

Global Theological Consultation on Communion and Justice 4-9 March 2010 Cartigny, Switzerland

A message to the members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

Introduction

The Cartigny Message is given to the members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches as the final result of a series of consultations on Communion and Justice. These consultations took place in 2009 and were organised by the office of theology of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. There were eight regional consultations in the following order:

March 2009	Europe
March 2009	Middle East
May 2009	Latin-America
June 2009	Indonesia
August 2009	Africa
October 2009	North America and the English speaking Caribbean
October 2009	Pacific
November 2009	North East Asia

For each of these consultations delegates of the member churches of WARC and REC were invited. Some of the papers from the regional consultations are published in Reformed World (Volume 60, Number 1). Each consultation produced a final report with recommendations¹. During the consultations the desire became stronger to have a meeting of representatives of the eight regional consultations in order to produce a final message. This global consultation took place in March 2010 in Cartigny, Switzerland. One representative of each regional consultation was invited. This document is the result of that meeting.

The document has three parts. The first part is a foundational, theological message. It defines communion and justice, the relation between these two and the position of the World Communion of Reformed Churches within the wider ecumenical world. As a conclusion of this part there is a short statement of what it means to be Reformed.

The second part gives a brief historical overview of both WARC and REC and why they come together in WCRC, being committed to communion and justice. This part also gives some scriptural and confessional references.

The third and final part of the message is an outline of what the implications are of being a communion of Reformed Churches, called to justice.

It is important to read this document in conjunction with another global message to the members of WCRC – the Johannesburg Statement. It is the message of the ‘Global Dialogue on the Accra Confession’. This message was the result of a global consultation WARC organised in September 2009 in Johannesburg. To understand the

¹ The consultation in Korea in November 2009 did not come out with a report. This consultation was organised in a different way. The North East Asia Council of Churches (NEACC) of WARC organised its annual meeting with the theme Communion and Justice. WARC’s executive secretary for theology was invited to give a presentation.

commitment to communion and Justice it is essential to read this message and the message that is before you with this document.

The two together, the Cartigny message and the Johannesburg Statement provide good material generated from member churches on the major themes of the Uniting General Council – Communion and Justice.

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1. What significance does the Communion have for our churches?

Communion and justice have always been core callings of Reformed people, but never more urgently than today!

Defining communion and justice

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is built on the unity most clearly expressed in the Trinity. At the heart of the universe is a *relational* God. Through communion the member churches of WCRC can be convinced that the world by the grace of God has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. The Communion is the body of Christ based upon that reconciliation with God *and* with one another. A true mark of the Communion is a sense of belonging through accepting one another and sharing with one another: “...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” (*Ephesians 4:32*)

In Jesus Christ God has justified us. God who is just sanctifies us and calls us to do justice. In the commitment to justice we are called to act faithfully with what God has entrusted to us. Working for justice we see the world through the prism of God’s grace making manifest God’s love. Through covenanting for justice we are part of God’s work in the whole creation, “to clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (*Ephesians 4:24*)

True communion entails covenanting for justice.

Connection between communion and justice

Serious considerations of communion go hand in hand with a commitment to and in-depth engagement with justice. Both WARC and REC have become aware of this in the history of their two organisations. The call for justice requires our churches to listen deeply to those who suffer and to act in solidarity with them, even when it is costly to us. In responding to this call, we experience God’s gift of communion to us. This gift is very clearly represented in the act of Holy Communion because it reminds us that our communion is initiated by God, who sustains and transforms us in a reconciling fellowship that itself flows from the triune life of God.

Connection to our ecumenical engagement and moving forward

Visibly celebrating our communion in the World Communion of Reformed Churches is a very important step in the history of Reformed churches worldwide. It is an essential sign of having overcome division. It shows “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Ephesians 4:3*). It affirms the long commitment of Reformed theologians and church leaders, women and men who have inspired so much the ecumenical movement worldwide. It strengthens Reformed Christians worldwide in their desire for unity among the churches. It is important to underline that unity does not mean “uniformity”. True unity can very well be lived out in reconciled diversity.

