

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

Rev Dr Jerry Pillay

Introduction

1. Psalm 106 verses 1-3 reads thus: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or declare all his praise? Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times."
2. It is quite interesting that in the context of worship, thanks and praise to God that the Psalmist adds the focus of justice and righteousness. This is as if to say that those "worthy" to worship God are the ones whose lives and living express justice and righteousness. The prophet Isaiah also goes to great extent to relate this connection between worship and justice in a very special way as he links true worship in the contexts of the poor, oppressed and forgotten people.
3. This report majors on two essential sections, among other things, as it focuses on the theme of this executive committee meeting on "Justice, Peace and Reconciliation" and then on "Organizational Matters" that pertain to the WCRC. It shall make some significant points as it calls for a return to the 2011 Vision and Strategic directions of the WCRC. However, before we venture there let us assess the context in which we meet here in Lebanon.

The Context

4. As we gather here in Lebanon we are starkly reminded of the conflict in the Middle East. The situation here is complex, volatile and unsettling as one wanders through the corridors of understanding. What exactly are the relationships and source of conflict between the neighbouring countries? Will there ever be peace and reconciliation between Israel, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the others? The Israel-Hezbollah conflict is also about ISIS, oil, nukes and global terror. It is not my intention to venture into this discussion; there are other more competent people who will address us on this theme during our time in Lebanon. My point of focus is in relation to our theme for this Executive Committee meeting here in Lebanon: *Justice, Peace and Reconciliation*.
5. However, let me offer some brief information about the context in Lebanon in order to set the scene. With its high literacy rate and trading culture Lebanon has been an important commercial hub for the Middle East. It has also been the centre of Middle Eastern conflicts, despite its small size, because of its borders with Syria and Israel and its uniquely complex communal make-up. From 1975 until the early 1990's Lebanon endured a civil war in which regional players—in particular Israel, Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization—used the country as a battleground for their own conflicts.
6. Syrian troops moved in shortly after the war started. Israeli troops invaded in 1978 and again in 1982, before pulling back to a self-declared "security zone" in the south from which they withdrew in May 2000. Syria continued to exert considerable political clout in Lebanon even after the withdrawal of its troops in 2005 ended a 29-year military presence. It seems that the government remains fragile and increasingly at the mercy of the Syrian situation.
7. Muslim groups have demanded that representation should reflect their increased proportion in the population. This communal tension has been at the heart of most internal conflict in Lebanon, and neighbouring states have used it as a pretext to intervene. Lebanon has also seen several large influxes of Palestinian refugees. They and their descendants make up as much as a tenth of the country's population and, needless to say, their presence, status and actions have been major sources of discord.
8. The Middle East continues to remain fragile and volatile. Peace is only maintained by treaties and security agreements that are essentially not adhered to or valued with sincere commitment. This reality is not only to be found in the Middle East. The truth is that our world is plagued by injustices, cruelty, violation of human rights, hunger, poverty, political turmoil and oppression, economic discrepancies, unemployment, religious violence and intolerance, and the list goes on. The tragic fact

is that we tend to do some of these in the name of God, but at the heart of it all is economic, political and selfish endeavor. The world is dominated by greed, power over the powerless, self-acquisitiveness which usually leads to injustice and oppression.

9. The world is in crisis as we consider the situations in the Middle East, Russia and the Ukraine, racial tensions in the USA, the impact of IS and the violence it has generated in Europe and other parts of the world, religious conflicts in Nigeria, Sudan, Kenya, Egypt and other parts of Africa with the rise of the Boko Haram. We witness the rise of ethnic, tribal and xenophobic intolerance and racial violence in many parts of the world. We are in crisis. However, crisis gives us opportunity to make changes, challenge injustices, work for peace, assert moral and human values and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ afresh in a world of growing secularism, materialism, greed and violence. The crucial question for the WCRC is how we plan to engage these realities and challenges?
10. It is very appropriate that this executive committee meets under the theme: *Justice, Peace and Reconciliation*. In my opinion, the mandate of the 2010 General Council: *Covenanted to Communion and Committed to Justice* addresses some of these challenges we face today. The Accra Confession of 2004, in particular, places this squarely and consciously on the table. However, we seem to have side tracked from this direction, I will return to this later in the section on "Organizational Matters." For now, allow me to focus on our theme for this executive meeting.

