



## Institute builds global community



**Question:** What do you get when you put over 30 students, faculty and staff from more than a dozen countries on a seminary campus in Central America for three weeks of classes, worship and immersion experiences?

**Answer:** A global Christian community of future ecumenical leaders.

Gathering under the theme “Transforming Mission, Community and Church” the WCRC’s fourth Global Institute of Theology (GIT) took place this July on the campus of the *Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana* (Biblical University of Latin America) in San José, Costa Rica.

“The GIT is one of the most effective gatherings for young Reformed theologians with a longing to meet other open and committed Reformed students,” said Bas Plaisier, president of the GIT and a faculty member. “This mixture of worship, study, lectures and exposure in a particular culture and church is unique and extremely meaningful. Each GIT ‘delivers’ a lot of new committed ecumenical theologians and a new network of young Christians all over the world.”

The Institute’s coursework was structured around the theme, with a different core course each week attended by all students:

- Mission: Mission as evangelism and service
- Community: Places of Epiphany/Reformed presence in the world

- Church: Reformed Church challenging the ecumenical world

Students were also given a variety of elective courses from which to choose. Topics for this GIT included contextual Bible reading, Christian mission in Latin America and Reformed identity and the search for vital churches, among others.

Immersion experiences included attending local churches for worship each Sunday, traveling to sites around Costa Rica and visiting churches’ outreach projects. But it was the sharing between students that will likely have the longer-term impact.

“Students come with their stories—stories of hope, joy, grief and concern—and they share that. And when they go home, they are part of a global community,” said Douwe Visser, WCRC executive secretary for theology and GIT secretary. “This is a very deep once-in-a-lifetime experience for them.”

Aruna Gnanadason, GIT dean of students, agreed: “It’s very earth-changing because the students’ horizons are broadened so much. They learn a lot about world Christianity listening to so many people from different contexts. I think it helps to understand your life more when you encounter other peoples’ lives.”

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# A taste of diversity: stories from GIT students

The Global Institute of Theology purposefully accepts students from a wide range of countries and contexts, building a diverse community over the course of the institute. Here are some brief stories from this year's GIT students:

## Promoting interfaith reconciliation



Vincent

Born into a Presbyterian family, Vincent Kalvin's policeman father wanted him to become police officer as well, but Vincent felt called to ministry. Currently obtaining his master of theology degree,

Vincent is a member of the Protestant Church in the Moluccas (Indonesia). And although not yet ordained, he is involved in many church activities including teaching Sunday school and leading youth services.

But what he ultimately wants is "a ministry of reconciliation. I want to build peace with my Muslim brothers and sisters."

Repeated riots between Muslims and Christians are etched in his memory. Vincent's home was burned, and when he was seven years old he saw people who were killed, victims lying in the streets.

Because of the trauma from the Christian-Muslim conflicts, Vincent struggles with pluralism. "I see people dying because of violence and war. I want to do something, to reconcile my people," he said.

Vincent believes it is important to be part of the GIT because "I need my mind opened. You can learn something from others and their struggles."

The experiences at the GIT confirmed the importance of being in dialogue for Vincent and the other students. "What I learned is being in conversation with other people, not all Presbyterians are the same. It's strange for me. So, when I was trying to be in conversation with other people, it's nice because I know their struggle and their context. I know their story and I can learn something from their story."

Vincent also was challenged by what he learned at the GIT: "Every-

one has problems, and I began asking myself, 'Who am I in this world?' and 'After the GIT what do I do?!' I am just one person in the world. I am not a big man with a lot of power. But I can help one person back home. I cannot feed everyone, but maybe I can feed one person."

## Making mission a daily occurrence

Newlywed Sunelle Thompson co-pastors a church in Krugersdorp, a suburb of Johannesburg, for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

The co-pastors are dedicated to empowering their congregants "to every day really live church and to engage in mission because we believe that everyone is part of mission," she said. "We want to empower congregants to think differently, to speak differently about others, about the world; to interact with people in a way that shows God's love."

A specific programme that captures this goal is the HelpLift Net-



Sunelle

## Institute builds global community

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As student Cate Burton from New Zealand said, "It provides us an opportunity to have in-depth conversations with people from all over the world about issues that we previously only read or heard about on the news. To meet real people from such places and hear their stories is challenging and profound."

"Clearly the number one experience for participants is the formation of an international Christian, spiritual community in which they feel blessed by hearing the sto-

ries of others," said Peter Wyatt, GIT dean of faculty. "I think it introduces students to the ecumenical context on a global basis and opens up possibilities and vision."

"The importance of the GIT for me is not only to listen," said Joanna Hipp, a student from the United States. "We're part of a global body, and like each of our own bodies, we have to move, we have to act. The impact of the GIT also taught and inspired me to move, to be part of a movement to the fullness of life."

The GIT is made possible by the generous support of the *Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland*, the Council for World Mission East Asia Region, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the United Church of Canada, the *Evangelisch-Reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich* and the *Fondation pour l'aide au protestantisme réformé*.

The next GIT is planned to take place in the weeks preceding the 2017 General Council in Germany.

work, an ecumenical online network that links people with needs to people with resources ([www.helplift.co.za](http://www.helplift.co.za)).

Through the network, people are brought together: “You have to go take those in need the clothes yourself, for example, to actually see their context, to actually interact with them, to build a relationship with them. So it’s not just the people that receive the stuff whose lives get changed. But the givers, their lives also get changed by the ones they’re giving to.”

Sunelle is passionate about using mission to unite even in diverse situations. “I did my thesis in a way about diversity, but it was more about the gap between rich and poor in South Africa and how the Trinity, the specific relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, can help churches to overcome the gap,” she said. “That specific relationship is all about unity within diversity. It’s this dynamic, reciprocal relationship of diversity.”

This same interest is what excited her about the GIT. “The GIT is such an awesome diversity,” she said. “Where people from different backgrounds get together—something happens there. Peoples’ lives really get changed. I’m coming here and I’m getting exposed to so many different backgrounds and different cultures, and it’s great. I want to take it back to South Africa where we have an unbelievable diversity.”

