraham (Gen 22:18) is fulfilled! The nations are blessed and healed; they come home. It is the blood of the Lamb (Rev 5:9; 12:11) and the witness of the believers (Rev 10-11; 12:11) that brings the breakthrough, that allows God's plan to be fulfilled. It is my witness and yours that can achieve this.

3.4 Sent in the power of the Holy Spirit

The third part of the policy document has the character of a missional ecclesiology. It deals with the church's missionary task and all that it entails. In this part the focus is specifically on the role of the Holy Spirit. In the first two parts the mission of the Triune God and of the Son is under discussion. Now the focus shifts to the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit works through the church. Therefore this part also deals with the missions of the church (*missiones ecclesiae*).

The policy document says that it is an essential characteristic of the church to be involved in God's mission. It means that the whole existence of the church is tied to mission. If the church is not involved in God's mission, it is not a true church. As Emil Brunner said: "As a fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission". This is what the church's existence is about: To be involved by God in God's own mission to make the whole world new.

3.4.1 The identity and purpose of the church

1 Pet 2:9 confirms this point of view when it says about the church: *you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

The verse emphasises the *identity of the church* and *the purpose of its existence*. In the context of 1 Pet 2 the identity and calling of the church are illustrated with different images.

3.4.1.1 The church is a *spiritual house* (a temple) with Jesus as corner stone, into which every Christian is built as a living stone. The church (the people, not the building) is God's dwelling place on earth. Every believer is indeed a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). But Peter also emphasises the unity of the congregation with this image. Every Christian is a living stone, but

these stones are put together, cemented to each other, so that together they form a spiritual house in which God lives (see also Eph 2:20-22). This is God's address in the world – the congregation. So in the first place we are talking about the local congregation. Therefore the policy document also mentions the local congregation as the primary instrument of God's mission in the world. However, this also remains the true character, the identity of the church in all its manifestations. The congregation lives before God, in his presence (*coram Deo*).

- 3.4.1.2 Peter immediately moves to another image: The members also are a *holy priesthood* that serve in this temple. Through Jesus Christ they bring spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God. They are holy, because God dedicated, separated and equipped them for this service.
- 3.4.1.3 Verse 9 links up with this thought. The church is again described as a priesthood, but this time as a *royal priesthood*. This relates to Ex 19:5-6. There the Lord tells Israel, that if they keep his covenant, they will be his own, from all the nations ... *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.
- 3.4.1.4 This is not only about the role that Aaron and his sons (the priests) fulfilled. It is about what the whole nation of Israel represents in its life among the nations. Through keeping the covenant they become the channel of God's presence and a blessing among the nations. They therefore play a mediating role, the role of priests. The whole nation are called priests, dedicated to God. In Reformed terms we could call this "the priesthood of all believers". And in our understanding of priesthood there is always the undertone of prayer (worship and intercession), as well as the service of compassion.
- 3.4.1.5 But Peter does not only say that they are a kingdom of priests. The church, according to him, is a *royal* priesthood. This means, they are priests with the status of kings. They are associated with the King. They also share in the King's authority. But they practise this authority as priests – with empathy and compassion. This is the kind of king who defends justice and righteousness in the community, who takes care of the poor and the marginalised.

- 3.4.1.6 This identity further leads to a *prophetic life purpose*. God makes them his own – so that they will *proclaim* his acts of salvation. This is a prophetic function. They must witness about the great change in their lives. God called them from darkness to his own wonderful light. These are the praises of God which they must declare. They heard God's voice and it totally changed their lives.
- 3.4.1.7 In the context this witness about God's wonderful works clearly is the *purpose of the existence of the church*. But, as we have shown, the context also shows us that this witness has different dimensions. Our policy document summarises it in terms of what we traditionally describe as the three offices of Christ: *king, priest and prophet*. These are indeed the dimensions that we see in 1 Pet 2.

3.4.2 The congregation's life and ministry

According to the policy document the church expresses this witness in different ways. We can see it as different expressions of the ministry of the church. It spells out how we as a congregation of the Lord must live in the world to fulfil our missional calling as *priests, kings and prophets*. Because in its essence the church is missional, each different expression of the congregation's life has a missional significance.

The picture that Acts 2:37-47 draws of the first Christian congregation, undeniably confirms and illustrates this view. We will briefly look at the implications of this picture.

3.4.2.1 Living in the presence of God (*coram Deo*)

The congregation lives in the presence of God (*coram Deo*). This is the actual meaning of being filled with the Holy Spirit, which forms the context of this passage (Acts 2:1-4). When God pours out his Spirit on the congregation, it is with the purpose of being present with them, every moment, to live in them and work through them. Thus, and in no other way, God realises his own mission through the congregation. We receive power when the Holy Spirit comes over us and become his witnesses (Acts 1:8). The vibrant congregational life that Luke describes in Acts 2:37-47, is the direct result of their being filled with the Holy Spirit. People

are attracted from darkness to the light of God's mighty presence (Is 60:1-3).

Acts 2:42 offers us a short outline of this life in the presence of God:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

From verse 41 we gather that the "they" mentioned here, are the three thousand people who recently repented and were baptised. This is a new congregation. An immense assembly. But this whole congregation is enthusiastically involved in four activities that are essential:

- They focus wholeheartedly on the teaching of the apostles;
- They experience unprecedented fellowship – communion with one another – and extend it with practical acts of compassion and mutual care;
- They celebrate their communion with Christ and with one another by eating together (the breaking of bread);
- They persevere in prayer.

3.4.2.2 Worship and intercession (*leitourgia*)

Although prayer is mentioned last, it was clearly a prominent part of the lifestyle of the first congregation. Where people are filled with the Spirit and live in God's presence, prayer is always central. Our policy document views this as a ministry in which we worship God and intercede for the world. This is the worship service of the congregation (*leitourgia*). And it clearly has missional dimensions. Where the congregation worships God in Spirit and truth, it becomes in itself a witness to the world about the reality of God's love, mercy and power. Therefore Paul explains that the effect of the worship service on outsiders and non-believers must be that they will ultimately fall on their knees, worship God and openly confess: "*God is really among you!*" (1 Cor 14:25)

In the early church intercession was an important aspect of ministry. When the congregation was faced with new challenges, they again and again turned to the Lord – for protection in times of persecution, for wisdom to make the right decisions, for courage to proclaim the gospel, for signs and wonders to confirm the message (Acts 4:23-31). This is the source of power which enables them to be witnesses in the world. At the

same time it is a sign of Christians' dependence on God and their compassion for the world. This is the *priestly ministry of reconciliation* in action.

3.4.2.3 Fellowship (*koinonia*)

A strong sense of communion is another characteristic of the first congregation. They form a new community – *the communion of the saints*. The word *koinonia* describes their relationship in Acts 2:42. This is what they steadfastly continue doing. They live in the closest relationship with one another. They share the bitter and sweet, pain and joy. They take care of one another, and help one another. They become free from selfishness and greed. They do not hesitate to share their possessions with one another. They are sensitive to the needs and wants of others, and make sure that nobody feels neglected or is left alone in their suffering. They often share their meals – with joy and in all simplicity. There is a deep unity among them (Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-35).

The congregation celebrates this communion with the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42,46). This is done from house to house (vs 46). It means they did not only meet at the temple, but also in the homes of believers, probably in smaller groups. Commentators usually believe these meals included Holy Communion, but that there was more to it. These were love-meals – the so-called *agape* meal. A celebration of fellowship with the Lord – and with one another. It is a sign of their unity. It demonstrates their bond with each other and their spirit of sharing. It binds them together.

In modern terms we might describe this congregation as an *alternative community*. Because it was so totally different from the norm, they drew attention to themselves. There was a paradigm shift in their values. The new values that they lived out made a big impact on their whole community. It became an inseparable part of their witness. It was the means that God used to save people, to add new believers to the congregation every day (Acts 2:47).

3.4.2.4 Serving people in need (*diakonia*)

When the mutual relationships in a congregation are ruled by true Christian love, the willingness to serve flows from it organically. And

ultimately this readiness to serve cannot be restricted to the boundaries of the congregation. The believers serve one another in love, and at the same time they become sensitive to the needs of people outside their fellowship. God's love living in their hearts makes it impossible for them to ignore those needs. It compels them to reach out over all boundaries towards any form of need. This was characteristic of Jesus' own ministry. The church cannot do anything but follow Him in this.

