

Address of the President

Rev. Najla Kassab

Introduction

1. I am happy to be addressing the new Executive Committee for the first time and thank you for your trust in me to be the president of the WCRC. I look forward to working together as a communion who strives for building stronger relations among churches and strategizes to lift up justice as a lens through which we evaluate what we do, how we view the world around us and how we reach out in mission.
2. “Called to Communion, committed to justice” is a challenging theme that the World Communion had lifted up clearly, summarizing our identity and concerns. In the last nine months as WCRC president, I came to discover how challenging it is to reflect this in our work and structures. We are called as a committee to scrutinize how we live as a communion and how we seek justice in our work. Communion starts with our life together as people from different churches and how justice is lived among us here in this Executive Committee. Communion starts in our encounter with each other as an Executive Committee.
3. We gather today empowered with the way God led us in the 26th General Council in Leipzig, Germany, 29 June to 7 July 2017 under the theme “Living God, renew and transform us.” If we look back we can recognize the several steps on the way to renewal and transformation that God bestowed on us, whether in the representation of women and men in the General Council, or electing a youth among our officers, or the number of women and men in the Executive Committee, or adopting the consensus model in our decision making, or electing a woman as president and many other decisions that were an affirmation that the WCRC is moving forward towards renewal and transformation and is centered around the “God of life.” I mention this to affirm that God is leading us and reforming us for all that reflects a life of *koinonia* that is rooted in living up to God’s call for justice.
4. The world is overwhelmed today with lots of pain, divisions, hatred and enmity. Just as I am preparing my report, the war in Syria continues and the threat of continual bombing of Syria from leading countries in the West is a daily reality, pushing more refugees outside Syria. Also, the struggle in Israel-Palestine continues and the voice of the suffering of the Palestinian Christians is raised daily, or the threat to the Christian church in Egypt by radical groups, or the growth of radical Islam which has succeeded in making the language of fear and threat a worldwide language that is used with ease by several world leaders. Not to forget the struggle in Colombia and the need for a culture of nonviolence and peaceful resolution for a historic conflict or struggle in South Sudan, or the struggles of Indigenous people and their rights, or the issue of migration that deprive many people their dignity and lead the receiving countries to new realities that could lead to more tension and enmity. I have counted very few of the many challenges that the world is going through, and the actions of our last General Councils reflect

that hard reality and challenges us to see the urgency of reconciliation for the world.

5. All this leads us to gather here in South Korea around the theme of reconciliation in a country that has long been struggling for peace and reconciliation. As we read the signs of the time we are called to live as ambassadors for reconciliation **“From Life, For Life: Transforming, Reconciling and Renewing.”**
6. One wonders what would bring this world to healing and wholeness. **Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21** speaks about reconciliation; it seems after having a good experience in the city of Corinth, after the church was flourishing and growing, Paul left them to find later that lots of problems appeared there. Not merely problems among the Corinthians but there were even problems with Paul himself. Paul was questioned and suspected concerning his validity as an apostle; his motives were questioned, and his gospel was considered as heresy. So, in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul, sometimes with gritted teeth and through tears other times, defends himself. In the fifth chapter, Paul's desire to clear his name combines with his effort to repeat the true gospel, resulting in a sublime passage of great power where the centrepiece is reconciliation. Paul shares his story of the pain that he experienced in Corinth. He opens our eyes to a new way on how to solve divisions, since many times we tend to deal with temporal solutions that relate to consequences and forget to tackle the main cause for divisions. Without reconciliation healing is not achieved.
7. The result of this cosmic reconciliation is that we now look at everything differently. Therefore, we know no one after the flesh (*kata sarx*—according to the flesh) from now on because Christ “died for all, that those who live should no longer live to themselves, but to him who for their sake died and rose again” (v. 15), Paul calls us to no longer regards others “after the flesh” or “according to the flesh” (v. 16) but to see God in every person around us. Paul calls us to look at everything and everyone through the lens of reconciliation. We are ambassadors of reconciliation as we call others to believe in Jesus and be in a good relationship with God. But it's not just about the vertical dimension between God and us, it's also that God's love changes everything on the human, horizontal level, as well.
8. Paul writes, “Once upon a time we regarded Jesus only from a human point of view and when we did, we didn't understand Jesus well. But now we see Jesus and everyone in a divine perspective and it changes everything.” Paul talks about regarding Jesus and each other *kata sarx*, “according to the flesh,” and the call of reconciliation is a step towards looking to people beyond the flesh recognizing the image of God in them and the power of reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

Context

9. **We meet in South Korea** where the Korean peninsula has been struggling for peace and reconciliation since the war started in June 1950. In July 1953 a

ceasefire agreement was signed. The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was created to separate the two countries. In October 1966 the Korean DMZ conflict began as troops from both countries invaded the demilitarized zone and engaged in skirmishes. The threat for resuming war was ever since. The two countries engaged in tense talks before agreeing to reduce tensions.