### Encouraging equality in society

Pulak Samantaroy, married and a new father, has been working as a minister since 2006 for the Church of North India in and around Amritsar, serving congregations in both urban and rural areas. Pulak’s challenges are many and include harassment of Christians, economic disparity and injustice and caste discrimination.

“We try to educate all of the people. We try to educate Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and Muslims. We bring them all to one centre, in the church,” he said. “So the poor



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GIT photos by Priscila Barredo Pantí, Joanna Hipp and Phil Tanis.

**A taste of diversity**

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people, those who cannot afford to go to school, we bring them and give them free food in the evening. And through this we bring the people in one boundary so there will be unity.”

“For religious conflicts we interact with religious leaders of other faiths. We call Muslim leaders, we call Hindu leaders

to come to a common platform where we can discuss the problems and the solution,” said Pulak.

The caste system remains strong in the villages, with many Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables”), the lowest caste level, facing severe discrimination, including separate water taps and economic enslavement.

And economic success doesn’t free Dalits from discrimination. “Even though now some of the Dalits have come up in their lives and they have very good jobs, people continue to look down on them,” explained Pulak. “But in church we invite all people to come, sit together, and the pastor visits everybody’s house, no matter what caste they belong to. Pastors are open to all so that we can bring togetherness in society.”

The GIT has given Pulak “an opportunity to meet international students and know their culture and how they work in their society and how they work in the church. So it will help me to know them better and learn new things I can implement in my country, back in my home church, so that I can transform my society.”

**Offering an alternative narrative**

A former lecturer in Hispanic studies at Glasgow University, John McCulloch is just entering his second year of training with the Church of Scotland. While studying, he’s also been placed at a church in one of the

poorer areas of Glasgow, learning alongside its pastor.

“In this particular community, which is what we call an urban priority area, the church is reaching out to the children. There’s a lot of violence in the area. There’s a lot of broken families and social problems. And so we run a church for the children which meets once a week,” John explained. “And from that, they’ve been able to establish links into the schools.”

“But I think another very important aspect of what the church does



*John*

is the Sunday worship—by offering an alternative narrative to the narratives of consumerism, of individualism, of violence and of deprivation in the city. Preaching the liberation of the Word in the Gospel has a huge impact on the lives of those around the church,” John said.

Before the GIT John travelled through Central America with his wife, who is a doctor, and their four children. “I connected especially with our Catholic brothers and sisters. I think what most impacted me is the faith of the people in Central America.”

When asked why he wanted to attend the GIT, John said, “What attracted me was to be part of a global conversation from a Reformed tradition. I think we who have been brought up in the West would do well to listen to our brothers and sisters from the Reformed tradition to see how their approaches to ecclesiology, to hermeneutics, to living in contexts of huge challenge—how all that has shaped their theology.”

**Anchoring a neighbourhood**

Marleen Blootens ministers in a diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam—but not in a typical church. “Our church

has been renovated and opened two years ago in a completely new concept. So we are not only a church, we try to be an open house for the neighbourhood, a community centre.”

Part of the community centre houses a toddlers’ group, attracting parents and children of all faiths. “That’s what we want. We really think this is good for people who are vulnerable to have a place to play with their children.”

But it’s not only a church and a community centre: “We started a social restaurant. And the people who work in our restaurant are deaf—not only deaf, they’re also mentally disabled. They get an education to find a way to the regular restaurants and bars to get a job. In the restaurant now we’re also starting with visiting hours, when everyone can come in who needs help.”



*Marleen*

Volunteers from both the church and the neighbourhood have been trained “to be helpers for people who need help.” Thankfully a number of church members live close by: “We’ve got 15 houses which are above our building,” explained Marleen. “And everyone who lives there is part of the church, and they form a community also together. So within the community is also a community of people who are committed to this neighbourhood, and to this church, and to the Christian faith.”

The diversity of her neighbourhood spurred Marleen to attend the GIT. “I noticed being a minister in a multicultural area that sometimes I don’t know how to deal with cultural differences. I just have no tools. I know that I just don’t know enough about intercultural theology,” she said, adding that the extreme secularization of Amsterdam was another reason: “I’m such an exception, being a Christian. And I really longed for a meeting with people who are in places where being Christian is not such a rarity. I’d really like to breathe a bit more of that air.”

# UBL warmly hosted the GIT

*Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana* (UBL) hosted the 2014 Global Institute of Theology with both its students and faculty participating in various aspects of the GIT.

“As a university, we strive for academic excellence as we promote biblical, theological and pastoral practice that is contextualized and transformative,” said Edwin Mora, UBL president. “Our institution, which has always been international and ecumenical, has been serving churches and communities in Latin America and the Caribbean for more than ninety years.”

UBL began in 1922 as a Bible school for young women. A little later it was opened to both men and women and transformed into a seminary in the 1940s. Students engage in both church work and social movements, looking at where faith and practice intersect. Students then take this knowledge into their work upon graduation, as they serve both churches and organizations in Latin America and around the globe.

We talked to a pair of students to get a better sense of what led them both into ministry and to UBL:

## Isaí Laurencio

### What made you want to study theology?



“I am a farmer, working in chili fields. One day I was in the fields and felt something fall on me, and I felt like I was dying. My only prayer to God was: ‘If you want me to serve you, I will.’ I hadn’t been to school yet. I said, ‘God, I can’t serve you if I don’t have a chance to study.’ I had only finished primary school. I was 26

years old. So, I said to God, ‘If you are going to use me, please open doors so I can do your work.’ I signed up for a secondary programme for adults. I finished high school at 30. God opened doors so I could study in Peru and through that seminary, I was given the opportunity to come here [UBL]. And I’ve got an experience that opens me to a lot of new theology, and a lot of new perspectives that will help me in my ministry.”