This was also what happened in the first congregation. The seed of fellowship and care planted in the congregation right at the beginning, germinated and grew across boundaries. In Acts 6 we see how a cultural boundary is crossed. The Greek-speaking widows could not be neglected in the daily care of the poor. They had to receive the same care as the Hebrew-speaking widows. That led to the appointment of the seven "deacons". The congregation ensures that its compassionate service does not become exclusive. It must include everyone.

The story about Tabitha (or Dorcas) in Acts 9:36-42 confirms that this ministry spread wider and wider in the community. All the widows in Joppa came to Peter, sobbing, and showed him the clothes that Dorcas had made for them. Her acts of compassion clearly touched the whole community.

The end of Dorcas' story again shows how indispensable all the ministries are in a congregation's efforts to embody an effective witness. Her servanthood towards people in need was the attraction that brought many people outside God's covenant to meet the true God. After she was raised from the dead, the whole Joppa heard about it, and many people came to believe in the Lord (Acts 9:42).

3.4.2.5 Proclaiming Good News (*kerugma*)

The first congregation was also serious about the teaching of the apostles. The message of the apostles is authoritative for the congregation, because this is the message which Jesus entrusted to them. It is the message that was eventually recorded in the books of the New Testament. This is the good news that the congregation must proclaim to the world (the *prophetic calling* of the congregation).

But they first had to hear, understand and grasp it themselves. They received the message from the original source: they sat at the feet of the apostles. They listened to first hand witnesses, who had personally heard Jesus speaking about the Kingdom of God and who were present at his death and resurrection. The proclamation of the message touched them deeply, stirred their hearts, brought them to repent and admit their guilt, germinated faith in them and changed their lives.

This message is the power of God to save all who believe (Rom 1:16). It has the power to change the world. It is the umbilical cord of God's new world. It is the channel through which God's love and mercy in Christ flows to the world. If this good news is not proclaimed, the world is doomed, totally lost.

But we learn from the first congregation that this proclamation is part of a comprehensive ministry. It does not stand on its own. Our policy document rightly says we are called to minister the gospel of God's salvation to all people, through word (*kerugma*), through deed (*diakonia*) and in a relationship of love and unity (*koinonia*). This whole package is also accompanied by life in the presence of God (*coram Deo*) which leads to an attitude of dependence and worship (*leitourgia*). All these aspects of ministry go together. One is never found without the other. They cannot be separated. Together they form a reliable witness. It is exactly in this all-encompassing ministry that we find the power and effectiveness of the witness of the first congregation.

This last point is exactly what we want to emphasise and put into practice in the United Ministry for Service and Witness (UMSW). We want it to become part of the structure of our church and our missional calling. In the past we divided these different expressions of the congregational life and ministry into too many compartments. Therefore, we lost much of the potential impact of our ministry.

3.4.2.6 Justice, reconciliation, healing and hope

We have already referred to the Jerusalem congregation as an *alternative community*. We said it was a community in which a paradigm shift had taken place with reference to values. The followers of the risen Christ no longer lived according to the values of the present age (Rom 12:2), but according to Kingdom values. Their life included practices and values like

justice, reconciliation, healing and hope (as stated in our policy document).

In the story of the first congregation these matters were addressed indirectly. They did not agitate for justice in the community as we would do today. They did not toyi-toyi in the streets for the redistribution of land and riches. As a tiny faith community in the huge Roman Empire they did not adopt a confrontational strategy, but their whole lifestyle had far-reaching implications. For example, the way in which they ensured that nobody among them was destitute, was nothing less than a practical manifestation of justice. They took care of the widows and the poor among them. They even appointed people to focus their full attention on that ministry (Acts 6:1-7). The apostles confirmed the seriousness of that ministry with the laying on of hands (vs 6). And the whole congregation worked together. Those owning land or houses, sold them and brought the money to the apostles to distribute it according to the need of each one (Acts 4:34-35). In that way everyone was brought onto an equal footing. Everyone had the opportunity to experience and live with human dignity. That is justice.

Many people regard this form of society as an early manifestation of communism. And commentators often see it as an experiment which was not really sustainable. Later we read that the congregation of Jerusalem indeed had to receive help from others to take care of their poor (Acts 11:29; Rom 15:25-26). But it is still true that the early Christians displayed an attitude of love that has fundamental implications for the whole community. They become a visible and tangible sign of God's Kingdom, which will come in the whole world. In their small but growing community the kind of reconciliation and healing takes place that demonstrates to the whole world what must happen where God reigns. They demonstrate to the whole society what God has in mind for the world. That generates hope. The Messiah came and God's Kingdom is breaking through. God's new world is coming! The congregation is the sign and foretaste of that new world. And they witness to this with fearless courage.

As we know, however, everything was not moonshine and roses. The sad story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) only shows how soon the old lifestyle in all of us again rears its ugly head and comes to spoil the congregation's new life with selfishness. But the fact that they dropped

dead where they stood, also shows how serious God is to eradicate the values of the present age from the community of the future. That brings holy respect in the church and the community. God does not tolerate deceit and corruption.

While the first congregation were witnesses to the hope of the resurrection, which sustained their faith, they also experienced strong resistance from the leaders of the Jewish community (Acts 4:1-22; 8:1-4). Although the religious leaders were the ones orchestrating the persecution of the church, they still represented the social order of the time and their actions were typical of the reaction that we often find in the public witness of the church. They try to muzzle the church. But where the congregation is filled with the Spirit, there is always a fearless courage to go on witnessing and being more obedient to God than to human authorities (Acts 4:19-20; 31).

3.4.2.7 Cultivate and preserve God's creation

In our time one of the most important aspects of our public witness is the questions about ecology. Global warming (climate change) and its destructive results is often covered by news bulletins. There is a growing realisation in the world that our current way of life is not sustainable. The earth is tired. We are exhausting its natural resources. It seems as if natural disasters are greatly increasing in our time. It is as if the earth is protesting! Perhaps we must hear God's voice in all these things ...

These issues also are not directly dealt with in Acts. They were not issues on the social agenda of that time. But in our time we would disobey God if we did not speak out about them. If Jesus should speak to us today about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), these issues would definitely have been on his agenda!

3.4.3 The nature and attitude of our witness

Par 3.2 of the policy document spells out the attitude with which the congregation should fulfil her missional calling. A whole series of essential qualities are mentioned. Being filled with the Spirit, integrity, obedience, following Christ, compassion, a serving spirit, humility, boldness, willingness to cross barriers. One could add to this list. It is actually about true Christianity. As we have seen already, every expression of the life

and ministry of the congregation has a missional dimension – what we believe, how we live, how we relate to one another and the world, our relationships and activities on all levels of church and community – all of this contributes either to our success or failure as witnesses. We do not simply preach the message; we *are* the message.

In order to give this point a biblical foundation, one could simply refer to the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). This fruit creates the kind of person who draws others to Christ. This is the picture of a new person; someone who reflects the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Therefore Gal 5:22-23 is a very good definition of an effective witness.

We can learn much from Paul about the attitude necessary to make our witness effective. His second letter to the Corinthians is an illuminating example of his own struggle to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in his whole missional ministry. David Bosch describes this clearly in his book on 2 Corinthians, *A spirituality of the road*. Especially in 2 Cor 4 and 6 the qualities that we mentioned above come to the fore very strongly. While his authority as apostle is questioned by the congregation in Corinth, Paul sets out to demonstrate his credibility and integrity.

The somewhat unusual combination of true humility with steadfast conviction is striking. Paul knows that he is like a clay pot, but he is absolutely convinced that he carries the treasure of the gospel in that fragile vessel (2 Cor 4:7). Therefore he fearlessly witnesses to the supreme power of God working through him. In the process, however, he is a mere servant – literally a slave (*doulos* in the Greek), as he argues in 2 Cor 4:5. The message is not about himself; it is about Christ; and about other people. He is a servant of Christ and a servant of the people whom he wants to reach with the gospel. Therefore he tries not to put an obstacle in anyone's way; so that no-one could find fault with his work (2 Cor 6:3). He is willing to suffer for the sake of his ministry, to endure hardships and to work hard.

In 2 Cor 6:6-7 he gives a touching description of his attitude: *By our purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness we have shown ourselves to be God's servants – by the Holy Spirit, by our true love, by our message of truth, and by the power of God. We have righteousness as our weapon, both to attack and to defend ourselves.*

He then concludes the passage with a sincere declaration of his open heart towards the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:11). Although there were hard words between them at times, his heart is wide open for them. He speaks to them as his children, with great compassion and openness (vs 13). He does not have a secret agenda. He truly wants to understand and appreciate their side of the matter. He wants to show empathy. Not only his heart, but his eyes and ears are open as well.

