

*The Session of the Central Presbyterian Church (Louisville, Kentucky) approves and recommends the following action to the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky:*

*The Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky respectfully overtures the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly (2018) to approve the creation of a Task Force:*

- 1. to develop a U.S. letter to accompany the Confession of Belhar that addresses the participation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other Reformed bodies in racism in our historical context, building on prior statements of repentance and apology. As with the original Accompanying Letter from the church in South Africa, while not of constitutional character, whenever the Confession of Belhar is printed in the Book of Confessions, it should be accompanied by this “U.S. accompanying letter” once the Task Force prepares it and it is approved by the General Assembly;*
- 2. to include within the development of this U.S. accompanying letter such topics as unfair land acquisition, near genocide of native peoples, the enslavement of African men, women, and children, and a system of white privilege which unfairly discriminates against people of color;*
- 3. to share this work with other U.S. Reformed churches and full communion partners, building on past ecumenical efforts to address the sin of racism in view of enduring tensions, and on a common concern to honor our identity as churches “reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God;”*
- 4. to request the moderators of the 222<sup>nd</sup> and 223<sup>rd</sup> Assemblies, in consultation with the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly and their advisory and advocacy committees, jointly to name a team of 7 PC(U.S.A.) members from the fields of theology, social ethics, ethnic and racial history, law and/or philosophy, capable of contributing to a concise but comprehensive statement to be presented for approval to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2020); and*
- 5. to request the Stated Clerk to invite as many as four other Reformed and/or Full Communion churches to nominate (single) representatives to serve on the task force, sharing in their costs, both to contribute to the drafting work and to help develop shared strategic conversations about our witness in a diverse culture.*

## **Rationale**

Presbyterians are one of the oldest religious bodies in the United States. A number of U.S. government structures are modeled on our church. We celebrate how Presbyterians helped shape the institutions, founding documents, and religious life of this nation.

Yet, we know the history is much more complex and problematic. Our story is fraught with failure to live according to God’s call and riddled with contradictions and sinful actions that have never been enumerated and confessed in our constitutional documents.

European founders arrived on these shores filled with dreams and seeking religious freedom, but the land was already full of people living their own dreams within thriving and diverse cultures. America had already been “discovered” and was a cherished home to native peoples! Nevertheless, many Christians, including those from our church, participated in removing native peoples and taking their land, actions that resulted in the near genocide of the original American residents. Soon after came the brutality of 246 years of chattel slavery. Many European settlers, including many Presbyterian Church leaders, owned enslaved Africans. Our church split over slavery. Many Presbyterians believed that the tragic civil war solved much of the racial injustice, yet even after slavery was officially abolished and repudiated, various forms of legal and customary racial discrimination reigned in this land for more than a century. And though many laws have now changed, institutional patterns of discrimination linger. Racism is indeed America’s original sin.

The PC(U.S.A.) took a big step towards addressing racism by adding the Confession of Belhar, the first confession from the global South, to our Book of Confessions at the last General Assembly. Written by an oppressed church suffering racial discrimination, Belhar is an important statement of solidarity and repudiation of racism. The addition of a U.S. accompanying letter will help us take the next step that is sorely needed: to name and confess the sin of racism built into the fabric of our own corporate society and individual lives.

#### *Why an accompanying letter?*

As a reminder, our collection of confessions in the Book of Confessions originated with the adoption of the Confession of 1967. The Book of Confessions includes creeds stating what we believe (Nicene, Apostles, Scots, Second Helvetic, Confession of 1967, and Brief Statement of Faith), catechisms (Heidelberg, shorter and longer catechisms) and declarations of purpose against threatening evil (Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Confession of Belhar).

Various attempts have been made over the decades to convince the PC(U.S.A.) to write its own confession regarding racism. Most often, these requests have arisen from people of color in the church calling an overwhelmingly white denomination to account for its actions.

The Confession of 1967 did address the intent of God to break “down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary” (9.44). A concise letter responding to the Confession of Belhar from the U.S. context might strengthen the new confession and also serve to address our historic complicity in sinful actions.

#### *Why now?*

The U.S. is once again facing a kairos moment with regards to its racist history. Fear of “the other” continues to permeate society and church. People of color live in fear in their own country. While some hope for a return to an imagined better past, many Presbyterians are taking action on issues of racial justice. A denominational letter modeled on and complementing the

South African example would help us better understand and apply Belhar in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. context.

The PC(U.S.A.) is an overwhelmingly white denomination wishing to diversify its membership to include people of other ethnicities. We also hope to appeal to younger people. The Millennial generation cares deeply about social justice. How can our church expect to earn the trust of new groups if we do not boldly confess our racist past? We can no longer ignore a sin that has shackled us for generations. This is the time to courageously seek forgiveness as a denomination. If not now, when?

Imagine this generation taking the courageous step to name the sin, articulate the dangerous theology and ideology that allowed the sin to be practiced for so long, and collectively apologize. Let us acknowledge what needs to be forgiven, and ask God to set us free from our sin, and lead us to a world where all people will be free to live with justice, dignity, and peace. What a gift to future generations of the church and what a message to new, diverse communities, that we pledge to strive for the eradication of racism.