### What are the main challenges of the church?

While Isaí is studying theology, he is also working in the church, and trying to encourage children to continue their studies. “In my community, I have 56 children in the church. I want to encourage them to go on in their studies, so I help them with their homework.” These children work in agriculture, like Isaí, and the church itself participates in working in the fields. Isaí dreams that

the community can gain more economic resources from their work, so the children can succeed. Along with other members of the church who help these children, they hope that with this help and guidance, children can go further than they ever dreamed.

## Ana De la Cruz

### What made you want to study theology?



Both of Ana’s parents graduated from UBL, and they are both pastors. Ana says the last thing she wanted to do was what her parents do. She went with her family to the United States, and she studied computer networking. As soon as she could, she came to Costa Rica. Ana says she had to be independent to live here, and the

studies she did in computer networking allowed her to get a job at HP. She has been working at HP ever since.

In terms of ministry, Ana works with a group of young people who like rock and punk music but also like to study the Bible. She said, “It used to be difficult to go to church if that was your taste. And if we wore black clothing we were seen as satanic. I saw the needs people had, so I started working with the group, and before I knew it I was involved in ministry.” Ana simply saw there was a need and fulfilled it. It was during this time that she realized she needed to study the Bible. She remembered the university her parents graduated from and decided to apply.

### What are the main challenges facing your church?

“Things have gone wrong here. Spirituality is tied to money because of the prosperity gospel. And that’s partly because of lack of education and theology that is in many churches. In many churches, someone just feels a calling and they are sent to lead a group. In terms of social position, churches are hiding, it seems to me. There are some churches that make pronouncements concerning social issues. But the other churches are worried about keeping their own church and not having problems. I think there is a lack of courage in the churches on their pronouncements. And other churches that have a holistic theology vision, they don’t have organization experience to carry their work out well.”

*Partnership Fund*

# Making dreams a reality

The indigenous, marginalized people of Sibü, Sarawak, Malaysia, often can only dream of improving their lives. Thanks to the *Gereja Grace Batu Pahat* (Church of

centre provides education for all ages, especially children and women.

Members of the *Gereja Grace Batu Pahat* have worked for the last two decades among the indigenous people of the Iban tribe in the interior of Sarawak. In recent years people from this rural tribe have migrated to the city of Sibü. They cannot afford to send their children to the local kindergartens because of the high fees associated with the schools. Therefore the children are unable to



Grace) and with a grant from the WCRC's Partnership Fund, they now have a centre in which to chase those dreams.

The *Pusat Bimbingan Kalvari*—literally “the Guidance Centre of Calvary” but known as “The Dream Centre”—was created to support and empower the local indigenous church to reach out to their own people. The

start school as early as other children, and because of the delay in their education become discouraged and eventually drop out. Compounding this problem, the children's mothers often lack knowledge or self-confidence to know what to do to help.

The project is vital to the region because the Dream Centre assists the indigenous people where they are, while teaching them core Christian values. Although the focus is on children, attention is also given to teenagers and adults, especially women. Along with a kindergarten, classes for illiterate adults are provided, teaching them to read and write.

Those running the Dream Centre hope to offer classes for primary and secondary school students in the future. “With the passing of time, we are better able to see and gauge how the Lord leads us in the establishment of this centre,” said Tan Kok Eng.

“It is our belief that the success of this centre will result in the setting up of more centres catering for the indigenous people in other parts of Sibü in the future,” said Tan Kok Eng. “*Gereja Grace Batu Pahat* will always be at the forefront to ensure that *Pusat Bimbingan Kalvari* will continue serving the indigenous community.”

Applications to the Partnership Fund may be made at any time. We especially welcome requests from churches that have not previously applied. Grants are limited to €25,000; grants for emergency aid to €7,500. Further information can be found at [wcrch/partnership-fund/](http://wcrch/partnership-fund/) or by emailing [partnership.fund@wcrch.eu](mailto:partnership.fund@wcrch.eu).

# Latin Americans encourage embracing Accra Confession

The latest in a series of consultations marking the 10th anniversary of the Accra Confession concluded with a covenant to “recuperate a proper spirituality that will challenge a culture of consumerism and individualism.”

The Accra Confession, a prophetic statement on economic and environmental justice, was created in 2004 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a predecessor of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Members of the WCRC’s Latin American regional body, known as AIPRAL by its Spanish acronym, drafted the “Barranquilla Declaration” at their consultation that, among other items, calls:

- for “processes to educate and encourage all member churches to include the Accra Confession in their books of confessions or catechism”
- for the placement of “the principles of the Accra Confession in public forums such as world banks, governments and other international organizations”
- to “participate [in] and support community efforts that build economic, cultural and political alternatives that place human dignity and care of the environment at the forefront”
- to “make stronger alliances with our sister ‘northern churches’ to develop new economic systems that give God honour and glory for the welfare of all of God’s people”

The “Barranquilla Declaration” answered a question posed by Helis Barraza Diaz, a WCRC vice president and rector of the Reformed University in Barranquilla, Colombia, the host site for the consultation: “The Accra Confession gives value to the WCRC and other church bodies. Our question for this convocation should be: What are we going to do with the Confession?”



Chris Ferguson, the incoming WCRC general secretary, commented, “Accra is saying that the world today is not how God intended it to be.”

Maria Ramírez, representing the Venezuelan Presbyterian Church and director of AIPRAL’s women ministries, said that the Accra Confession is still today “God’s answer to the excesses of economic globalization.” The question is, “Would the ‘rich north’ be willing to adopt the Accra Confession—a primarily global south document—as their own?”

She challenged people to adopt a “theology of sufficiency” instead of the current practice of hoarding material things that create scarcity in other parts of the world.

Dan Gonzalez Ortega, from the *Comunidad Teológica de México*, said that the Accra Confession should not be seen as a “doctrinal document like other confessions that become something to defend or memorize, but it should be a dynamic document for our times for prayer, education and above all, practice.”

Delegates to the consultation took the opportunity to see

first-hand the impact the current global economic system is having on people. They visited El Tamarindo Community, composed of people from other parts of Colombia, displaced by fighting between government troops and guerrillas.