We must also say it loud and clear to one another: Without this kind of attitude all the efforts of the church to render service and to witness is without any value. It should characterise the congregation's leadership style. It should be the mode of every expression of the ministry. This is how Jesus Himself worked in order that the Kingdom of God may come. We can actually say: This is how things work in the Kingdom of God. It is the lifestyle of God's new world.

The nature of our missional calling is to be servants (*douloi* and *diakonoi*). Therefore the policy document also concludes the relevant paragraph with the statement that we can never separate service from witness.

3.4.4 Practical guidelines to fulfil our calling

The policy document continues in paragraph 3.3 by outlining practical guidelines for the realisation of our missional calling. We take a look at the different practical steps to be taken to ensure that this ministry does not remain hanging in the air. After all, we will fail if we do thorough theological research and can formulate a nice theory, but it does not make any difference to the lives of people in physical and spiritual need.

3.4.4.1 Discern God's will for our context

In order to serve and witness effectively, we must first have a good perception of the context of our ministry. And we must know what God's will is for the particular context. For this we need spiritual discernment.

This matter receives much attention in the South African Partnership of Missional Congregations (SAPMC). They emphasise that careful contextual analysis is essential for a missional ministry. But that is not only an academic exercise. On the contrary, it has to lead to discernment

of God's will in that specific context. It is indeed a spiritual process. It happens where members of a congregation struggle together before God to find their specific calling in that social context.

Our policy document gives a good summary: *We are called ... prayerfully, and with others, discerning and obeying God's calling for us in and from this context.*

For a good biblical example of this kind of spiritual discernment we can turn once more to Acts. When the first congregation in Jerusalem encountered adversity and were forcefully forbidden by the Jewish Council to talk about Jesus, they immediately gathered the congregation to consider the situation before God (Acts 4:23-31). Note the following facets of their actions:

- They realised that they were facing a dilemma. This implied that they did an evaluation of their situation in that particular context.
- Because they remained conscious of God's presence (they lived *coram Deo*), they urgently asked God for guidance and support.
- They prayed together with all the fellow-believers; the whole congregation seems to have been involved.
- While they prayed, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.
- This gave them the courage to live out their calling (*The Message* calls it "*fearless confidence*").
- Because they were convinced of their calling, they were willing to obey God, no matter what the consequences might be (Acts 4:19-20; 5:28-29).

3.4.4.2 Listen to voices calling for liberation

Our calling to service and witness has to do with people's practical needs. With reference to the previous point, our policy document emphasises that all ministry therefore starts with a process of listening. If we really want to help people, we must first understand their needs. And in order to understand people's needs, we must be willing to listen to them. Too often in the past we gave suffering people cheap answers. We decided what medicine we wanted to distribute – without first diagnosing the disease. This is arrogant and counterproductive. Therefore the "season of listening" that was implemented in many congregations of the DRC family in the last few years came at the right time.

In our communities there are many voices calling for help. There is overwhelming need and suffering – at a spiritual level, but also at emotional, social and physical levels. The policy document mentions practical examples. It starts with the voices that call out for salvation from sin. The spiritual need remains prominent. But there are many other kinds of suffering. These are the voices that call to be *set free from fear, hunger, sickness, pain, poverty, crime, violence, injustice, unemployment, HIV and Aids, alcohol and drug addictions, rape, abuse of women and children*. We can add many things to this list. The fact is, our ears must become attuned to suffering in all its dimensions.

This will only happen if we really have *compassion or empathy* with people in need. Probably this is exactly where our problem lies. We have become numb. Because we are exposed to so much suffering, we find it hard to have *empathy* with suffering people. And lacking that, our missional existence collapses like a house of cards.

When God sends people, He expects them first of all to sit down and listen. When Ezekiel was sent to the exiles in Tel-Abib he first had to go and sit in their midst beside the Chebar river for seven days. Their pain and suffering frightened him (Ez 3:16). He was dumb, and did not speak a single word. He only listened and experienced their sorrow and suffering. He first had to stand in their shoes, and learn to have empathy with their circumstances. Only then did the Lord tell him what to do and say.

Nehemiah's ministry also began only after he had listened. He encountered officials who returned from Judea. He enquired about the Judeans who were released from exile and returned to Jerusalem. He heard about their miserable suffering and how they were insulted. The walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed and the gates of the city burnt. When he heard this news, he sat down and cried for days. He grieved about the situation. Then he began to fast and pray. And God gave him the vision, the plans and the perseverance to go and make a difference. God Himself also ensured that he would receive everything he needed to complete that ministry.

In the story of the early church in Acts the apostles also first had to listen and clearly understand the complaints of the Greek-speaking members of the congregation about their widows who were neglected in the daily provision. This ultimately led to a restructuring of their whole

ministry. Thus the service of compassion eventually became more purposeful and effective.

3.4.4.3 Alleviate need through service and witness

When we listen with compassion to all the voices that call for liberation, God calls us to respond in practical ways: in word and deed. Through prophetic witness and priestly service, as we have already described under point 3.4.2 above. We are called to relieve needs practically. Depending on the kind of need, we must act with empathy, with compassion. Not only with charity, but with remedial action. This means we must also carefully consider the origin and reasons for the need, and look for ways to let the justice of God's Kingdom triumph in the situation. In this way both the priestly service and prophetic witness come into play.

We get a practical demonstration of this from Nehemiah (Neh 5:1-13). While they were rebuilding Jerusalem, there were many complaints about exploitation of the poor. They suffered so much that their children had to be made slaves to their own people. Their lands and vineyards were taken (vs 5). Nehemiah interfered. He confronted the prominent citizens and officials (vs 7). He told them their exploitation of others proved that they did not respect God. It also caused their enemies of other nations to despise them (vs 9). That was a prophetic voice. It was encouraging that the people listened to it and radically changed their behaviour (vss 11-12). Priestly compassion came to the fore. And as leader Nehemiah himself set a good example. He gave up the privileges and allowances to which he was entitled as governor. Hundred and fifty officials and workers had their meals at his table (Neh 5:14-19). Out of respect for God he became a servant of the people – a servant leader (vs 15). That became a powerful witness.

3.4.4.4 Celebrate diversity, but nurture unity

According to our policy document, diversity is an asset to our task of witnessing. Our rich and diverse heritage is something that we must respect, build up and celebrate. The variety of languages, cultures and gifts are part of the potential of Southern Africa's people that we must use to benefit the gospel. It need not be a stumbling block. As long as we do

not allow it to divide and separate us, it can and must actually help us to accomplish our witness more effectively.

That was a dimension which the early church still had to discover. God revealed it to Peter in a special vision (Acts 10:9-36). Peter saw something like a big cloth being let down from heaven. It contained animals that were clean and unclean according to Jewish law. He received a command to kill and eat. When he protested, he heard a voice telling him that he should not consider anything unclean that God declared clean. When directly after the vision he received an invitation to go to Cornelius' house, he understood the message. Cornelius was not a Jew. Peter therefore had to learn that God included people from all nations in his church. In a manner of speaking, one could say that God enfolds a multi-coloured variety of people into one cloth.

We impoverish the church if we try to exclude or separate people from different cultures. The early Christians confirmed and applied this principle at the first church council that is described in Acts 15. Everyone had to make concessions in order to make room for others. This was of course essential for the spread of the gospel.

The idea that we should appreciate variety and diversity in the church is emphasised very strongly by the metaphor of the body, which Paul used so frequently. Especially in 1 Cor 12-14 he explains that we must positively harness not only the variety of cultures, but also the diversity of gifts to build up the church and serve one another. God actually gives different gifts in order to do justice to the different aspects of the functioning of the congregation. The gifts are God's way of equipping the different parts of his body for different ministries.

What makes this metaphor so exceptionally relevant for understanding the church is the fact that the differences between the members never bring the unity of the body into question. The fact that the members fulfil different functions never means that they work only for their own benefit or in opposition or competition with other members. Each member fulfils his or her specific function to benefit the whole body. Everyone makes a special contribution to the effective functioning of the whole.

This perspective is also very important for the missional effectiveness of the church. In our society with its extraordinary diversity of languages

and cultures it becomes a very powerful witness when everyone uses his own heritage and specific gifts to the benefit of the whole body. This is also practically worked out in the following point where we deal with partnerships.