We have been encouraged by reactions within the worldwide ecumenical movement that see the birth of the WCRC as a clear sign of visible Reformed unity that can only further strengthen the Reformed commitment to Christian unity. It is inspirational for the whole of the ecumenical movement. Therefore we want to affirm that the creation of the WCRC is not an end in itself.

It is part of a process that is at the heart of our ecumenical engagement wherein the member churches work for the goal of a true full communion of the church of Jesus Christ. In this engagement, we also seek further unity within the family of Reformed churches inside *and* outside the WCRC.

Communion is not a closed circle. This is valid not only concerning ecumenical engagement but also concerning the religious world wider than Christianity. We live amidst people of other faiths. Communion as the experience of God reconciling the world calls the churches to give witness to this reconciliation also by seeking dialogue with other religions. WCRC has to move forward in this direction.

Ecclesiological principle

As the ecclesiological basis for our communion we start from what Calvin saw as the true marks of the church. The church is where the word of God is preached and heard *and* where the sacraments are rightly administered. Out of this emerges the church. The WCRC is based on this ecclesiological principle and shares the true marks of the church. This is the fundamental principle underlying what is stated in article III of the draft Constitution of the WCRC, which affirms “the gifts of unity in Christ through the mutual recognition of baptism and membership, pulpit and table fellowship, ministry and witness.”

Raising our consciousness

The Calvin Jubilee (2009) has been very important for the Reformed community worldwide in rethinking its identity. Two fundamental principles of Calvin’s theology have been essential:

- The sovereignty of God over all life
- The unity of the church

These principles have been echoed in the theology of other Reformed ancestors, e.g. Zwingli.

The Calvin Jubilee has strengthened and affirmed the process of obeying God’s call to communion and justice.

Constitution and basis

The foundation of WCRC is expressed in its constitution. Signing a declaration of agreement with the basic articles of the constitution at the moment of instituting WCRC will be a powerful way in which the member churches symbolise their commitment to communion and justice.

Living out the Communion

The Communion is the body of Christ. The members of the Communion share in glory and suffering. When one part of the Communion suffers, all suffer together. The Communion is part of God’s creation. We share the joy of its beauty. We are responsible to God to take care of the earth and the fullness thereof. We will be held accountable for how we act in sustaining life of all creation. Living out the Communion is a call to life-giving ministry.

Our Common Calling

Statements that describe our common calling include the following:

- To be Reformed is to witness to the sovereignty of God
- To be Reformed is to joyfully receive God's gifts of communion and justice
- To be Reformed is to live in communion
- To be Reformed is to be committed to justice
- To be Reformed is to be ecumenical
- To be Reformed is to seek unity in reconciled diversity

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2. Background of the common calling

The common calling to Communion and Justice is rooted in the Bible, the Reformed Confessions, the actions over the years of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC).

This common calling has been a theme in a series of eight regional consultations on Communion and Justice held worldwide in 2009.

Scriptural references

We respond to the call to communion and justice in faithfulness to the word of God. We believe that it is God who moves us in this direction. We begin with God's action! As foundational scriptural references we see:

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (*Psalms 133:1*)

“I ask you Father... that they may all be one.” (*John 17:21*)

“...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...” (*Ephesians 4:3*)

“...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice...” (*Micah 6:8*)

“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.” (*Psalms 82:3*)

“I came that they may have life and have it in fullness.” (*John 10:10*)

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to God.” (*2 Corinthians 5:19*)

Confessional basis

The World Communion of Reformed Churches sees itself as part of the universal church. It stands within the tradition of the Reformation, where the historic Reformed confessions and 20th century confessions (Barmen, Belhar) were written in close connection to the word of God. They were confessions expressed in specific historical situations. We want to follow this tradition, in faithfulness to the word of God and reading the signs of our own times.