This group of *campesinos* had settled in unclaimed, vacant land just outside Barranquilla, where they have farmed for up to ten years. When the property became a “duty free” zone because of the free trade agreements between Colombia and the United States, the local police and army forcibly evicted the families, bulldozing their homes, destroying their crops and in some cases even killing their animals.

Authorities and other sources estimate there are more than five million such internally displaced people in Colombia. The AIPRAL consultation participants reiterated that this dislocation of families is a direct result of the economic globalization and injustices highlighted by the Accra Confession.

The “Barranquilla Declaration,” which will be presented to a global consultation in the fall, reminds all that, “the Accra Confession unmasks the ideal of the ‘human being’ from a capitalist system that excludes many, and is also characterized by exploitation and selfishness. The Confession exalts humanity as an object or means to rescue the biblical idea of the human being created in the image of God.”

The consultations are organized by the Justice and Partnership Programme Office of the WCRC in dialogue with the regional councils. For more information, please contact Dora Arce-Valentín: [dav@wrc.eu](mailto:dav@wrc.eu).

The Accra Confession can be found online here: [wrc.ch/accra-confession](http://wrc.ch/accra-confession)

—with reporting from Antonio (Tony) Aja

# An interview with Chris Ferguson

*Chris Ferguson was elected general secretary of the WCRC at the executive committee's May meeting, taking over in September from Setri Nyomi, who had served the allowed two terms. An ordained minister in the United Church of Canada Chris has served in Canada, Costa Rica and other countries in Central America, Jerusalem, Colombia and at the United Nations.*

## What originally convinced you to become a minister?

Faith journeys are deep so a brief answer is difficult. For a whole series of reasons, I found myself interested in helping and serving people. When I was at loose ends for a summer (as a teenager) my mother pushed me to take a summer job: "Why don't you help out at a camp?" The experience open to me was to help at a camp run by a United Church of Canada (UCC) inner-city church on an island outside of Vancouver. Mostly First Nations people came to it, the poorest of the poor; kids on the edge, with all sorts of tough stories.

I saw this world for the first time as someone trying to help. So I was convinced after some very dramatic experiences as a camp counsellor that I would go find out about the life of these kids in the inner city. I went, and who I saw effectively standing up and being with these people in really hard circumstances was the church, and the role models I saw were these incredible ministers.

What I saw from them in ministry did not remind me of anything I had experienced. I had the usual idea of what ministry was—static, boring, preaching of a warmed over Gospel to disinterested people that didn't mean much to me as a 16-year-old. Then I saw that ministry was really being a service of bringing the Gospel of life to people in the places where they lived and where their pain was.

The short answer: I got out of the church and into the world. And I had pretty impressive role models.

## What learnings from your time as a parish minister do you still carry with you?

I think there are three:

1. The first response of ministry is to go to where the people are, to where the pain is, go and be physically with those who are suffering and who are hurt.
2. Without a shadow of a doubt—and I think this is true to our tradition—we're all in this together. We're all in ministry. The ministers are the congregation. Together we're called to ministry.
3. The world continues to evangelize the church equal to the church evangelizing the world. God works through the world to bring the church to the service of the Gospel as equally as the other way around.

## You seem to have an affinity with both social justice and Latin America. What led you in those directions,



## both thematically and geographically (both initially and longer-term)?

The simple answer would be the coups in Chile, Argentina, the Dirty War, the revolutions in Central America. But it didn't lead me intellectually. Those massive displacements meant my world was flooded with refugees. Latin America was engulfed by these horrible situations of displacement, injustice, etc., which meant its people were seeking refuge. Always welcome the stranger because in so doing many have welcomed angels unaware. Latin America came to me, and then it seemed only right we go to be with the brothers and sisters in Latin America and share what we could share.

You can't attend to everything, but North Americans (and Europeans) need to consider as an ethical imperative those things where we are complicit in the injustice. In Central America there was a particular North American complicity—economically and politically.

## You've clearly gotten around. What are some of the highlights of your professional career?

All my formal jobs have really been ecumenical, partnering with others.

A big highlight of my work in Canada was combining social justice and mission work, developing gender justice in global mission work—forging new understandings of mission partnership (with both the UCC and the World Council of Churches (WCC)), including that mission is from everything to everywhere—the whole Gospel for the whole world.

I was both the general secretary of mission and the ecumenical officer of the UCC—working in mission and in unity. What I see in this job now was God's hand, having this unusual combination: activist-mission guy versus the unity-communion guy.

While working in Central America I was privileged to give accompaniment to Rigoberta Menchú [winner of a Nobel peace prize] into the Guatemalan war/conflict zone. And in 1989, I was giving a workshop in a Baptist

church in El Salvador when the war came into the city. I coordinated for a time the human rights work and pastoral care of the missionaries and church workers who were caught up in the war. That confirmed for me that ministry was really being there for the church, to see the church there in situations in conflict and see how we can make a difference.

After being in Jerusalem—which was also a highlight, trying to bring together the churches in the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre—I was asked to represent the WCC at the United Nations. My first day on the job (or so) I was sitting in the office and this woman came in and said she was with the Mennonite central committee and had one question: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (of Iran) is coming, President George Bush is refusing to meet with him—lots of tensions—would the WCC partner with them to have a dialogue on a religious basis with Ahmadinejad? Our fundamental commitment was that yes, we believe we should talk and dialogue. Even with enemies you're called to love.

### **What do you hope to bring to the WCRC?**

I think that the people who know me often say to me that I have a lot of passion and energy, and I am also fiercely inquisitive theologically. I have been gifted by the affliction of analysis. It's incumbent on us to be critical to see how things work.

I think I bring a sense of not only passion but imperative urgency: I feel that it isn't only the passion of investing oneself but of being motivated because we're in a bad place as a planet. We can't defraud God's gift and let a scandalous situation remain. This includes human and ecological injustice.

I push and I shove but also at the same time am extremely committed to relationships and reconciliation. We have to move forward so that we all arrive together. It's forward movement that allows us to get together. Forward movement is a force of unity.