3.4.4.5 Partnerships with different institutions

Forming partnerships has come to the fore in recent times as an important missional strategy. This is in the first place about the co-operation of churches for the sake of the coming of God's Kingdom. It is a practical expression of the unity of the body of Christ and of the *koinonia* that we have already discussed. In our own ranks it means, for example, that all the churches within the broader DRC family (also outside the borders of our country) help one another to spread the gospel effectively.

In this regard we have in mind not only evangelisation, but also other manifestations of Kingdom work, like involvement with educational, medical, agricultural and ecological projects. This kind of involvement makes it essential to work together across church (ecumenical) boundaries and even forming partnerships with government and non-governmental organisations.

In Rom 1:11-12 Paul teaches us an important biblical principle for partnerships, namely that it must never be just one way traffic. He was eager to visit Rome and present them with a spiritual gift. He knew he had something special to offer them. But he did not come with a superior or paternalistic attitude. He emphasised the mutuality of their relationship. He would not only give, but also receive. He would encourage them, but would also be encouraged himself. Everyone has a contribution to make, even if it is not necessarily the same kind of contribution. Like the different members of a body. That is real partnership.

In the history of mission, paternalism often hindered the work. Missionaries came to people with cultural and religious superiority. In our current time it is an attitude that is experienced very negatively. Humility, also as to our own culture and religious beliefs, is a much more effective approach for our task of witnessing.

3.4.4.6 Dialogue with people from other faiths and beliefs

The humility to which we referred in the previous paragraph, is also essential in our witness to people from other faiths and beliefs. Our policy document does not evade the necessity of this witness. Our faith in the Triune God compels us to talk about it to people who think and believe differently. In the post-modern time there are many people who say that it is arrogant to think our faith and beliefs are better than those of other religions. But we cannot evade this challenge. We have to witness about our faith, but the attitude in which we do it is of crucial importance. Therefore our policy document speaks of *respectful dialogue*. This means we must have the necessary respect for other faiths and religious beliefs. We must not only talk, but also listen. We must show real interest in what they believe and take them seriously. That is what dialogue means.

In this too, Paul, the great missionary, set us an example (Acts 17:16-34). He stood in the centre of the Areopagus and challenged the people of Athens to think carefully about their religiousness. In fact, he was upset about all the idols in Athens (vs 16), and so he argued with the Epicurians and Stoics (vs 18). But he also acknowledged their religious commitment (vs 22). And he took their religiousness as a starting point for his conversation with them (vs 23). But he did not avoid sharing his faith with them. After all, dialogue means that you also get the opportunity to voice your own point of view.

Paul also went further, as he explained in 1 Cor 9:19-23. For the Jews he became like a Jew – to “win” the Jews. And he did the same for those who were under the law and those without the law, and for the weak. He became all things to all people, so that he might save some of them by whatever means possible (vs 22). He became a servant to everyone to try and “win” them for Christ (vs 19). This does not mean that he gave up his own position, but it does mean that he identified himself with those whom he wanted to reach for Christ, to such an extent that he could really understand their viewpoints and beliefs. In that way he demonstrated his deep respect for different cultures and points of view. This is the only way to gain respect for our own faith and perspective.

3.5 Service and witness in unity

The policy document concludes by once more emphasizing the importance of unity if we want to be effective witnesses. The standard of this unity is the manifestation of the unity of the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This requirement is very clearly stressed by quoting the whole passage of Eph 4:1-6, where unity is directly linked to the Trinity.

The Spirit brings unity among us and binds us together to become one body. Thus we are all called to one and the same hope. There is also only one Lord, and this is Jesus, the Son of God. Therefore there is also only one faith and one baptism. All of this is grounded in the one God and Father of all: He who is above all, works through all and lives in all.

There is no stronger way to emphasise the need for unity in mission than this appeal to the being and work of God. The inter-trinitarian relations demonstrate the unity for us. The unity is also guaranteed by our shared relationship with God. If we belong to God, we also belong to one another. God is one, therefore we cannot be separated from one another.

This unity is a fact – a gift from God. At the same time it also is a command, an obligation, a calling. Paul says we must do *our best* to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds us together. We must make it our own. We must hold on to it. We must preserve it; work at it continually. We must focus on it; do our best. This must become a reality in our lives. It must become part of our lifestyle. This is the lifestyle that is in keeping with the calling that we received from God (vs 1). And for this we need the characteristics of vs 2: *“Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another.”* After all, these characteristics are essential to living in peace with one another (vs 3). And in this way we build up our unity.

This command for unity is not optional. It lies at the heart of the gospel. Without it our service and witness have no power. Therefore this policy document is not only about service and witness, but about *service and witness in unity*. Each of these three dimensions is essential. The credibility of our witness depends on it. Jesus Himself also confirms this in his high priestly prayer: *My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me* (Joh 17:20-21).

Chapter 4

How do we practically do service and witness in unity?

4.1 Zoleka's story

Zoleka Khonyeni's inspiring story is a wonderful example of the practical effect of *service and witness in unity*. In this story we see how the different manifestations of the church function and restore hope in difficult situations. It clearly shows our inter-dependence and co-responsibility in proclaiming the gospel. Zoleka personally told her story to the DRCSA synod in 2011.

In 2003 an outreach group of the Zithulele partnership, which includes congregations of the DRC and URC in the Western and Eastern Cape, held a winter school at Zithulele. Zithulele is in the rural countryside of the Transkei.

Zoleka Khonyeni attended the winter school. In that week she gave her life to the Lord. She was invited to come to live in Bellville with members of the Kenridge DRC to receive tertiary education and thus become financially independent. She was young, uncertain and could scarcely speak English, but in the end she did accept the invitation. A new life opened up for her with the love and support of her new family and much hard work.

Zoleka made difficult personal decisions during this time in order to equip herself even further. For example, she rejected an offer of marriage.

Since 2004 she has successfully completed several courses, including a certificate in day care for older people. Also a diploma in child care at INTEC, a bridge year at UNISA and a year to bring her English up to standard. Currently she is a second year B Ed student at UNISA.

Since 2004 Zoleka has been the Xhosa teacher at the Kenridge Primary School. She is a popular teacher and her pupils recently attained excellent results in Xhosa at the Eisteddfod.

Today she is the strength of her family and a role model for her two younger brothers and the wider community. She also offers her energy and talents to needy children in the informal housing areas of Khayelitsha and Gugulethu. She makes special efforts to bring them into contact with children from other culture groups.

The Christian family with whom she has been living since 2003, experience Zoleka as an inspiration because of her strong faith, her perseverance and thankful attitude. Because she has a better understanding of the consequences of poverty and hopelessness than most people, she appreciates the grace she has received and wants to give her services back to the community. People who know her, testify that her influence on other people is beyond measure.

4.2 The context of our service and witness in unity

Through *service and witness in unity* we participate in God's mission. We proclaim the gospel, not only within the church, but also in society. We participate in God's mission through communicating the gospel in word and deed.

4.2.1 Communication in word and deed

True communication in this connection is a way of saying and doing. Thus we want to do three things: We want to address the other person, respect the other as independent human being and in love draw the other closer and try to persuade them with arguments. We do not want to make people dependent, but rather create new life opportunities for them.

The "language" in which we communicate through *service and witness in unity*, is words and deeds. When we communicate with others through language, we make four basic claims:

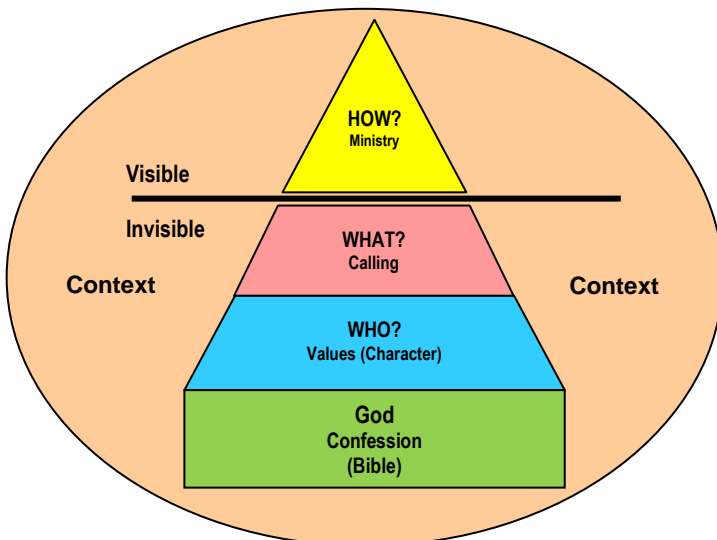
- Firstly, we assume that we talk intelligibly. That the other can hear us and know what we are saying, because we use the language in such a way that they understand the content in the same way that we do.
- Secondly, we assume that what we say is factually correct and does not mislead.
- Thirdly, we claim to speak the truth. That what we are saying, is sensible, confirms what people know and is in line with everyone's beliefs and best interests.
- Fourthly, we lay claim to dignity: true, honest and sincere communication, reliability, in our own best interests and that of others.

