

“A harvest exceeding their wildest dreams”

Birth of the Reformed Family Forum in Africa initiated by the sister churches that were founded through the influence of Andrew Murray and the work at Wellington.

The churches in Africa with historical links to the DRC in South Africa have discovered that they are indeed part of a wonderful family, that they are sister churches, inextricably bound by a shared history, a communal confessional identity and a joint calling.

Most of the younger churches, the so-called daughter churches, became self-governed in the 1960s and 70s. The process of changing from being ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ to becoming ‘sisters’ or equal partners has not always been easy. Yet, despite tensions at times, the sisterhood has prevailed.

After becoming autonomous, the individual churches in the Family have sought different concrete ways of expressing their unity. From 1960 to the middle 70s, the Family’s unity has been structured by way of a Federal Council, but that body was eventually dissolved due to the support of the Dutch Reformed Churches for *apartheid* and their dominance within the council. Several bilateral and multilateral partnership agreements have been formed since. Much mutual assistance has also been given. But it is true that for some years the Family did not manage to get together as a whole. It was thus a cheerful family reunion in Stellenbosch in 2004 when representatives of most of the sister churches could convene for a conference on “Mission in Africa”. They rediscovered one another and listened to each other’s stories. This valuable conference was followed by a conference in 2009 in Johannesburg on “Partnerships”, arranged by the United Ministry for Service and Witness of the domestic sister churches in South Africa.

Upon the initiative of Dr Kobus Gerber (General Secretary of the DRC) and with the support of Dr Kobus Odendaal (Director of Witness Ministry DRC family Cape Region), Dr Gideon van der Watt (Secretary of Partners in Mission, DRC, Free State) and Prof. Jurgens Hendricks (Network for African Congregational Theology or NetACT) it was arranged for the general secretaries of the sister churches to convene at the Justo Mwale University in Lusaka in 2015. The meeting was hosted by the Reformed Church of Zambia and most sister churches attended.

In 2016 another meeting took place at Senga Bay, at Lake Malawi. This meeting was hosted by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Nkhoma Synod. At this meeting the Reformed Family Forum (*Encontro da Familia Reformada*) was established, consisting of churches with historical links with the Dutch Reformed Church. Initially only the general secretaries of the respective churches met, but it was envisaged that other leaders will later join in too.

Over the years, especially after acquiring autonomy, the churches experienced miraculous growth. Churches like the Reformed Church of Zambia (RCZ), the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Nkhoma Synod and the Universal Reformed Christian Church (NKST) in Nigeria grew exponentially. There are also accounts of perseverance despite unimaginable hardships due to violence, civil wars, poverty and social injustice in many of our Southern African countries. Attacks by fundamentalist Islamic groups in Nigeria and Kenya as well as severe droughts have had a huge impact on the churches in these areas. We clearly need one other, we have to take hands in addressing the challenges of our continent.

The sister churches face very similar challenges in their ministry and there is a definite need for partnerships and structures such as the Reformed Family Forum to address issues such as the following:

- Partnering in the joint calling to transformational community development for the healing of our broken and wounded communities in a region with increasingly perforated borders and huge migrant populations.
- Theological training at training institutions with the valuable support and networking structures of NetACT.
- Reflecting together on our Reformed identity in the face of challenges posed by neo-Pentecostal and charismatic trends (new kinds of prophetic ministry, prosperity faith, the commercialisation of Christianity, and so on). The Reformed Family Forum agreed to deliberately work towards the missional transformation of our churches.
- Reflecting on transformational leadership models focusing on servanthood and priesthood of all believers also in our times.
- Finding ways to engage in meaningful dialogue with one another even about matters where we as separate churches hold different views.
- Finding ways to engage in prophetic dialogue with role-players in our respective socio-political, economic and ecological contexts and of bearing witness to people of other faiths.

The Reformed Family Forum consists of:

- Reformed Church of Zambia (RCZ);
- Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Nkhoma Synod, Malawi;
- Universal Reformed Christian Church (NKST) in Nigeria;
- Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (South Africa);
- Reformed Church in Zimbabwe;
- Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP)-Harare (Zimbabwe);
- Swaziland Reformed Church Swaziland;
- Dutch Reformed Church (South Africa);
- Dutch Reformed Church in Botswana;
- Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (South Africa and Namibia);
- Igreja Reformada em Mozambique;
- Reformed Church in Eastern Africa (Kenya).

A 'new' sister in our family is the

- Evangelical Reformed Church of Angola (*Igreja Evangélica Reformada de Angola* or IERA).
- The Lesotho Evangelical Church in Southern Africa (LECSA), established by the Paris Mission Society, has very close historical ties with the DRC Family. Consequently, LECSA is also drawn closer to our family which always remains open and welcomes fellowship with other Christians.

More information is available in the book edited by Gideon van der Watt and Mariëtte Odendaal called *A Family of Reformed Churches in Africa, Remarkable stories of God's Grace*, published by CLF Wellington 2017.

Kobus Odendaal