I bring a humble sense that I'm not finished learning yet. This is an opportunity for the WCRC to continue to offer gifts to all of us. There's so much learning to do about what we can bring and contribute to the larger ecumenical family.

### **What do you think the Reformed family brings to the world today?**

I think it's important because the historical roots and the gift of the Reformation is the Protestant principle that nothing is ultimate except the ultimate itself. What we bring is this spirit to renew and transform ourselves because we understand that those called are called to transform the world. What we bring is that we transform vibrantly, theologically, in the light of Scripture. This is a gift we've been given.

In tough moments when the integrity of the faith is challenged by injustices we know we can confess and

proclaim theologically to the world—which allowed for such statements as Barmen, Belhar, Accra. We bring this almost laser-like focus on a relationship with the God whose theatre of activity is the whole world and the belief that anyone who impedes feeling and experiencing the Lordship of God will be called out. Where life is threatened, that is a theological issue.

That obedience to God requires us to be in and of the world, putting Scripture first and understanding how God is active in the whole world, that God's grace is for the fullness of life.

This isn't thinking that we're special. Instead we feel a burden of responsibility to that gift that the Reformed tradition has equipped us with as a legacy. We must constantly reform ourselves. Unless the church is reinvigorated in its mission and understanding it will fail to be a force of transformation for the world.

The United churches also bring a unique part of this picture. They also have other senses of how that Reformed story has to mean other things. It's the dynamic playing out of this idea of understanding God's action in all of history and the Christians' role in the transformation of the world.

The other part of this mix is: To be Reformed is to be ecumenical. This is all meaningless unless we bring this to the whole family. To be Reformed is to embrace inter-religious cooperation.

### **How do you see the importance of the WCRC in today's world?**

Called to communion, committed to justice, the WCRC is dedicated to unity for the transformation of the world. We bring together an often very divided confessional and historical family so that we can share our unique gifts with the wider ecumenical movement and the world.

The WCRC is a crucial space for creating tighter bonds of communion, mutual care and common action in response to God's call. Through the WCRC we can address the issues that divide us as a family so that we can better fulfil the mission God has given us.

We in the WCRC have shown that we can address the urgent issues facing humanity and the planet, drawing on our Reformed and Uniting traditions to read the signs of the times in the light of the Bible and act together, confessing our faith in order to transform. We need to keep doing this. It has never been more urgent.

We are charged with the imperative to contribute to the wider ecumenical movement at a time when the way forward is not clear and the energies are flagging. We are charged with the Gospel imperative to participate with the triune God in the transformation of the world so that all may have life abundant. That is to say that not only is the WCRC important for the member churches, the ecumenical movement and the world, but it is also burdened with a God-given responsibility to stand up and be counted for the cause of unity and justice.

*TESF profile***Angélica María Munera Cervera**

*The Theological Education Scholarship Fund for Women in the South (TESF) was established in 2001 as a means to increase the number of women in ordained ministry and to enable women from a wide network of Reformed churches in the south to build their capacity for effective partnership in God's mission.*

*Below Angélica María Munera Cervera, a recipient of a scholarship, describes her situation and the impact the scholarship had on her life.*

*More information on the scholarship, as well as application forms, can be found online here: [wrcr.ch/theological-education-scholarship-fund-for-women-in-the-south/](http://wrcr.ch/theological-education-scholarship-fund-for-women-in-the-south/)*

I am a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia and am currently living in Cartagena, Colombia, where I have worked as a pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Cartagena for five years. I was born in the town of Barranquilla, Colombia.

Why did I want to become a minister? The answer to this question started forming the very moment I was conceived in my mother's womb, a mother who, due to her reality and a resulting sense of anguish, separated from my father, and therefore separated from her three children (including myself), in pursuit of a better future in the United States.

As a result of this determination, I was given to my maternal grandmother who from that moment on (I was three years old) became my mother, my protector, my father, my everything. She taught me the importance of God in my heart and in my life, and she took me to the Presbyterian Church in Barranquilla. While growing up and running through the church halls, I got together with other children and we talked about what we wanted to be as adults. My answer was forceful and always the same since I was seven years old: I want to be a minister.



I grew up separated from my siblings but surrounded by the love of God and of my grandmother. She was called to God when I was about to turn eighteen. I was alone again, but this time was different as God and my church family had become the best legacy my grandmother and mother could have given me. That was also the time when my desire and vocation grew stronger—I wanted to be a minister and I wanted to be able to give back in the immediate future some of the many gifts I had received. The experience of living faith through concrete actions confirmed my vocation.

I became aware of the TESF programme when I was in the second semester at the Reformed University in Barranquilla. As a young woman with little financial resources I was faced with the danger of having to drop out. However, my teacher of the Old Testament, seeing my love for theology, my vocation being reaffirmed with every single class and experience, felt very strongly about helping me so together we started the process of applying for a scholarship.

The goal behind studying theology and completing my master's degree has always been clear to me: To improve my vocation and to continuously update my knowledge of this field, being aware that the Colombian context is ever-changing and that, undoubtedly, the Bible is our most essential source to find a message that is relevant in our context.

I fulfill God's call through my vocation: I live to serve in a church surrounded by sectors with a high-risk population, displaced people, victims of unemployment, inequality and a lack of many other human rights.

My wish is to be a source of inspiration for young women without opportunities, women who cannot have children (being one of them myself), to encourage orphans (like myself) to find in God a mother, father, and protector, to help other women in their community who, given their economic reality, do not have the opportunity to go to university after concluding their basic studies and exercise their own calling.

I am firmly convinced that looking at my reality many women with similar circumstances can identify themselves with my experience. Today, every time I am standing in the pulpit preparing a sermon, I feel that I can speak properly about topics such as faith, doubts and walking on top of the water, among others. Nowadays, as women in Colombia, we are still fighting and organizing ourselves to fight in the midst of a reality filled with conflicts and physical as well as emotional, verbal and even spiritual violence. Throughout my life, I have lived a number of these and sometimes all of them at the same time, and in the name of God and together with God I have overcome them.