The danger does exist that our “language” could be incomprehensible to others. That we or they can fill it with a different content; that our beliefs can differ and that others can experience us as dishonest.

We must take special note of the challenges that the communication of the gospel poses in Africa. In Africa people prefer telling stories to making abstract declarations. Communication through dance and testimonies, rather than through theological definitions and arguments, is decisive. Festivals rather than concepts, songs rather than complicated confessions, healing rather than complicated biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) characterise how people of Africa communicate (Oduro, et al 2008:109).

From the diagram below it is evident that the basis for doing *service and witness in unity* is formed by our understanding of God. The diagram emphasises that our identity – who we are in Christ – is equally important. This identity shapes our ministry, as well as the unity of our service and witness.

Only when we reach consensus on our understanding of God and about our identity in Christ, can we clearly formulate our calling together. Service and witness ministries are also not in the first place a program, but a way to communicate, of expressing an attitude of life and an approach of witnessing through deeds. In the diagram these different aspects are pictured.



4.2.2 Changing context

The diagram clearly shows that the church (the triangle in the diagram) always functions within a specific context.

In our century there are a number of new developments that make our context different to that of the previous century. Aids is new. Climate change is new (even if people argue about it, earlier they did not argue about it). Globalisation is new. Communism has gone. Electronic communication totally changed the world in which we live and clearly has a great political impact. Some expectations that people had of political liberation were disappointed, and people now have new expectations of the church. It is in this context that we must be a church with a new capacity.

4.2.3 Challenges to the capacity of the church

Not only the context, but also the capacity of the church experienced great shifts over the last decades. It definitely poses new challenges to the *service and witness ministry*.

Many congregations simply cannot afford ministers any longer, especially if we define ministers as highly educated, expensive, professional people. From the practical situation we know that 60%-70% of URCSA or DRCA congregations have vacancies. The same tendency is also growing in DRC congregations.

Fewer and fewer students offer themselves to be trained as ministers. The academic theological curricula of universities and the needs of the church are moving increasingly apart. This is a result of the different contexts in which they function.

The agenda of the church is determined by matters like identity, calling and ministry (in the diagram above the *who, what and how*). The training at the universities do not necessarily focus on these, but rather on a high academic standard in different theological disciplines. This remains extremely valuable for the church.

But now the question is: how do we help one another to once more establish a practical ministry in our church family?

The capacity of the church can be greatly extended if we use the available resources more effectively, for example, expertise, funds and

management. Through the service and witness ministry we can for instance become a specific role player in a partnership with other churches and organisations.

4.3 Manifestations of the church

In the preceding chapters and from the abovementioned diagram our identity (who) and calling (what) have already been described. The service and witness ministry (the how) will now be described by looking at six manifestations of the church that are theologically widely accepted.

The six manifestations of the church that are distinguished, are:

- The church service (worship/liturgy)
- The congregation
- Relational church structures (presbyteries and synods)
- The ecumenical church
- The individual believers
- Voluntary initiatives and activities
- We add a seventh manifestation, namely the family.

The reason for describing the church in terms of these different manifestations is to help us understand that the church is bigger than we think. While we distinguish different manifestations, the relationship between them is of special importance. These manifestations complement each other. They broaden and support each other. In each of the manifestations of the church, service and witness ministries function with the same purpose, but in distinctive ways.

4.3.1 The church service (worship/liturgy)

The church service is about God who acts (*actio Dei*). God is the beginning and the end, the One who speaks and makes the service possible. God is acknowledged and worshipped as Lord.

We can say with AC Barnard that the church service “is the revelation of the essential struggle of God against the idols and the struggle for God against the idols”. In the church service believers gather as a covenantal community of new people to have fellowship with the Triune God.

In order to allow the service and witness ministry to come to its own within the church service we must focus on every area of the community. The service then assumes a social and political character that expresses God's alternative vision of the community. In Eph 2:19 Paul writes about the intimate bond between the private (economy - *oikos*) and public life (political – *polis*): *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,*

The implementation of the ACCRA declaration

In their focus on WARC's ACCRA declaration on globalisation and justice in the worldwide economy and ecology (2004), URCSA and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany (ERC) contracted the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch to facilitate a process of interaction between role players from the South and the North.

As a result a thorough research project was conducted between 2007 and 2010 on the economy and ecology in the light of globalisation. Various work sessions and study conferences were held. At these occasions different expert research partners from different subject areas and parts of the world focused on important facets. New insights and focus points developed. Various significant publications saw the light.

The final research publication summarises the outcome of the project and our continuing focus very well: *From South and North, together in communion, we dream a different world.*

In this project there has also been an effort to develop guidelines for sermons, liturgical materials and practical guidelines for congregations in and outside our church family. The plan is to complete this process in 2011 and then the materials will be made available for general use in local congregations.

According to Letsosa, Western style church services apparently do not succeed to have an emotional impact on Africans liturgically. It is suggested that the church does not view the culture and rituals of Africa with adequate sincerity on matters like death, birth and marriage. Westerners are also ignorant about the need for an African liturgy to address issues like fear of evil powers and dealing with disease. There are strong beliefs about the intimate connection between liturgy and culture.

Among others the function of liturgy is to help create a new culture. The church can lose her relevance if she ignores the importance of

culture. On the other hand the church can also lose her witness in the world if she simply accepts culture uncritically. Therefore it is important that the necessary recognition be given to culture.

The Bureau for Training of Intercultural Workers (TIW)

The Bureau for Training of Intercultural Workers (TIW) developed programs to equip and help believers when they must cross cultural boundaries in *service and witness ministries*.

There are many different kinds of cultural boundaries. Ethnic culture is only one of them. It surely offers one of the greatest challenges because the differences between ethnic cultures are often very big. But there can also be “church cultures” and “religious cultures” within the same ethnic culture. So there are also different cultural groups within the same social setup. The youth, for example, often have their own kind of sub-culture.

When we have to cross any cultural boundary in our *service and witness ministry* it makes special demands. The equipment of TIW offers a broad framework for believers to enable them to cross any kind of cultural boundary in order to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

The equipment and facilitation include matters like the following:

- The way in which culture functions in our lives;
- The dangers and challenges to which believers must be sensitive when they cross cultural borders;
- The great challenge of meaningful communication across cultural boundaries. This is looked at from different viewpoints;
- We pay specific attention to the cross-cultural proclamation of the gospel;
- We also look at ways in which believers make contact and build relationships with unknown cultural groups or communities.

The elements on which we agree in the church service is...

The risen Christ is central in the church service and liturgy. The church service gives symbolic expression to a faith community’s understanding of time – Sunday as the day of resurrection. When the liturgy calls in remembrance the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is a strong dimension of *service and witness in unity*. We indeed celebrate life, the victory over the powers of death itself.

Here we further focus on only four meaningful activities that occur on Sundays in the liturgical spaces of church buildings.

4.3.2.1 Worship

In her *worship* the congregation distinguishes herself from the surrounding world, but the church as an alternative Christian community remains inclusive. Baptism in the Name of the Triune God means a new identity that must become visible in the world.

When the congregation worships the Triune God as Creator, Saviour and Perfecter, all other forms of power, authority and politics are made subservient. Ideas about power and ways of social intercourse are now in Christ filled with love. We live outwards, hospitable and fruitful from the meeting with Christ in the church service.

Because everyone is welcome in the service, but even more because the church service focuses on Christ, the service embodies a new story and new relationships.

The worship of the God who loves the world so much that He gave his Son, compels us to reach out to a world in need.

4.3.2.2 Intercession

Therefore worship always results in *intercession*, for all people, but specifically also for authorities. The government is responsible for the social and economic well-being of its subjects. Therefore this is a strong biblical command that we unfortunately often neglect.