Justice, Peace and Reconciliation

11. At the Global Consultation on the Accra Confession I was asked to speak on the "*WCRC and its justice perspective: Where we are, and where do we plan to go as we celebrate a decade of the Accra Confession?*" Since many members of the executive committee were not present at that meeting, I have decided to offer here some of the things I mentioned which captures where I see us on the aspect of justice.
12. I will not attempt to go into detail on my thoughts, so I will merely offer a summary in points and undertake a little elaboration where necessary. I will also reflect on the Accra Confession since its adoption ten years ago. What follows is an extract from that presentation.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The 2010 General Council met under the theme: "*called to communion, committed to justice.*" We have said quite emphatically that we cannot have communion without justice and justice without communion. They are two sides of a coin, two wings of a bird or two blades of a scissor—you need both to work effectively. However, the tendency has been to put more emphasis on communion and less on justice or vice-versa. There are those who are not comfortable talking about justice so they wish to focus more on communion, and then there are those who only really wish to speak about justice.
- 1.2 In the context of the WCRC, you have to have both. Our communion has great diversity. How do we experience *koinonia*? How do we engage true fellowship, justice, peace and integrity? We are surrounded by inequalities brought about by economics, socio-political standing, geographical setting, etc. The question is: How do we bring these inequalities to the table and how do we address them within the communion because invariably they influence and affect relationships.
- 1.3 Hence if we are to work on being a *true* communion then we would have to focus on justice issues as we address injustices in the world and in relationships.
- 1.4 I am finding that there is a tendency today to warm up to the idea of justice but that is largely attributed to the changing circumstances of people in their context.

2. Where are we as the WCRC on Justice?

- 2.1. In my opinion, the Accra Confession best expresses the WCRC view about justice but before we attempt to look at that, it may be necessary to mention something about the background which led to the formulation

- of the Confession.
- 2.2 The Council at Debrecen called on the WARC Member Churches: *“To work towards the formulation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life which express justice in the whole household of God and reflect priority for the poor and support an ecologically sustainable future.”*
 - 2.3 This resulted in the Accra Confession which was adopted at the 24th General Council of WARC in 2004. It was based on the *seeing, judging and acting* model accepted at Kitwe and the *recognition, education and confession* model spoken about at Debrecen.
 - 2.4 Whilst the Accra Confession tends to deliberate quite extensively on economic justice, it also recognizes that gender justice and eco-justice are necessary ingredients to a conversation on justice.
 - 2.5 After the adoption of the Accra Confession in 2004, I must admit that we struggled to get off the ground in some quarters. It seems that our discussions got dominated by two words that were used; namely: “Empire” and “Confession.” Some, particularly Europe and America, became quite uncomfortable with the use of the word “Empire.” They felt targeted because of their economic status in the world. However, this was primarily a misunderstanding since “Empire” was not intended to have a geographical focus in as much as it was aimed at reflecting on the concept of power and wealth itself. For example, today we notice that there are new arising empires such as China.
 - 2.6 The word “confession” also created, and perhaps still does, confusion among member churches. This largely arises out of the different understandings and processes and procedures within these churches in formulating and accepting confessions. In some churches “confessions” have to go through a process whereby a two-thirds majority is required to accept a confession, in others a general assembly may take such a decision. My general response to this conflictive conversation in my travel to member churches is to say to them that they should not get too caught up in the debate of “confession” or “declaration” or whatever else; instead they should focus on the content of the Accra Confession and what it has to say about justice and what that means for us in our own context or in the worldwide context. I have found that this approach has helped to make a difference.
 - 2.7 The crucial change in the perception and acceptance of the Accra Confession really came in 2008 when we faced the world economic recession. Suddenly it all started to make sense and the Accra Confession was praised for its prophetic insight and wisdom. It would be true to say that ever since then the Accra Confession has been received with new appreciation and understanding, but this is not true for everyone.
 - 2.8 So, let’s return to the question about where we are on justice as the WCRC by asking: “What have we done with the Accra Confession in the last decade?”
 - 2.9 If the truth be told, the WCRC itself has not done much with it or, at least, it could have done much more than it has attempted to do in the last 10 years. I will mention some of the things the WCRC has succeeded in doing just now; allow me first to qualify my position briefly in the next point.
 - 2.10 I suspect that many of our member churches have not as yet distributed the Accra Confession to their own members. Ten years later it still remains on our shelves, so to speak, or in file 13. We have not adequately motivated and excited our congregations to engage with the Accra Confession contextually. The real challenge is to live out the Accra Confession wherever we are. I must acknowledge that there are some member churches that have done/are doing well with the latter through dialogue, Bible studies, inclusion in liturgy and other such activities, based on the Confession. However, we need to see much more than this!
 - 2.11 All is not lost; one of the greatest joys is to see other ecumenical organizations use the Accra Confession in fabulous and different ways. For example, the WCC has written many books using this Confession, the Council for World Mission has formulated its theological statement using this as its basis, and Europe has conducted workshops and produced books and articles on the Confession. Indeed, there are many commendable initiatives and explorations on the theme of justice emerging out of the Accra Confession. We simply applaud these contributions and are so pleased that others have taken this further than we have. We have always maintained that the Accra Confession is the WCRC “gift” to the (ecumenical) world, and we mean that. Hence we are greatly overjoyed to learn that it is being used and appreciated at such a wide level.
 - 2.12 However, let me be quick to add that whilst we offer the Accra Confession as a “gift” to others, we must also reclaim the vision of the Accra Confession with its focus on justice for ourselves as an organization, and it is imperative that we appropriate the “gift” for ourselves. Justice is not just something we impart to others; we make it a part of our lifestyle, too!
 - 2.13 So what have we done in the past 10 years with the Accra Confession? Where are we in our justice focus? As far as economic justice is concerned, one of the major developments is the establishment of

the New International Economic and Financial Architecture Plan. It is a collaboration of four organizations: WCC, CWM, LWF and the WCRC to suggest alternatives to the economic models we currently have. There is no sense in just criticizing current economic trends without also trying to provide alternatives. This group is busy attempting precisely the latter. We commend this initiative and hope that it would deliver new models that promote economic justice, for all.