# Theological leader laid to rest

H. Russel Botman was lauded at a memorial service held in South Africa in early July. Botman passed away unexpectedly in his sleep at the age of 61.

Botman, most recently the rector at Stellenbosch University, was deeply involved in educational and ecumenical work throughout his life, including working with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), a predecessor of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

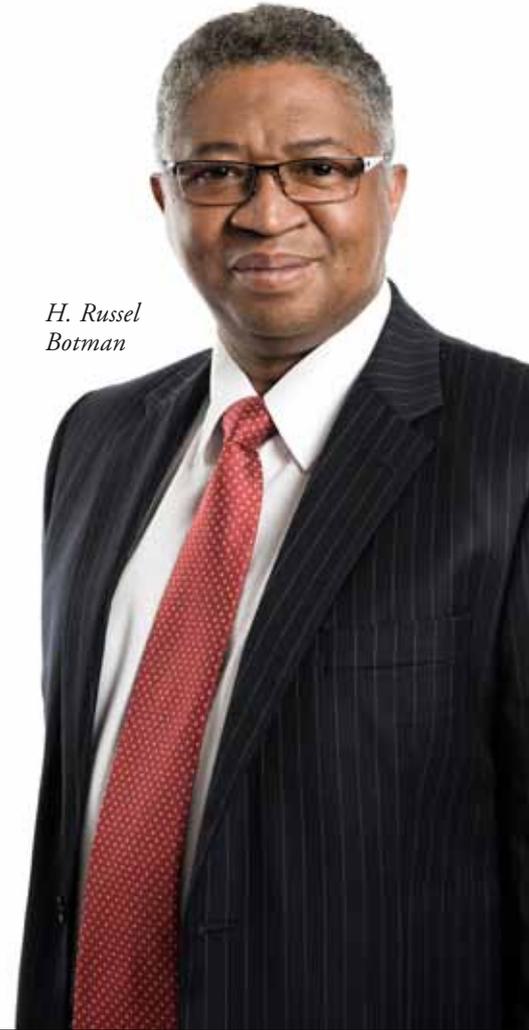
“I was always amazed by his deep faith, humility, service, love for the church and desire to work for a better world,” said Jerry Pillay, president of the WCRC. “He possessed this natural ability to speak truth to power in the most diplomatic way yet exercising the ability to be prophetic.”

In his message at the service, Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the WCRC, said, “If God’s creation was not experiencing that fullness of life [given by the Lord], Russel could not stay silent. His life story is filled with life-giving actions which demonstrate his profound understanding of our Lord’s self-understanding of why He came. His stance for racial justice, for justice in the economy, for climate justice, for gender justice and for inclusion of all God’s people in God’s economy are all expressions of this commitment.”

Thabo Mbeki and F.W. de Klerk, former South Africa presidents, and Desmond Tutu were among the hundreds who attended the service.

Nyomi called on those gathered to draw inspiration from Botman’s life: “We can continue the work of unmasking the forces of injustice in our communities and engaging in actions that clearly say, ‘A different world is possible.’ Bringing this hope through transformation was Russel’s lifelong commitment. You and I can use this occasion, inspired by the person we are saying farewell to, to commit ourselves to being God’s instruments of transformation. This will bring hope to many.”

For the WARC Botman was co-chair of the International Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue from 1998 until 2006. He was also a consultant in the WARC’s covenanting for justice process in the early 2000s, which contributed to the creation of the Accra Confession.



H. Russel Botman

## Report hopes to stir ecclesial imaginations

Throughout history the greater church has been a victim of schism on different levels. Even today it is still a challenge churches face. A report written after six years of dialogue between the Lutheran and Reformed branches of the church endeavours to counter this and instead stir ecclesial imaginations to consider new expressions of unity.

*Communion: On Being the Church* seeks to draw us into the world of these two church branches. This includes shared experiences and challenges and also points to the direction taken by the joint Lutheran-Reformed commission and its acquisition of fresh expressions of being the church and being in communion.

*Communion: On Being the Church* is helpful as a resource as churches continue to face disunity and other challenges. Church leaders will also find this document useful because of its contextual approach, making it not merely an abstract document but a reflection of a lived reality. It is important because it gives one some indications of the dynamics one encounters in a quest for communion and has been commended by both the Lutheran World Federation and the WCRC.

*Communion: On Being the Church* can be downloaded from the WCRC’s website: [wrc.ch/OnBeingTheChurch](http://wrc.ch/OnBeingTheChurch).



*News from our member churches*

# CRC and RCA synods unite in historic session

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) made history in June when the synods of both denominations held a joint session and adopted a resolution to work more closely together. It is the first time that has happened since the CRC seceded from the RCA in 1857.

CRC and RCA delegates voted simultaneously and unanimously to adopt a resolution declaring that “the principle that guides us, and the intention that motivates us, is to ‘act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately.’”

“I congratulate these two member churches for taking this historic step forward together,” said Chris Ferguson, WCRC general secretary, who was present for the vote on the campus of Central College in Pella, Iowa.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA and the WCRC’s representative to the Global Christian Forum, placed the historic division between two denominations into a global context.

“The idea that any group with a slightly different understanding of the truth can separate itself from a denominational structure has been so commonplace, we barely give it a thought,” he said. “What we confess as the one holy catholic church has become endlessly divided. Our present shameful, sinful state of affairs is that there are 43,800 denominations in the world. Our proper response should be confession and repentance.”

Rebecca Warren, chair of the CRC’s Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, spoke of the history of the two churches, noting that, despite their common roots, “the churches decided that what divided them could not be bridged. They parted ways, creating separate agencies and churches.”

Jeff Jappinga, from the RCA’s commission on Christian unity, noted that in recent decades, an increase in cooperative efforts between the two denominations is changing the landscape. “What we have done together has advanced the gospel in so many ways,” he said.