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Tim 2:1-2)

This is not merely a pietistic or naïve plea, but a fundamental act that testifies of social responsibility and care. True intercession is a testimony of trust in the providential reign of the Triune God in creation.

4.3.2.3 The Word of God

As members of a Reformed church we believe that *God's Word* stands in the centre of the church service. The Word of God that must be proclaimed, does not consist of empty words. God is personally present and active in the Word. Therefore it is a Word of hope and life. It contains new language with a different logic than that of society (Is 55:8-9). The

story of the Bible breaks through the current barriers and prejudices of our society. It is a story about the Bread of life. About liberation from everything that keeps us in bondage and from all powers. It is a story of love for strangers and enemies. It is a story of reconciliation. The story of the new people of God who come from every people, tribe and nation.

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Jes 55:11).

Yes, it is a story of the impossible.

By participatory listening, believing, celebrating salvation and glorifying God, our presence in the service assumes the character of *service and witness in unity*.

4.3.2.4 The sacraments

The *Sacraments* are visible, holy signs and seals that God gave to us so that we may understand the gracious character of the gospel even better.

Baptism confirms that we live in a new relationship with God and Christ. It is based upon God's gracious act of deliverance in the death and resurrection of Christ. So baptism gives us a new identity in Christ. Our old sinful life died on the cross with Christ, so that we will *count (y)ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus*. (Rom 6:11). In baptism we are all one in Christ and we have all been called to *serve and witness in unity*.

At the *table of the Lord* believers eat the bread and drink the wine, embracing each other and confirming their calling as a new community towards the society. Our *service and witness in unity* starts here at the table because it is a covenant meal and a banquet of love. The piece of bread and sip of wine represent an alternative economy that does not know any scarcity, injustice, or exploitation, but only gift and justice. The communion speaks the language of welcoming, mercy, reconciliation and hope.

Francois Wessels has argued that the bread and wine did not only remind the early church of the death of Jesus. It was also a meal of bringing and sharing, where the richer believers could share their food with the poorer believers. David Bosch specifically describes the Gospel of Luke as the Gospel for the rich and the poor, in which Jesus brings in

the strangers and outsiders to become guests of honour at God's banquet.

4.3.2 The Congregation

The church of Christ actually has only one task in the world, namely to witness about the great deeds of God. This witness of the church is determined by the servanthood of Christ (Matt 20:28). Therefore the church is defined as a community of service (2 Cor 9:1; 1 Pet 4:10), in a special sense service to those in need.

The congregation as a fellowship begins her ministry of *service and witness* in the community where she lives. But this ministry always looks far beyond the borders of the congregation and the immediate community.

The abundant variety of ministry activities offer believers wonderful opportunities to live out their calling. Some are even set apart (e.g. Acts 13:1) to give attention to the requirements and needs of people within and outside the local context and to learn to respond to it personally, directly and creatively.

4.3.2.1 The congregation is not being served, but serves

The congregation is involved with the ministry at grass roots level as the subject that goes to serve and witness. The congregation is not in the first place the object that must be served and towards whom witness must be given. Yes, the needs of church members are important too, but that is not the primary purpose of the existence of the congregation. Members and ministers must understand that they are not the focus of *service and witness in unity*. This ministry is rather about the love of Christ that compels the congregation to see and address the needs of others.

The inner compulsion to introduce Christ's love therefore motivates the congregation. Thus the congregation indeed functions increasingly as body of Christ. In our ministry, as body of Christ, we focus on our calling, gifts, thankfulness and God's invitation. Among other things this will include summoning believers to perform their priesthood, the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9-10). They live as priests through witness and service, through preaching, teaching and an exemplary lifestyle.

If we want to focus the ministry of the congregation in this way, we must equip our members for that purpose (Eph 4:12). We must also create the structures that facilitate and support ministries by members.

4.3.2.2 Holistic ministry – in fellowship with one another

The stronger focus on calling, gifts, invitation and thankfulness in understanding the congregation's ministry brings us closer to the Reformed tradition of being church. It is also in accordance with the idea of *ubuntu*, which is a very strong element of many African cultures. As congregation in the African context it also challenges us to think more holistically about our ministry of *service and witness in unity*. Our *service and witness* become effective exactly in fellowship with one another, in our unity as body of Christ.

Individualism is out of step with this perception of what it means to be a church. Unfortunately this is exactly the kind of culture that many of us learnt at our mothers' knees ...

For Sider (2002:36-44) a holistic ministry displays a number of characteristics:

- The ministries of *personal spiritual transformation* has the ultimate purpose of social change;
- *Service* is a ministry through which we attend to people's needs and is the way to bring the gospel in those circumstances;
- The ministry of *reconciliation* testifies to the unity that Christ brings about;
- *Community development* is an expression of God's love for the world – for all people;
- The ministry of *justice* strengthens people's identity in Christ;
- We reach *the discouraged and sceptics* by demonstrating practically that the church, as body of Christ, makes a difference in people's lives.

The *theological motivation for our service and witness in unity* is that the Kingdom of God forms the centre of our lives – it leavens, renews, changes and sanctifies our whole life.

The Bible wants to bring an essential change to people's lives. Therefore we must meet people in their own living space and embody

Christ there. *Service and witness* can be no less than a long term ministry, because it is all about relationships.

4.3.2.3 See, hear, think and do

What does the *service and witness ministry* of the congregation then look like in practice? In the first place this ministry happens through *seeing, hearing, thinking and doing*.

We cannot deal significantly with issues involving *service and witness*, like poverty and need, unless we have good insight and knowledge of the circumstances. If we want to fulfil the practical ministry challenges, we must be exposed to people in need, we must personally go to observe and experience the specific situation of need.

The “experts” are those who live with the challenges and survive in the situations. Therefore we must see and hear and think. Think together. Not on our own, but along with the people in need.

The congregation can therefore not tackle this ministry on their own. The congregation is part of and bound to the local community. Therefore the ministry happens in partnership with others.

4.3.2.4 Partnership with others

Partnerships belong with all the manifestations of the church, but we prefer to describe it here.

Well-structured congregations (as in the Reformed tradition) offer channels to become involved with social development and service to communities at grassroots level along with community organisations. Community forums offer the opportunity to different institutions to form partnerships to alleviate the need in the community.

The partnership itself becomes an opportunity to serve and witness in the world. The church must after all clearly declare her identity and involvement with this forum. Otherwise society can easily see the church as simply one more humanistic institution like any of the other partners.

When forming a partnership to serve the community, congregations of Christ should establish at least **four pillars for the identity of the partnership**:

- Agreement about values;
- Agreement about the need and the challenge that must be dealt with;
- A clear description of what we will develop and how we will operate;
- A vision of that which we want to achieve together.

Conference on partnerships in KZN

Botha van Aarde (Minister in Synodical Service for Community Ministries, KZN) writes that Dons Kritzinger emphasised the following at a conference on partnerships held by the DRC family in Kwazulu-Natal:

1. In order to understand the concept of partnerships within the Christian faith community, we must begin with the biblical concept of **mission (witness)**.

Mission has three dimensions:

- a. **Dimension of proclamation (*kerugma*)**. It emphasises the traditional concept of mission as the proclamation of the gospel message.
- b. But it also has a **compassionate side (*diakonia*)**. People see and experience God's love and mercy in the way in which we find it possible to stand by them in their need. Our missionary ancestors understood it well when they started "mission stations" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with schools, hospitals, children's homes and other physical aid structures.
- c. But we often forget that mission also has a **relational dimension (*koinonia*)**. In fact, we cannot demonstrate the gospel to people if we do not build up a relationship with those people. Entering into a relationship (walking the road together) is actually the only possibility that we have to be successful in the other two dimensions, *kerugma* and *diakonia*.

All these things must of course be done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who equips, helps and comforts us.

2. **What does this have to do with partnerships?**

If we talk about **partnerships**, we speak of our **relationships (*koinonia*)**. It simply cannot be any different! Partnerships are therefore nothing but co-operative relationships. A relationship into which churches, congregations or individuals enter with the purpose to work together in some area or another. This is how Dons understands three levels of co-operative relationships in which we can enter with one another.

Level 1 – Networking

It is an informal relationship into which independent parties enter without losing their independence. You could even come and go in the network as it suits you. The best example of this kind of network is of course the internet. The internet *connects people!* You can for example take part in social networks like *facebook* and *twitter* as and when you want to. Nobody's functioning and independence is affected in any way.