- 2.14 In the area of gender justice, we have conducted workshops and produced a lot of books and material to sensitize and educate both men and women on this subject. However, we need to continue to encourage and develop practical ideas of how we may work more effectively in the area of gender justice.
- 2.15 Of greater challenge is the fact that the 2010 Uniting General Council resolved that the next council would consist of 50% women and 50% men as delegates. This was, indeed, a bold decision which has made some people uncomfortable and unhappy. How are we going to effect such a decision if we do not actively dialogue and challenge the leadership of member churches who remain with male-dominated leadership? We need to embark on a strategy now if we are to succeed in implementing the 2010 decision.
- 2.16 In the area of eco-justice we have also joined with an ecumenical initiative with the WCC, CWM and others on the Oikotree movement. We need to continue with this in a more defined and definite way.
- 2.17 Although our justice perspective speaks of an integrated approach of working with other organizations to address economic, gender and eco-justice; I'm not sure that we as the WCRC have adequately articulated or implemented this. Of course, financial resources have become a challenge over the last few years. This has prompted us to move from Geneva to Hannover in Germany. As an organization we have focused on financial survival and sustainability, and rightly so. However, new experiences and realities urge us to consider new ways of working and achieving our goals. In this light, I submit that we need a more definite and effective strategy for WCRC justice work. I sincerely hope that this consultation would be able to deliver such a strategy.

3. Where do we go?

- 3.1 Let me conclude by offering what I would consider as some principles that we should adopt as the WCRC as we talk about where we need to go. It is not my intention to provide thoughts about programmes and activities but to mention at least three concepts that need to undergird our continued work in the area of justice. What are they?
- 3.2 Firstly, we need to have *critical solidarity*. In South Africa at the birth of our democracy, the SACC decided to adopt a position of critical solidarity, but it proved to be more in solidarity and less critical. We must guard against such trappings and dangers. By critical solidarity, I refer to our prophetic witness in the world. We need to look at what is happening in different places where our member churches are found, and beyond, and we need to get more connected with their situations of injustices, oppression and struggles. We seem to be less concerned with these at the moment. We need to get more involved with the realities of our people. WARC did this when it took decisions to call for sanctions and boycotts in the apartheid South Africa, and we all know the impact this had in the dismantling of apartheid. What is happening in Israel/Palestine, in the Ukraine, in Nigeria, Madagascar, etc.? How do we speak into these contexts bearing in mind what we learn from the example of our Lord, Jesus Christ?
- 3.3 Secondly, we need what I would call *constructive engagement*. Even within the WCRC family we have different theological and ethical views on different subjects. For example, the ordination of women and human sexuality. How do we journey with one another on these often divisive issues? How do we create "safe spaces" for open and honest reflections and dialogue without injuring the unity and love we ought to have for one another as part of the same body? These are critical and necessary questions given the reality of our times and the struggle to be church together in the world. We need constructive engagement that speaks of hospitality, love and sustained unity.
- 3.4 Thirdly, we need *conscious transformation*. Simply meaning, we need to consider what actions can be taken to change unjust and oppressive situations. We cannot simply look at injustices and move on. Compassion compels us to stay, to pitch our tents and work for justice. We tend to turn a blind eye to many realities perhaps because it is easier to do than to get involved. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that a good neighbour is one who slows down and takes the time to make another's problem, his problem. Why? In essence, this is what the Lord requires: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