The list of those cooperative efforts continues to grow. There are congregations that belong to both denominations; church multiplication efforts are combined in special zones; pastors may receive calls to churches in the other denomination; the Disability Concerns ministry operates in both denominations; World Renew provides domestic disaster response for both; the new *Lift Up Your Hearts* hymnal was produced by a CRC-RCA partnership. The list goes on.

Cooperation also happens in local communities. Doug Van Aartsen, an RCA delegate from Ireton, Iowa, recounted a time when he worked with the CRC pastor

in the same town. He said that a trailer park in Sioux Center, Iowa, that housed a number of Hispanic families was being closed and the families were being relocated to Ireton.

“The Ireton, to its shame, was opposed to this,” Van Aartsen said. “The CRC pastor and I stood against them. There is now a group of Hispanic

people in Ireton, and we have a good relationship. It was an example of two congregations working together at a local level. I’d like to think we made a difference.”

As Dutch references abounded, including references to the historic rivalry between the two denominations’ schools, Hope College and Calvin College, one delegate noted that it seems that the issues are only between folks with Dutch backgrounds.

“I came [into the CRC] in 2001 and I’ve been treated really well,” said Rev. Ron Chu, a CRC delegate from Classis California South. “I hear the same thing from Korean pastors in the RCA. You are willing to embrace people from other ethnic groups, and I hear that you guys are arguing among brothers and sisters. That is something to think about.”

The adoption of the resolution was concluded with cheers, hugs, handshakes and applause as delegates from both churches joined hands to sing together the doxology.

—Gayla Postma



*News from our member churches*

# Rising from the ashes

When the school holidays roll around, the children around Winmalee and Springwood in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, get excited. Not because they're free from teachers and textbooks. They have the chance to take part in "Disaster Recovery Holiday Program" that's run by the Springwood Uniting Church.

In October 2013, horrific fires tore through the greater Blue Mountains area in NSW. Hundreds of homes were destroyed and when the flames died down and the threat was over, all that was left was devastation shrouded in ash.

Recognizing that the summer school holidays were looming, Janice Freeston and the children and family worker, Mary-Ellen Jamieson, set about creating and launching the programme – concerned that the local children needed a lot of support and there were no programs on offer. By late November the wheels were in motion.

"We have always been involved in this kind of area. We've always run a Kids With Courage programme for kids who need help building resilience, and we're about to launch a parents programme. When you live in the mountains you expect to have bushfires. But the 2013 fires were devastating in terms of the numbers of people left traumatized. I wanted to do something for the community and the programme seemed right," said Janice.

The programme is run each Wednesday during the holidays and attracts between 60–70 primary school age children. The Assembly funds the programme so it's free to attend. More than just a place to come together, the programme offers a number of exciting activities for the kids.

During the recent June/July holidays, Cricket NSW ran clinics; a member from the Springwood UC shared

cultural stories based on the work they'd done with Aboriginal people; there were mosaic and painting classes, weaving and more.

"The whole community has been traumatized and a lot of people were sustained by the church community. It was a really important time for them to stay connected. It's been very hard for some, particularly the older members of the congregation. None of the older members lost their houses but watching their children lose everything was so hard.

"So our aim is that people have a safe and fun place to focus on being a child instead of all these issues that are coming up for them. We have counsellors who are trained to pick up signals, we also have people to talk to parents.

"Another aim is community involvement so it's not just church people who are doing this. It's run out of the school hall at Winmalee so it's not a church place but somewhere that everyone would be happy coming to. We've tried to build relationships with other community organizations and include them in this activity as much as possible.

"We've been really overwhelmed by the generosity of people and it has given us a huge amount of flexibility. I've been able to fill in the gaps for people who don't fit the criteria for government aid. I want to thank the people who've made donations right across the country, but particularly from New South Wales. It has given us a huge opportunity to make a difference here," explains Janice.

This article first appeared in *Insights*, the monthly magazine of the Uniting Church in Australia's Synod of New South Wales.



## Brief encounters: A few words with two regional leaders

*We took a few minutes during the latest executive committee meeting to chat with two new regional leaders in the WCRC.*



**Lisa Vander Wal**, pastor of Lisha's Kill Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York, and from the Reformed Church in America (RCA), was chosen as the Caribbean and North American Area Council's (CANAAAC) convener earlier this year.

Lisa decided to become a minister because "I believe God had a call on my life when I was about seven years old." In her tradition, women did not go to the seminary, so she became a social worker. But she "always felt as though the ability to bring what I consider the most wholistic approach, which is as a pastor bringing spiritual things, was missing in that. So I felt a restlessness until I pulled out the application for the seminary."

Lisa became involved in the ecumenical movement as an officer for the RCA from 2010-2013 when she represented the denomination around the world. Lisa believes that it is crucial for those in CANAAAC to "begin to build those relationship where we care what happens with each other," noting the significant differences between the challenges facing the churches in the Caribbean and those in North America.

"I take very seriously John 17, Jesus' prayer: 'May we all be one so that the world will know, so that the world will believe.' How do we bring peace and reconciliation and be able to say, even though we don't agree on everything, we are in Christ fundamentally one and that that unity is what can provide the peace and reconciliation that is so needed in the world. That's our calling."



**Kyeong-Shin Kang**, now the Northeast Asia Area Council (NEAAC) moderator, has been pastor of the Tongung Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, for more than twelve years. He originally graduated from Hansung University in Korea, and in 1982 went to the Claremont School of Theology (California, United States), completing both his master of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees there. During his time at Claremont, he served a Korean immigrant church, part of the Presbyterian Church (USA), for six years. In 1992 he returned to Korea and has served as pastor since then.

Kang's interest in ecumenism came from his time of activism. "For my dissertation for my doctorate, I wrote about the Minjun Church in Korea in view of ecumenical movement. Also, my denomination has been very active in the ecumenical movement. The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) was the first member of the WCC; also PROK is a member of the WCRC. The Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) is also active, but PROK was very oriented toward the ecumenical movement, particularly for peace and justice.