Level 2 – Co-operation

In this relationship the parties work together towards a common purpose. Inter-dependence comes to the fore, because we realise that the shared purpose will be reached better and more easily when everyone's gifts and talents are brought together. The one party needs the other party, but both keep their independence. Perhaps the best example of co-operation in the Bible is when Paul tells the Corinthians that he plants, Apollos waters, but it is God who gives growth. Co-operation for the sake of the shared purpose, the glory of God.

Level 3 – Partnership

Here inter-dependence and co-operation is so close that a new entity comes into existence. Such a new unit requires a contract or covenant with one another. A partnership therefore is a much more formal bond. Good examples of partnerships where individual parties brought a new entity into being, is a marriage or a legal or medical practice. We can ask the question whether a denomination is not indeed a partnership of individual congregations. Understood like this, the denomination is more than the sum total of all the congregations. A new entity (Presbytery/Synod) comes into being.

It would of course be a good exercise to let your church board or relevant committee test the relationships in which you stand in the light of these descriptions. Decide in which relationships the congregation stands, and then decide whether the relation is a partnership, a co-operation or a network.

A relationship can remain what it is, or grow to a next level, depending on the outcomes that you want to reach in the relationship. Make sure that the parties in the particular relationship understand on which level the relationship exists. Then we will not expect too much of a specific relationship.

On the other hand we must always ask whether we must not bring something new, a new entity, into being for the sake of the Kingdom of God. One thing of which I have become sure, is that we can or must not work alone!

4.3.3 Churches in relation

The fruit and success of a congregation's ministry of *service and witness* must never lead to a tendency of independence, isolation and self-centredness (independentism). Congregations need one another and belong to one another in Christ.

The New Testament lays special emphasis on the relationship between congregations of Christ. Christ is the bond between congregations (Rev 1:9-20). With their journeys and letters to the different congregations the apostles served the purpose of binding them together and emphasised the unity among them.

"The relationship between churches (*as in Presbyteries and Synods - added*) belongs to the being (*the essence*) of the church, not just its well-being. Therefore we cannot willfully decide whether it is necessary or how much of it is necessary" (Smit, 2008:108). Therefore the existence of a denomination is a ministry of *service and witness in unity* in itself.

Our history is filled with *service and witness in unity* done by the relational church structures (synods and presbyteries).

Evangelism was the point of departure, but the approach was holistic. The Bible was translated into many languages and spiritual literature was developed. In the area of education, institutions were founded from primary to tertiary level. Medical and paramedical services, clinics, hospitals and special care units were widely set up. The care of the deaf, blind and orphans received attention. Agriculture and technology were also developed.

At that stage these were not the projects of individual congregations. They were the united efforts of the denomination, supported by the contributions and prayers of the congregations.

The role of the relational church structures (presbytery, synod, general synod) regarding *service and witness in unity* is that of support with visioning, conceptualising and co-ordination:

- **Visioning**

The relational church structures want to help congregations not to get stuck in their own situation by living inwardly. The congregations must be assisted to develop a vision of their outward identity and calling. The wider church structures must enable the congregations

to read the “bigger” picture of society (the context). Thus congregations must always be reminded of opportunities for service and witness.

- **Conceptualising**

It is the task of the wider church structures to give theological and practical content to the *service and witness ministry* through a process of conceptualising.

- **Co-ordination**

The wider church structures create capacity for *service and witness ministries* that are too big for only one congregation, like: children’s homes, old age homes, Aids ministries. These ministries may thus be managed on the level of congregations, but with the support of the wider church, even the denomination.

- **Expertise and professional services**

The wider church structures also support congregations with collective expertise and professional services, like social workers and others.

- **Developing and reclaiming resources**

Service and witness in unity is a national and even international matter. In this regard, synods, general synods and denominations offer an institutional identity for negotiations and when forming partnerships covering bigger projects.

- **Theological Training**

Formal theological training of its own ministers is one of important functions of the wider church structures (synod and general synod). But theological training can also be presented on a wider level as a way of reaching out beyond our own borders. This happens, for instance, through Nehemiah Bible Institute and the Bureau for Training of Intercultural Workers and Sokhanya Bible School (all being training institutions initiated by the DRC family).

Nehemiah Bible Institute

The Nehemiah Bible Institute was started in 1992 by Biblecor's department for missional ministries. It was designed to provide in the need of church leaders in the African context who never had the opportunity to receive theological training. The most important target group therefore are the leaders of the so-called "African Initiated Churches" – AICs.

Great numbers of Christians in Africa belong to these churches, but they often receive a rather diluted form of the gospel as a result of their leaders' lack of knowledge and training. This applies even to established churches, where there is an increasing lack of trained ministers, with the result that the so-called "laity" must take care of the greatest share of the ministry in congregations.

By equipping this kind of church leader with Bible knowledge and skills for leadership and ministry, we trust that the NBI makes a substantial difference to the growth of the Christian church on our continent. And this growth is not only about numbers, but especially about spiritual depth.

The course covers a very wide spectrum of training for church leadership and ministry. Bible study is the foundation of the course. A whole number of courses are aimed at personal spiritual growth. It starts with the basic message of salvation. Then there is something on prayer, spiritual discernment, stewardship and leadership. We try to build up the church leader's relationships in courses on marriage and family. And further we focus strongly on the church. What is the church? How did the church develop in history (especially in Africa)? How do we build up the church? The learners develop skills to study the Bible, preach, make disciples, minister to the youth, involve women, conduct church services, lead the ministry in song, do evangelism, reach out to people from other religions, deal with conflict and become involved in the community, and specifically in the struggle against Aids.

In nearly 20 years more than 4 500 church leaders have already enrolled for the course. In 2010 alone we registered 956 new learners. In this same year 361 students received certificates from the University of Pretoria which also accredits the course.

The course is now being used in most of the countries of Southern Africa: Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho. Last year 23 students in Madagascar completed the course. The Nehemiah Bible College in India also started in 2010 to offer the course by correspondence.

4.3.4 *The ecumenical church*

Ecumenical relations are not limited to the activities of a specific commission of the church. The whole church, every church board, presbytery and synod, should be involved in ecumenical relationships. This is especially true of *service and witness in unity* in different church manifestations and contexts.

Ecumenical relations aim to:

- make the unity of the body of Christ visible on earth – as in *Faith and Order* (in the World Council of Churches);
- make the witness of the church recognisable and credible – as in the World Council's *Mission and Evangelism*;
- deal with different manifestations of need in the world – as the World Council of Churches does through *Life and Work*.

The ecumenical *service and witness ministry* has prophetic, royal and priestly dimensions. For example, it delivers *prophetic* witness on the rights of oppressed and the ecology. It acts *royally* by organising activities, initiatives and groups around need and suffering. It offers *priestly* service through sacrifices of intercession, generosity and caregiving. There are also other forms of priestly service, both by volunteers and full time staff.

In our day the ecumenical movement especially focuses together on the close relations between ecclesiology (being church, doctrine) and ethics (life, social agendas and involvement). We seriously endeavour and work together to build bridges over traditional gaps, divisions and tensions between Christians and denominations. Together, through ecumenical relationships, the broader church wants to bring the gospel of Christ to the community. In unity.

According to Christensen, a new ecumenical spirit is developing. Church members have less loyalty towards only one denomination or religious affiliation. This new ecumenical spirit associates with an understanding of the church where there is less emphasis on rational elements like confessions, theological arguments and correctness. Stories, testimonies of God's work and the celebration of life are becoming much more integral in our ministry. In this we also clearly see the African influence.

It is also true that with a Kingdom perspective we can more effectively deal with the need around us. Ecumenical co-operation makes it easier for the church to negotiate with other partners like the state and industry. The role of the ecumenical church is therefore the same as with the denomination, namely to support and empower, but in a bigger context.

Sokhanya Bible school

Christianity in Africa is growing faster than in any other part of the world. Unfortunately the saying is often true that the stream runs very wide, but is extremely shallow. One of the core problems is a lack of a thorough, balanced knowledge of Scripture. This often leads to a hopeless fragmentation of faith groups. The ministry of the Sokhanya Bible School deliberately focuses on these aspects.