- 3.5 In concluding, let me say that what we need is *vision* and *visibility* as the WCRC at all levels from the congregations to the denominational structures of member churches, and right to the global structures of the WCRC. We need a strategy that puts justice at the heart of our communion as we seek to get our “hands dirty” as we work for justice, peace and unity in the church and most significantly in the world.
13. To summarise, the Accra Confession speaks about justice on three levels: economic justice, gender justice and eco-justice. This is quite comprehensive and absolutely essential as we address the challenges in the world today.
 14. Getting back to the Middle East situation we have to say that justice has to do with human rights. Quite clearly as we look at the situation between Israel and Palestine it has a lot to do with human rights. Christians are often divided about where they stand on this issue, some with Israel and others with Palestine. More frequently than not those who side with Palestine are doing so from the perspective of human rights and justice. And the majority of Christians that support Israel tend to justify this from some sense of biblical allegiance, often not asking deeper theological and biblical questions on the context.
 15. The Palestinians have made it quite clear that there can be no peace without justice, and quite rightly so. Palestinian Christians have taken it further to say that justice and peace must be brought about by love and not necessarily through violence and hatred. Niam Ateek’s book *Justice, and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* articulates this rather well (Ateek 1998).
 16. The enmity and hatred are so powerful and debilitating that it affects the free travel of foreigners who wish to visit any of these countries or anyone who speaks out against Israel. Religious bodies and different faith communities have a responsibility of working for justice, peace and reconciliation; instead we get caught up with political and economic issues that often make us take sides based on this instead of justice and peace.
 17. For example, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam the true object of faith is not the community of believers but the one, transcendent God who is the Creator and Lord of all. In the Jewish *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one God” (Deut. 6:14)), in the first article of the Christian Creed (“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth”) and in the first phrase of the Muslim *Shahadah* (“There is no God but God”) the one, unique God of all the universe is proclaimed as the only reality worthy of ultimate loyalty and devotion. Belief in the transcendent unity and uniqueness of God provides an internal critique of all tendencies to absolutize the faith community itself. In addition, the loyalty owed to God implies loyalty to and responsibility toward every human being.
 18. Each of the three religions, therefore, contains normative principles that emphasize the religious and ethical relationship that binds all persons together in a universal, moral community. When this is realized, religious belief can become an ally of universal, moral community and human rights rather than a threat to them.
 19. Only when Jews, Christians and Muslims have discovered in their own beliefs a better way to respect one another will the “fissiparous quality of religious life” be transformed (Smith 2007). The universalist aspect of each tradition is a key factor in this process. Taken alone, however, it is insufficient. In addition, each community must find a basis for respecting the distinctiveness of the other communities within the structure of its own belief. The task, then, is not the homogenization of the religious faiths but of their development in a *new direction*. For each faith, this development will entail a new respect for and understanding of the distinctive religious faith of the others. This is the only way in which we can find peace and reconciliation and respect and appreciation for a common humanity and human life.
 20. Peace is not just the absence of war; it is more than that. It is about finding a new way of life that reflects the *Shalom* (wholeness) of God. It is about inviting the reign of God that brings in justice, peace and the reconciliation of human beings to be reconciled with God and with one another and with all creation, both human and non-human. It is embedded in the knowledge that you cannot have peace without justice and you cannot have true reconciliation without having peace and justice.

21. The ecumenical movement has helped show us how justice, peace and reconciliation (unity) all come together, and that it is difficult to have the one without the other. Ecumenism is concerned with the world. This has always been the case in history, whether in earlier centuries, or during the self-consciously ecumenical twentieth century. The Greek word *oikoumene* refers to the whole inhabited earth. From the perspective of the Christian faith, the ecumenical movement sees the world in a particular light—of what it is, could be, should be and will become.
22. In recent years, attempts have increasingly been made to use the metaphor of *oikos*, household, implied in the *oikoumene*, to develop this vision further. Ecumenical leaders and theologians are deliberately relating the *oikoumene* of the church to the *oikounomia* or fullness of the life of the Trinitarian God, to be reflected in the life of the church (Smith 2007). The *oikoumene* is furthermore related to the global political and economic realities, critically discussed from the perspective of the political economy of the Holy Spirit, as well to the inhabitable earth, and, in fact, the whole of creation and ecology. The *oikos* of church, political economy and earth all together form part of the one household of life in the economy of the living Triune God.
23. The ecumenical movement has generally focused on two essential themes that it has attempted to hold together in varying degrees over the years; that is, it has always understood that “efforts towards manifesting the unity of the church” and “efforts towards common witness and service in the world (justice)” should be held together. The WCRC has done no different in holding communion and justice together.
24. We have spoken above mainly about justice and peace. Let us now reflect on unity and reconciliation. The world is characterized by “an identity of fragmentation” or “not-having-an-identity” according to Gerben Heitink, the leading Dutch practical theologian. We do not live in a time of unity, whether in the world, in societies or in the lives of people—and it is therefore not a time for unity in the church or for the ecumenical movement either. The earlier enthusiasm is gone. The vision is lost. Some talk about “paradigm shifts” and “challenges,” others talk about “crises,” “stagnation” and “standstill,” but they all refer to the same reality, the loss of the classical vision of visible ecumenical unity.
25. Over the last decade the world has become one—and this one world in which we live has become a new kind of world within many of us and of our contemporaries, and it has deeply affected our views of unity in church and society. This new kind of oneness is affected by the effects of globalization which has radically challenged and changed culture, economy and political power across the globe. In short, the one world is impacting on our smaller life-worlds, we become increasingly part of this one new world-community, and in the process other communities, other societies, other spheres of life—whether cultural, economic, or political—lose their orientating and life-giving influence in our lives. One of these effects is that many earlier spheres and circles of community in our lives increasingly lose their role in our lives—including church and society.
26. It may seem obvious that Reformed Christians should be deeply committed to the visible unity of the church. Historically, many Reformed people have taken the unity, the catholicity and the ecumenicity of the church extremely seriously. Systematically, that is easy to explain in terms of the deepest thrust of the Reformed faith itself, probably most aptly described in the well-known words “We do not belong to ourselves”—used by Calvin in his depiction of the Christian life.
27. Perhaps here we should refer to the Confession of Belhar (1986) which helps us to bring the understanding of unity and justice together in both church and society. It is a long quote but worth the full mention:

“We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. We believe that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another; that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain; that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and

groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;