John Calvin saw the divisions in the church of his day, destroying human fellowship and Christian relationship, as among the chief evils of that time. In 1552, in a letter to the English reformer, Thomas Cranmer – the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury – Calvin exclaimed that he would cross ten seas to promote the unity of

the church. Seeking unity within and through the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we want to respond to Calvin's legacy.

WARC–REC actions

The response to our common calling has been shaped through actions of both WARC and REC over the years. Among these actions, we want to mention:

- The Resolution adopted at the General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches in Montreal in 1937 that spoke out against the fascist doctrine in Nazi-Germany.
- The creation of a Department of Women's Work at the General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches in Princeton in 1954. This department "worked incessantly for the full integration of women in the different spheres of the church's life".²
- The merger between the International Congregational Council and the Alliance of the Reformed Churches in 1970 under the name of World Alliance of Reformed Churches.
- The declaration of *status confessionis* at the General Council of WARC in Ottawa in 1982 that rejected apartheid in South Africa as a sin and the theological justification of apartheid as a heresy.
- The document *Just Stewardship* on taking care of God's creation adopted at the REC Assembly in Grand Rapids in 1996.
- The *Declaration of Debrecen* adopted at the General Council of WARC in 1997, committing the Alliance to struggle for justice and affirming with the Heidelberg Catechism that "We belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to ourselves but to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ."
- The *Accra Confession* adopted at the General Council of WARC in Accra in 2004, speaking about justice in the economy and the earth and the nature of the Christian community.
- The REC Assembly at Utrecht in 2005 endorsed the Micah Challenge. (The Micah Challenge is a global coalition of Christians holding governments to account for their promise to halve extreme poverty by 2015.)

God's action has led the Reformed family as disciples through these steps to this calling to communion and justice today!

Regional consultations on communion and justice

Eight regional consultations on communion and justice were held in 2009 in Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, Indonesia, Africa, North America, the Pacific, and Korea. WARC and REC member churches were invited to these consultations, in which there were common themes and divergent perspectives. The common themes include:

- the Trinitarian and eucharistic foundation of communion
- the deep link between communion and justice
- ecumenism
- stronger mutual accountability through communion
- attentiveness to contextual interpretation and the interaction between global and local
- the link between communion and reconciliation

² Marcel Prandervand, *A Century of Service*, Edinburgh, 1975, 250.

- the reception of the Accra Confession

Opinions varied on:

- the different contextual challenges for interfaith relations
- differences in understanding ‘empire’
- awareness of ecological issues
- contextual differences in Reformed spirituality and liturgy
- the variety of involvement in covenanting for justice

The regional set-up of the consultations was most helpful for two reasons: we were together in the contexts in which the Communion will be lived out, and we could have the greatest possible participation. But regional meetings could not have the dynamic trans-continental interaction of a global consultation. Therefore, one participant of each regional consultation was invited to the global consultation on communion and justice, held from 4-9 March in Cartigny, Switzerland. This is the report of that consultation.

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3. The implications of the common calling for our witness today

Reading the signs of the times

Every church is always challenged to be sensitive to the things happening in its context. There are different ways of reading and responding to the signs of the times. Churches have to hear from each other how they read the signs of the times and how they respond to them.

We live out of the grace of God, out of God’s hope for this earth, out of God’s call for solidarity and justice. A theological discussion is needed about the way churches interpret the signs of the times. Questions to be asked include:

- Do we use the word ‘sin’?
- What is the role of the apocalyptic vision?
- Do we fear to judge the world?
- What is the role of fundamentalism?

We are called to a positive and faithful attitude. This doesn’t mean that we should not take the issues extremely seriously and act with all our strength against them.

A Communion should help in enabling churches to address their own government and national constituencies. The change to a model of qualitative instead of quantitative growth is a spiritual issue and has to be part of every church’s agenda. How could our Communion serve to find alternatives in economic and environmental issues? We do not take enough advantage of what is already happening inside our Communion. It may be true that even all the churches together remain a small and vulnerable player worldwide. But being vulnerable does not mean being without any influence. We should not feel overwhelmed by the enormous Powers. Paul speaks the truth also for us when he says (2 *Corinthians* 11:30): “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

Relating the Communion to ethical, anthropological, social, economic, and ecological issues

Against the background of Reformed theological reflection it is important to underline that what communion means in the vertical (towards God) is linked with the

horizontal direction (towards our neighbours). There is a direct link between faith, communion and ethics.