The ministry started at the request of leaders of independent churches in the Cape Peninsula. A contextual ministry-aligned Bible program was developed from the practical situation. We cover the whole biblical canon in six semester modules. The program aims to establish a responsible theological frame of reference for the students. Ultimately they must be able to handle the Bible themselves in their personal lives and ministries. We deal with all the important faith themes relevant to Africa and specifically come to grips with misunderstandings and wrong perceptions that are commonly found in these churches

Sokhanya has already been training believers from all denominations for 20 years. There are Catholics and Protestants, Christians from charismatic groups and even from Western churches. However, a big component belongs to a variety of Independent African Churches, like the Zionists and other Apostolic groups.

Because the Bible is used as the only handbook, everyone feels at home and wonderful ecumenical links are established between the leaders on a personal level. All offices are involved, from preachers to archbishops. The students also are of all age groups and there are many women. We have no educational requirements. All classes and courses are offered in Xhosa.

The work consists of two components:

- Weekly evening classes at different places in the Cape Peninsula. Every year between 80 and 90 people attend the weekly classes.
- We also adapted the material that was gradually developed in class discussions into a correspondence course and use it to minister to between 100 and 120 people in different places all over South Africa.

4.3.5 The individual

The church consists of believers, followers of Christ, who live and work in the world every day. Traditionally we think of these individual believers as moral agents who take responsibility for the political, economic and social context. They must act in that context as witnesses of the gospel.

The Bible emphasises that individual believers will one day stand before the judgement seat: *So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.* (Rom 14:12; cf. Matt 25).

Service and witness ministries by individual believers are not always formally organised. It happens where believers work and move. They do it simply by loving their neighbour as they do themselves. Often they do it by serving the community in their daily occupations, to the glory of God. We can therefore serve and witness in any occupation by doing our job to the glory of the Lord and not as for people.

4.3.6 Voluntary initiatives and activities

The church consists of believers who have been given to one another and to the world as a gift. Following in Christ's footsteps involves the total life and priesthood of every believer. Following becomes visible in the different manifestations of the church in the world.

We see one of these manifestations of the church when individual believers form voluntary organisations that are aimed at specific ministries. These groups which believers choose to join, are voluntary movements or projects that represent the ecumenical church in the community. As volunteers they then work together to serve and witness in different contexts and with different focuses and so they live out the gospel (for example, the industrial ministry; environmental care activities; other public witness activities).

There are many such voluntary organisations, outside the institutional church, that do fantastic work regarding *service and witness in unity*. These organisations are involved in many areas like social work services, social and community development, education and training, as well as caring for the sick. There are also organisations that focus on evangelism and Bible distribution.

These organisations usually cater for specific needs and contexts.

4.3.7 The family

We add the family as seventh manifestation of the church to the above six. We do this because we believe that, according to the Bible, the family must play an important role in the church and the world.

We see God's relationship with families as a covenant relationship with an unmistakable missional perspective.

It is clear that God often begins with one person, but still has a wider group in mind. The individuals often stand as representatives of the families that God uses. God set up a covenant with Abram, but Sara and Isaac were still fully part of it.

In the ten commandments as the "constitution" of Israel's covenant relationship with God, the family is also mentioned. We are given the responsibility to honour our father and mother. In Deut 6 parents again are commanded to continually remind their children of God's commands and his story with his people. God's promises also include the children, for example Acts 2:39, *The promise is for you and your children ...*

Right through the Bible we read how God works in and through families to reveal his will.

A few examples from the Old Testament: Noah and his whole family found mercy in the flood. God used Jacob and his family to save the "world" of their time from famine. Hosea and his family served as living witness of God's judgement, but also of his unchanging love.

In the New Testament we find more family stories, but especially also the so-called house tables (Eph 5:21-6:9, Col 3:18-4:1, 1 Pet 2:18-3:7). Here we see that families had "open" structures. Slaves were, for example, seen as part of the family. The motivation for slaves to work hard, for marriage partners to honour one another and for children to obey their parents, is time and again the fact that we belong to the Lord.

Families are a central part of God's concern for this world.

Apparently there are more than 40 different family structures in the Old and the New Testaments. It is therefore wrong to project the Western core family and family status of the 21st century on biblical texts.

A family's culture is tied to its own time and context. In the light of this, Müller's (2009:11) description of families can perhaps help us, also in the African context and in the broken world of our experience. He thinks of

the family as a story telling system that must be described subjectively. By this he means that any group that describes and experiences itself as a family, must be accepted as such. “Families are constituted by their stories and not by objective criteria and definitions determining from outside what can and what cannot be a family.”

VAM (2001:25) emphasises the importance of the household in dealing with need in our context. They understand a household as both the people and the physical structures. The household is the product of the interaction between diverse systems. This is where everything comes together for people – the economy, faith, relationships, etc.

The way in which the believing family deals with these matters can be a ministry of *service and witness in unity* to the community. *Service and witness* often take place through an attitude or disposition that we radiate while we go out to stand next to people in their need and identify with them. In this regard relationships are of critical importance. And the family actually is the most natural form of relationships.

From a theological and practical point of view the family and household therefore are beyond question important for *service and witness in unity*. Other ministries of the church like preaching, catechesis and youth ministry also focus ever more strongly on the family.

The theological perspective puts the covenantal character of the family on the table. In the Bible families fulfil an important role in taking care of people. The family is often seen as the church on a small scale. The church is also called God’s family (Eph 2:19).

The core family is the natural small group in which ministry is done and therefore also the training school for a ministry of *service and witness in unity* (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9).

The influence of families on friends and the way in which families minister to one another within a specific circle of friends, is important. The lifestyle of a family as such is a witness and influences circles of friends.

Chapter 5

The way ahead

5.1 The focus of this book

Our focus in this book has been on the concept of *service and witness in unity*. This is the concept on which the UMSW is founded. In chapter 2 we showed how the growing understanding and implementation of this theological concept eventually led to the formation of the UMSW. The story about this process helped us to develop a contextual and historical perspective on the real meaning of the concept. In chapter 3 we unpacked the policy document of the UMSW in which this concept is officially formulated. We examined and explained the biblical and theological basis of this policy document. In the last chapter the practical implications of the concept were scrutinised. The question was: How do we practically do *service and witness in unity*? We looked at the practical implementation of this concept in seven different manifestations of the church.

5.2 How do we proceed from here?

Now the question is: How do we proceed from here? What do we expect to happen as a result of this publication?

In the very first paragraph of the book we said that this is the first publication in a series. We indicated that, based on this book, the UMSW is planning to develop a series of workbooks for the DRC family's different outreach ministries. In other words, this book is just the introduction and theological foundation for those practical workbooks. The aim has been to clarify the concept and convince the DRC family of its practical value.

The UMSW is deeply convinced that the concept of *service and witness in unity* is the biblical expression of the missionary calling of the church. We believe that this is the way in which the DRC family should participate in the mission of the Triune God in our own context. Although we refrain from making this the only blueprint for the missionary ministry of the DRC family, we do insist that this is a clear biblical guideline for the structuring of this ministry. Our own history of *service and witness* also urges us to proceed in this direction.

5.3 Concern

We have to admit that, at present, the concept of *service and witness in unity* has not been implemented in many of the structures and manifestations of the DRC family.

On the other hand, it is encouraging to have some excellent examples of its implementation to which we can point. The UMSW itself is the most obvious of these. It combines both *service* (traditionally the *diaconal ministry*) and *witness* (what we used to refer to as *mission*) in a *united ministry*. It is not only uniting the different aspects of ministry, but it is also a *united* effort of all the churches in the DRC family. As such it is a sign of hope in the ongoing struggle of the DRC family to re-unite.

At this stage our greatest concern is that the UMSW is a structure at the level of the general synods of the DRC family. Although some of the regional synods have developed similar structures, many have not yet done so. The number of presbyteries and local congregations that have duplicated and implemented these structures are also relatively few. The real challenge, and therefore also the purpose of this book, is to convince the church at large that *service and witness in unity* is the way to go.

5.4 Appetiser

We do realise that more will be needed than just this introductory book. For synods, presbyteries and congregations to become enthusiastic about this concept, they will have to be convinced of its practical value. They will also require very practical guidelines for its implementation. This is exactly what the UMSW intends to supply in the practical workbooks to be published in future.

The book in your hand is just the appetiser and foretaste of what is still to come. We trust that you have found the reading of this book a mouth-watering experience! We trust that it has wet your appetite and that you will look out for the workbooks to come.

Service and witness in unity is indeed the ministry driven by the Triune God, who wants to involve us in this ministry. It is time to think carefully about the structure of our involvement as DRC family in this ministry.

What is God challenging us to implement at this point in our history?