“That this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another’s burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and build one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

“That this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

“That true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church.” (Belhar Confession 1986; for the text, see Cloete & Smith 1984)

28. It is thus clear that unity should be visible, yes, but in a variety of ways, and then a range of Biblical allusions invite those who confess to use their imagination to think creatively about different forms in which this living unity could become visible. This unity is not to be equated with uniformity.
29. The second set of convictions is found in the overall structure of the Confession, in the way this living unity, real reconciliation (article three) and caring justice (article four) belong integrally together. That there can be no real unity without real reconciliation and caring justice is confessed here. At least according to Belhar these belong together.
30. Indeed this understanding of justice, peace and reconciliation and unity have deep implications for the WCRC in a variety of ways in how we relate to one another as member churches, how we work towards a true communion as we seek justice, peace and reconciliation and unity among ourselves. It also has implications about how we work for these in a world filled with injustices, no peace and no reconciliation. We shall return to this in the paragraph on “Theology, communion and mission.”

Organizational Matters

Leadership and management

31. It was my privilege and joy to visit and address various general assemblies of member churches, offer presentations in different forums, deliver academic papers in university settings and journey with member churches in various ways. Chris and I have been particularly engaged in addressing conflict situations with our member churches in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that are leading to a potential split in the denomination. Our efforts there have been hugely successful in getting the warring parties together, but the process is now delayed and stalled by the lack of a desire to resolve the issues at hand. We pray that a vision for unity and reconciliation will be restored.
32. It is quite concerning that fragmentations and splits within member churches are becoming the order of the day. These are usually initiated by personality conflicts, differences in worship and theological issues, and these days mainly on the differences of understanding and acceptance on the matter of human sexuality. It is painfully sad to see that the issue of homosexuality, lesbianism, and same-sex marriage is continuing to divide the churches rather widely. In the last report I pointed to ways in which the WCRC can offer to play a role in assisting our churches with these challenges, and I am pleased to say that some churches affected by this have already taken us up on these challenges, and processes are already in progress to journey with our member churches in significant ways of

facilitating dialogue and understanding. This is something we will continue to do with energy and commitment.

33. I have continued to facilitate the process of reunification with the Dutch Reformed family in South Africa. Significant meetings and breakthroughs were achieved with conversations with all four churches: URCSA, DRC, DRCSA and DRCA leading to the signing of a "Memorandum of Agreement" among these churches. The DRC and URCSA advanced their movement by adopting a special "Memorandum of Agreement" and a "Road Map towards Unity."
34. Unfortunately, I am sad to report that the second process to adopt the Belhar Confession as a confession within the DRC has already conclusively failed because the process requires that all synods and congregations have to approve this with a two third majority. We have confirmation that least two synods have officially not approved this with the majority required or have overwhelmingly said "no" to Belhar in spite of the fact that the General Synod in 2013 with a 93% support voted to accept the Belhar Confession, and then send it to synods and congregations to vote. This is, of course, hugely disappointing for the leadership of both churches and has its own setbacks on the unity dialogues. We had a meeting in April where this was addressed, and we agreed that the leadership teams should continue with earnest to salvage the situation. A lot has to do with what transpires at the DRC General Synod in October 2015. Please continue to pray over this process and for wisdom and courage for the executive of the DRC and all concerned.
35. At the May 2014 executive meeting we rejoiced in the smooth transition and movement we had made from Geneva to Hannover. We acknowledged with thanks and appreciation the work of the Rev. Dr. Setri Nynomi over the past 14 years as he came to the end of his tenure with the WCRC. We welcomed with joy the appointment of the Rev. Chris Ferguson as the new general Secretary of the WCRC with from effect 1 August 2014, which included the handing over period for a month.
36. The handing over period went well and culminated in a wonderful service at the end of August 2014. Chris fully took over the reins of leadership as general secretary since 1 September 2014. He has been in office now for almost ten months. I have been able to work with him consistently on a number of matters pertaining to the life and work of the WCRC. We have had regular Skype calls and at least four officers Skype conferences since September 2014 to now, and we also met physically in November 2014 at the global consultation on the Accra Confession in Hannover.
37. I must point out that just prior to the time of Setri's departure, there were some challenges related to the reappointment of Viktória as the assistant to the executive secretaries for theology and justice. It was then decided to give her a temporary appointment until April 2015. Unfortunately this created tensions among the staff, and Chris as the new general secretary had to address this matter which started to escalate in proportion, warranting my intervention and involvement as president. I visited the office and addressed the issues with the general secretary, executive secretaries and support staff in separate and combined meetings. We agreed on a fair process that would determine whether Viktória would be appointed to a permanent position or not. As it would be, the process involving all the executive staff decided that she should not be appointed to the said position. There were differences of opinion between executive staff on this decision that resulted in some additional tension. There is a process in place to appoint a new staff member to this position even as I write, and I am sure that Chris would report on this. Whilst this matter, in my opinion, is now concluded I thought I should mention it because some rumours and misinformation have been doing its rounds. My intention is to set the record straight on this matter.
38. In my 2014 report I pointed out that the WCRC must move from *Transition* to *Transformation*. In my view, we currently have a vision of transformation but the time has now come for implementation of this vision with all energy, desire and determination.
39. Admittedly, since 2011 to 2013 we were quite occupied with issues related to finance, relocation and the move to Hannover. Whilst we may have succeeded in holding the fort during those trying times, it can be said that our work of delivery on our vision, mission and strategic direction, agreed upon in 2011, took a little bit of a dive and distraction. My view is that this current executive committee must direct all its focus and energy on implementing this strategy as much as possible in the next two and a

half years so that we have a very solid and formidable foundation to offer to the new executive committee that would be appointed by the 2017 General Council.