We relate our Communion to ethical, anthropological, social, economic, and ecological issues through theological-biblical resources and listening to those affected. The Accra Confession was a milestone in this process. It is now time to take the next steps in building on the vision of the Accra Confession. We need to speak the truth to power in ways that can change the powerful. We need to move beyond debates in order to live out the Accra Confession in our current situations in the framework of a Communion.

We are aware that in parts of the Reformed family, it can be difficult to give room for a dialogue on social and ethical issues. WCRC needs to strengthen the theological thinking and expertise of its member churches in order to assist the member churches in creating room for this. Through this, the Communion between the churches would be strengthened and made more visible. Being a Communion has an effect on what happens in the local church.

We should not fear contradictory debates. Compared with other Christian traditions, there is enough room for this in the Reformed tradition. Communion is not about forcing everyone into consensus. It is an open space where one can feel safe to disagree, without breaking or leaving the Communion. We may need to discuss the limits to disagreement, but unity doesn't mean uniformity. If we belong to each other, we also engage in dialogue with each other, to listen and learn from each other's point of view and contextual experience.

How can the WCRC live out justice?

- by sharing bread and wine as God's own gift to us
- by joyfully embracing God and neighbour
- by reading the stories of the Bible in the light of our own personal, ecclesial, economical and social reality
- by promoting a theological understanding that integrates and opens room for the discussion of social and ethical issues
- by sharing theological, liturgical and human resources: developments in one country can impact churches in other countries
- by listening with compassion to the victims and hearing about their situation
- by confessing our sins
- by finding possible ways to heal the pains of the victims: the WCRC should be a communion of those who act
- by rejecting patriarchy and discrimination and working for a just community in which the gifts of all women and men, young and old, and people of all races and castes can be appreciated and given space to blossom within the church and society

The message from the Global Dialogue on the Accra Confession (Johannesburg, September 2009) emphasised the relevance of the word "empire" as a theological concept to define the powers of evil and to describe an unjust economic and ecological system. We are called to name the powers of evil, but we are also called to act from our faith that no empire can overcome the kingdom of God. We are far away from living in the kingdom of God, but that doesn't allow us to resign or to give up our faith in the power of God. Because that enables us to resist and struggle for justice and peace on earth. Communion should help in designing action, signs of hope and alternatives.

How can we strengthen the sense of being a Communion

- by sharing experiences and resources and strengthening the communion feeling (globalisation from below)
- by strengthening the network on a theological level and being in solidarity with each other, empowering and encouraging each other to address common issues
- by acting together continentally and regionally, recognizing the work done by others
- by keeping communication flowing inside and among the regions: the rings of communion have to be connected
- by addressing issues that are difficult for some churches; this can strengthen the Communion. (For instance: violence against women and children; injustice in the economy; climate justice; sexual identity and orientation; HIV/AIDS, etc.)

Fulfilling the Communion will need full participation of both women and men. We need to develop a more inclusive approach.

What is the church, where does it start, where does it end? Reformed ecclesiology doesn't end at the border of the local church; neither is the Communion the office in Geneva. Communion happens at the local level. The local church must develop the feeling of ownership of the universal dimension of the church. The ecumenical movement gives us the chance to live the universal character of being the church. This is the added value of the Communion. The idea of communion and justice can help us to find ways of belonging together better.

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Conclusion

“Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace” is the theme of the Uniting General Council where the World Communion of Reformed Churches will be instituted. Reformed churches worldwide are called to communion and called to justice. Against the background of a global process of reflection on communion and justice, this message is sent to the churches to support them in their commitment to communion and justice. It is God who calls us to do this. To God be the glory!