"I am very much oriented toward the ecumenical movement, also theologically. For me we understand that if we don't get together, we don't understand each other very well. When I came here [to the executive committee] and I heard what some people are saying about their regional problems, I heard and understood more and more. It is one body and here I feel that. I always feel Christians have real brother- and sister-ships. Even though we meet first time, oh, you are Christians, we are all brothers and sisters. This is a kind of communion. Like the WCRC, there is no justice without communion and no communion without justice."

# Following God's call: an introduction to our interns

What do an American sports journalist and a South African fashion designer have in common?

They're both examples of how God's call can lead to unexpected destinations, such as Hannover, Germany, as they're also both interns for the WCRC this year.

Fundiswa Kobo was a fashion design student in 2001 when she first sensed God's call. "I spent almost a year and a half trying to discern what God was really saying to me, constantly asking for guidance from senior ministers who prayed with me," she said. Fundiswa enrolled in a bachelor of theology programme at the University of Fort Hare and went on to obtain her master's in systematic theology from the University of Pretoria in 2010.

She has since served the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa in Gugulethu Township and Delft, working to create relations between the church and community, "offering spiritual upliftment, creating space for dialogue on issues that are controversial as well as crucial to the life of both the church and community."

"It is almost impossible to separate the church and the community in my context," she said. "First and foremost we believe in *ubuntu*—a person is a person by virtue of others. Our spirituality therefore is communal in a sense."

Fundiswa was first connected to the WCRC through the 2012 Global Institute of Theology, which "challenged me as it brought new insights in what I had always known. Being with theologians from all over the world, sharing our stories, struggles and finding new ways of doing theology was a highlight for me."

She hopes to come away from her internship "an empowered young woman who has been formed by so many voices through encounters

with various theologians and people Reformed and non-Reformed. I hope to be able to use the knowledge and these experiences as a tool to empower as I continue to find new ways to minister when I return back to South Africa."

Joanna Hipp, growing up in rural North Carolina, never thought going into ministry was an option for her until her Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation called a woman to be their minister, with others following. "These women showed me that ministry was an option and somehow saw potential in me that I didn't even know I had," she said.

God redirected Joanna again at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which she entered intent on becoming a rural church pastor. "As Christians we are called to live out *koinonia*. I think it's important to remember that we live together in one community of faith, honouring diversity. My question, though, is how is this lived out not only in our local context but also in relationship with the WCRC?"

Joanna experienced the international ecumenical world as a steward

at the 2012 central committee meeting of the World Council of Churches and again at the WCC's General Assembly in Busan, participating in the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute.

"I am deeply passionate about the ecumenical movement and how to continue on this pilgrimage. I am also deeply Reformed," she said, "and we believe in the interconnectedness of the whole church. We pride ourselves on our confessions, but we acknowledge that we are to move forward together as one church body, active in the world."

When asked to choose what she hopes to come away with from her internship, she said, "It would be that I hope to have a greater sense of how to live into my ecumenical calling and aid others in joining the ecumenical movement. I pray that my time here in Hannover is rich and rewarding, but from the past weeks I already know it will be."

Fundiswa's work will focus on theology while Joanna will be primarily connected with social justice. Both will also work with communications.





Chris Ferguson

**FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY**

*So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene.*

—Isaiah 59:14-16 (New International Version)

As I write this, the WCRC is in the full swing of transition! Just days ago we had the official handover from the outgoing to the incoming general secretary and celebrated the 14 years of abundantly rich ministry and service of Setri Nyomi with Holy Communion in the offices and then a staff party. Jerry Pillay, the WCRC president, was with us, and on Sunday Johann Weusmann, the WCRC general treasurer, joined with the staff and the people of the Reformed Church in Hannover to send Setri and his son safely on their journey to Geneva and then, later, on to Ghana.



The Global Institute of Theology held in Costa Rica was a great success. Two of the special events to mark the 10th anniversary of the Accra Confession have already happened, and the consultations in North East Asia and Africa will take place soon, leading up to a very important global consultation in November. A busy month, November. We will have the first meeting of the General Council Planning Committee as we gear up for 2017, marking 500 years of the Reformation with the 26th General Council under the theme: “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” Many, many more things are being readied and are moving forward.

As a World Communion we are in full gear and ready for transformation, ready to move from transition mode to renewal and change. It would almost be possible, almost but not really, to block out how truly dire the world situation is. In the face of escalating worldwide violence, injustice and counterproductive militarized response to virtually every conflict, we can feel a deep affinity with Isaiah the prophet as he clearly described the bleak situation in which his people found themselves—a massive threat to human life, afflicting most harshly the poor and powerless.

“Justice driven back...righteousness far away...truth stumbling and falling in the public square...no honesty...those who struggle against evil become victims...”

As hard as it is to fully take it in—our situation is as stark and as dire—certainly our member churches in the Middle East, in Colombia, in Mexico, in El Salvador, in, well, in most of our planet, can join their voices with Isaiah. And it’s no surprise that the Creator God, the God of Life, looks on this ugly truth of injustice and is displeased! No surprise that God is not focusing on the church or religious piety or devotion of the conduct of individuals only but focusing on injustice and rejecting it. But deeper and more startling is that for God the injustice was not the worst of it. The worst of all is that God saw that in the face of violence, inequity and systemic evil nobody, nobody at all did anything to right the wrong, to straighten the crooked, to repair the breach! Isaiah goes so far as to say that God was appalled! God recoiled at, was repulsed by, made ill at the thought that those made in God’s own image did not rise to the call of their vocation as human beings and intervene!

As a wide and broad family of Reformed, United/Uniting, Congregationalist and Waldensian churches work together to deepen and strengthen our unity and forge a communion committed to justice we are faced with this startling challenge. To look at this complex and turbulent world situation beset by systemic injustice and rampant evil and know that our very vocation as people of faith calls us to intervene, to enter in to the work of justice, peace and reconciliation not as a programme or an activity but as a central and irrevocable part of our faith in Jesus Christ.

We are moving from transition to renewal and transformation. Pray that together we will respond to the God of Life, so that God will not be appalled that there was no one to intervene.

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