40. To refresh your memories of this strategic document, I requested the General Secretary to resend it to all members of the executive committee, but I will include here a few points for easy reference. In 2011, the executive agreed on the following "Vision, Mission and values Statement:"

Vision

To live out the Communion of Reformed Churches, participating in God's mission, that all may experience the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

Mission

Drawing on the heritage of the Reformed confessions as a gift for the renewal of the whole church, the World Communion of Reformed Churches is committed to communion and justice and, in partnership with other ecumenical bodies and organizations, we participate in God's mission in the world as we proclaim the saving grace and love of our Triune God by mutually working for: Christian unity and renewal in worship, theology and spirituality; justice; eradication of poverty; building right relations; integrity of creation; interfaith relations; reconciliation, healing, peace and the transformation of both churches and society.

Values

In a spirit of openness and transparency, and speaking the truth in love to ourselves and the world, we affirm the values described in Article IV of the WCRC Constitution:

- A. The World Communion of Reformed Churches strives to demonstrate and live the *oneness* in Christ we profess, to carry out its ministry in ways that *enable all member churches to share* their gifts, and to honour and be committed to God's saving purposes for the transformation of the world. The World Communion of Reformed Churches serves its members with love and care, encouraging their mutual support and nurture of one another.
- B. The World Communion of Reformed Churches in its order and actions is called to respect, defend, and advance the *dignity of every person*. In Jesus Christ all human differences must lose their power to divide. No one shall be disadvantaged for, among other reasons, race, ethnicity, or gender, and no individual or church may claim or exercise dominance over another.
- C. The World Communion of Reformed Churches embraces *God's covenant promises for the redemption, restoration and renewal of the whole creation* through Jesus Christ. In doing so, it affirms the biblical calling of the members to recognize the gift of baptism in one another, and the call to be unified in ministry, and together to bear witness to God's justice and peace and to the integrity of creation.

41. The Executive also approved the following key strategic directions for the WCRC:

1.Key directions

- 1.1. The WCRC aims, by the end of 2017, to be known as a Communion that unites Reformed churches in God's mission in the world. Our internal relationships will evidence the oneness for which Jesus prayed. The WCRC will have significantly contributed to the world church's awareness of and ability to address theologically and practically, issues of justice, equality, reconciliation and peace-building. The WCRC will be the place to go for theological and practical resources on these issues. The WCRC will be an interwoven network committed to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world, and will be widely acknowledged as an effective convener of significant training and resourcing for leaders and future leaders so that they may contribute theologically and practically to the mission of the member churches. The core of the network will be sustainable with core functions funded with

revenue from member churches. The WCRC, at every level, embarks on this journey using the following key directions (not in rank order):

1.1.1. *Mission*

The WCRC is called into God's holistic mission and commissioned to seek new ways of engaging in mission. As a communion, the WCRC strengthens doing mission in unity and stimulates reflections that make our churches' mission effective and relevant to the 21st century. The call to proclaim the saving grace and love of the triune God and to be God's agents of transformation in the world places mission at the heart of everything the WCRC and its member churches do.

1.1.2. *Communion*

The WCRC is deeply committed to the life of the whole Communion. As a Communion the WCRC is based on the understanding of *koinonia*. Jesus Christ has revealed that *koinonia* is the reality of the participation of his sisters and brothers in his body. This reality is clearly visible in our life when we share bread and wine at Christ's table, when in fact we share the body and blood of Christ, and when through this *koinonia* "all kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged". Therefore the WCRC affirms that there can be no communion without justice and no justice without communion. Any separation between the call to communion and the commitment to justice would ignore the basis of *koinonia*. And so we affirm the gifts of unity in Christ through a full communion where all of our churches recognize each other's baptism, invite one another to the table, and affirm the integrity of one another's ministry.

1.1.3. *Justice*

The WCRC will actively engage in biblically and theologically grounded justice and be aware of its implications. This includes building right relations among all people, justice in the economy and the earth, economic justice, eradication of poverty, gender justice, integrity of creation, reconciliation, interfaith engagement, healing, and working towards the transformation of both churches and society. The theological self-understanding of who we are as a Communion undergirds the commitment to being a prophetic voice for justice on the part of the WCRC and its member churches and regional councils.

1.1.4. *Theology*

The WCRC envisages bringing together seminaries, theologians, leaders and potential leaders from different contexts, to find, within and beyond the WCRC, fresh understandings of Reformed theology and new expressions of Reformed identity, doing what we can together, and drawing on the resources of theological centres and individuals. The WCRC intends to knead its values and beliefs into the dough of the church, doing contextual theology to reflect current realities.

1.1.5. *Ecumenical Engagement*

Called to be part of God's wider family working with others in response to the line in the high priestly prayer "... that they may be one", the WCRC is committed to working closely with other ecumenical bodies, as well as in commissions and dialogues with other world communions as expressions of this key direction. Our understanding of being in communion is both for the Reformed family and for the whole church. To be Reformed is to be ecumenical; therefore the WCRC will continue to be engaged actively in endeavours that foster Christian unity and ecumenical mission."

42. It is very clear from the above that we have committed ourselves to achieving certain objectives and goals by 2017. Thus, it is my desire and intention to bring us back to these objectives with more deliberate effort and focus. This should be the focus of this executive committee as well.

43. I have personally requested all the executive secretaries to evaluate their work in the last year against the WCRC strategic directions with the objective of showing how we are attempting to maintain the

course and to be redirected, if needs be, to our agreed vision and strategy. In line with this, we will expect the conveners of the core groups to address this with great precision, care and focus during our meeting in Lebanon. The officers will set the process for this discourse and meet with all the necessary persons and parties to ensure delivery of expectation. It is hoped that the executive committee will then receive very polished reports emerging from the core groups for dialogue and decision. It is imperative that we now do justice in implementing what we set out to do in 2011, even though some of the challenges we face continue to remain with us in whatever way. I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians: *"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."* (3:12).

A few observations about our work in the past year

Finance

44. It is fairly apparent that we have good financial systems in place which allows for better management and auditing processes to be fulfilled and maintained. We express our sincere thanks and appreciation to Johan, Gerhard and Anna for their dedicated work and service in this area in bringing us now up to date, as they will report to the executive meeting. A special thanks to the finance committee for their sound judgment and contributions to the relevant processes and general oversight.
45. However, whilst we have the financial systems now in place it is becoming increasingly clear that we still continue with our challenges in receiving income for our work. Attracting funding for our core budget (administration and salaries) has always been a problem since donors are not particularly keen to fund this. It must be noted, however, that we are starting to encounter the same challenges with funding for our programmes which was not necessarily the case previously with most of our programmes. In some cases funding has stopped altogether or has been significantly reduced because our funding partners are also going through financial challenges themselves. We are particularly thankful to some of our ecumenical partners who continue to fund some of our programmes and even financially support some of our staff salaries. We hope and pray that they will continue to sustain such commitments as long as possible.
46. The particular challenge in raising income is also experienced in the percentage of member churches that fail to pay their membership fees, not paying what they are expected to pay by the use of the grid or have reduced or stopped their financial contributions to the WCRC over and above their membership fees. In my opinion, it is necessary for us to relook at the contribution grid we have adopted to ascertain whether it is realistic or not in expectation of member churches. I must caution also that such a grid must not be exclusively based on monetary contributions but must take into cognizance other contextual, cultural and diverse factors as well. Most significantly though, we need to encourage a culture of covenant and commitment to the work, life and witness of the Communion which includes financial commitment as well. Even if all our members pay their membership fees, it would not be enough to finance our work but, at least, it will indicate accountability and commitment which is usually only visible closer to a general council.
47. The financial challenges would also require that we give greater effort and value to our fund raising initiatives and programmes. At this executive meeting proposals would be brought and discussed by the finance committee, in consultation with the communication core group, which also has a fund raising component to it, and eventually tabled at a plenary business session of the executive. I know that we have had some really painful and tearful discussions on this subject in the past but let us see how we can reasonably discern the way forward collectively and corporately on this matter, bearing in mind all the dynamics associated to this subject and the further truth that we cannot expect one model to fit every context or country. The fact of the matter, sisters and brothers, is that we have to put a fund raising strategy in place otherwise we will be found in dire financial situations, much sooner rather than later, even though we are currently financially stable and steady. Let us positively engage this at our meeting here in Lebanon.

Theology, Communion and Mission

48. Our work on theology, communion and mission has continued to be maintained in spite of challenges mentioned in other parts of this report. I am particularly grateful to Douwe for his work on the GIT, mission on the front line programmes addressing religious conflicts and violence and the dialogue with the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Pentecostals. Some of these discussions have been more or less completed but I think it is necessary for the executive to engage with these more intently. We need to ensure that these reports are not stacked on the shelves or relegated to the archives; we need to find ways in which we can implement and give new life and meaning to these conversations, if possible and practical. I hope that the core group will engage this further in your meetings in Lebanon.
49. Given what I said earlier about communion under reconciliation and unity, I trust that the core group would also pick this up in your discussions. We have had significant consultations and dialogues about communion and how we can build this within the WCRC and outside of the organization; I hope that these can feed your discussions and guide us in new ways about thinking and building the unity and cooperation within the WCRC and beyond. We have the task of building a true Communion committed to justice, peace and reconciliation. How do we do this? Let this become the focus of our conversation in Lebanon as we keep in tune with our strategic vision and plans.

Justice and Partnership

50. Our area of work on justice and partnership had its fair share of challenges with Dora having to work in Cuba for many months, and then moving to Geneva once the paperwork related to work permits, etc. were resolved and then focusing on the move to Hannover. The regional and global consultations on the Accra Confession last year, as part of our 10th anniversary of the Confession, helped shed new light and direction for our work in justice and partnership. My sincere hope is that the core group attending to this would bring some very engaging and fruitful suggestions as to how we can seriously direct our work and witness in this area. Given all the challenges we face in this world with regards to greed, injustices and oppressive economic and political systems, it is important that we as the WCRC are in the forefront, working with others, to address some of these challenges. How do we engage our member churches on justice issues and how do we walk alongside them as we respond to economic, gender and eco-justice?

Communication and Fund Raising

51. Phil has tried hard to work on communication matters and to update the website regularly, whilst applying his mind around the fund raising challenges. We need to engage the whole area of communication with in-depth vision and strategy. I have expressed from time to time that our move to Hannover would require more endeavor and effort in this area. We need to rise to this challenge in light of our vision and strategic direction. Here again, I am hoping that the core group would offer some significant contributions to raise this profile and witness of the WCRC.
52. I have offered the above comments in this section not to sound critical in any way, which is certainly not my intention. I am simply trying to offer some sense of direction in light of the intention to return more deliberately to our 2011 vision and strategy document. Our task as the executive is to implement the decisions of the WCRC. I, as president, am trying to remind us of this so that we would deliver appropriately and fulfill our responsibilities as members.

Summary of Vision

53. The world is in crisis. Crisis gives the WCRC the opportunity to restate and reclaim its focus on justice, peace and reconciliation.
54. The WCRC should return to its mandate given at the 2010 Uniting General Council in a more deliberate and intentional way as it focuses on *communion* and *justice*.
55. Our focus on the Accra Confession should help us to remain focused and faithful to our calling in addressing the injustices in the world today, and the desire for unity within the Communion and with others as we continue in the endeavor of Christian unity.

56. The WCRC needs to return to its 2011 “Vision, Mission, and Values Statement” and to the key directions it set for its work until 2017. As we prepare for 2017 we need to ensure that we are going to deliver on those set goals and objectives. We need to use this executive committee meeting to redirect us to that end.

Thanks and appreciation

57. I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to the staff for all their work and effort in keeping the WCRC alive and at work in many places around the world in the relationships we maintain, the programmes we run and the life we share together. I wish to express our thankfulness and appreciation to Chris Ferguson (general secretary); the executive secretaries: Douwe Visser, Dora Arce-Valentin, and Phil Tanis; all the financial and supporting staff and interns: Gerhard Plenter, Claudia Duval, Anna Krüger, Werner Joecker, Paul Oppenheim, Joanna Hipp and Fundiswa Kobo. May God continue to bless you with all strength, wisdom and good health.
58. I like to express my sincere thanks and gratefulness to the officers for their constant journey, wisdom, support and encouragement. It is very apparent that they take their role and responsibilities with WCRC very seriously. I appreciate the time and effort they make to connect via Skype and the fruitful and thoughtful contributions they make to our conversations. May God bless and keep each of you in joy, peace and good health.
59. We are truly blessed to have the kind of members we have who serve on the executive committee. I have had occasions to meet with some of you physically during the year and to talk with others electronically. I am often deeply amazed and moved by the interest and concern you have for the work of WCRC. You really want us to be out there making a difference in the world, and that is absolutely spot on! When things may appear to be quiet, you express a desire to know what is going on, and I might add that is indeed your responsibility. It is important that you are always in the communication loop but, more significantly, it is vital that your role with the WCRC is not only at the executive meeting. We each need to be out there as the hands, feet, voices and representatives of the WCRC. Thank you for your dedication and service in the past year.
60. I wish to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to all our volunteers, people who work in the different regions, serve on various committees, attend and contribute to our programmes and conversations and bless us in a variety of ways.
61. I like to recognize with joyful thanksgiving the many organizations and churches that generously and graciously support our work and programmes with financial and other resources, not forgetting particularly the CWM for their contributions to our endowment fund, and other churches, like the united churches in Germany, who are not even members but still support our work, nevertheless.
62. Finally, I wish to thank my family for their patience, support and love. My wife, Sandra, and children have been a tower of strength and comfort. Equally, I like to acknowledge and thank your loved ones for their support to you and for the work of the WCRC.

Conclusion

63. We are at a crucial time in the life and work of the WCRC as we steadily move forward to the next general council in 2017. Our journey thus far has led us through some significant and historic milestones as we moved from Geneva to Germany, elected a new general secretary, appointed in some instances new staff and chartered our way forward through financial challenges. It is now important for us to remain on track and to finish our part of the race, as current leaders, with the motivation and goal to deliver the things we set out to do in 2011. May God continue to give us grace, wisdom, courage and joy to do what God calls us to do in this world as we work towards justice, peace and reconciliation. To God be the Glory!