10. In January 2018, the Seoul–Pyongyang hotline was re-connected. In February, North Korea sent an unprecedented high-level delegation to the Winter Olympics in South Korea, headed by Kim Yo-jong, sister of Kim Jong-un, and she passed on an invitation from her brother to President Moon Jae-in to visit the North. The two Korean leaders met at the Joint Security Area on the 27th of April where they announced their governments would work towards a denuclearized Korean peninsula and formalize peace between the two states. Furthermore, it was announced that President Moon would visit North Korea this fall.
11. With this positivity and the move towards reconciliation we are challenged as the church to be fully involved in reconciliation on the local and international level. The church in Korea has been playing a vital role side by side other ecumenical organizations to push peace forward and the WCRC was fully involved to advocate for peace talks. On 5 October 2016 a visit to North Korea promoting dialogue was arranged by the WCRC and efforts were made through fostering dialogue between North and South on 4 of July 2017. Also, the issue related to Korean peace was voiced at the 2017 General Council where the Korean Christian Federation (of North Korea) sent a delegation. The General Council in Leipzig instructed the WCRC to bring together the many ecumenical initiatives working for peace to create an “Ecumenical Accompaniment Process for Healing, Reconciliation and Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula.” The Korean peninsula has become one of several areas of focus for the WCRC in its Global Peace Initiatives program.
12. We are grateful for God who brought us here in Seoul at this time where all efforts towards peace have started to bear fruits. The World Communion of Reformed Churches welcomed the progress toward peace made at the summit in Panmunjom between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. It is a significant step in a long journey of reconciliation. We are here to rejoice together and to discover together as churches of the Communion how we will be renewed together as we imagine how the Lord will send us to live peace and reconciliation where the shalom for the people in the Korean peninsula is lived. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we will be challenged to live as ambassadors for reconciliation and will strive to be healed from a past full of pain and division to a new community transformed, reconciled and renewed.

WCRC after the General Council

13. After the General Council in July in Leipzig, the WCRC continued its work through a “Bridge Plan” that was carried out between July 2017 and May 2018. The plan placed a strategic emphasis on five key directions for the work and witness of the WCRC:
 - 1) Mission

- 2) Communion
 - 3) Justice
 - 4) Theology
 - 5) Ecumenical Engagement
14. The work in the bridge plan was in line with the goals and objectives that are developed in the proposed strategic plan. Several activities were held in the above areas (the General Secretary will explain more on those). During this time officers took additional responsibilities for the governance of the organization. Several Skype calls were conducted, besides a face-to-face meeting in December 2017. The officers acted as interim committees when needed, were the core of the Strategic Planning Committee and took their role as the Personnel Committee.
15. **Strategic planning:** Since December WCRC leadership, partners and members in the Communion and staff joined efforts toward developing a strategic plan that will guide the organization in the coming years until 2024. In the spirit of discernment and the involvement of different working groups and core groups who took part in the process of defining the “Vision and Mission” besides “Context Analysis” and “Strategic Goals and Tactics” a strategic plan came to birth. The fruits of this work will be presented to us in this Executive meeting, and we look forward to be involved in receiving the work done and contributing together to a strategic plan that will lead us to echo in practical ways what we heard in our last General Council and what the Spirit will lead us to as a Communion. I believe a great work was done and I hope by the end of this meeting we will embrace the work with confidence, joy and thankfulness to our God who will lead us through this strategic plan.
16. **Strengthening the Communion:** One of the key tasks that I find it empowering to our Communion, as president, is building relations among our churches of the Communion and with partners. I have received in the last months several invitations from our churches to attend their gatherings and even from partners and new partners. Unfortunately, due to conflicting schedules I could not meet all the requests, but I hope that with earlier notifications, I will be visiting all the regions, if possible, and will be able to attend the regional councils. Below are some of my involvements with churches and partners in visitations and conferences that I attended since July 2018:
- 26 November – 2 December:** Consultation on “Strengthening the Communion: Communion and Human Sexuality,” Chennai, India
- 1-4 September:** Speaker at the General Assembly of Danmission, Denmark
- 5 September:** Reformed Church in Copenhagen visit
- 26-29 September:** Participating as a speaker in a conference prepared by the Lutheran Church in the Middle East inviting leaders of Reformed churches in Middle East as part of celebrations for 500 years of Reformation
- 8-13 March:** Presenting the opening sermon at the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), Arusha, Tanzania
- 21-24 March:** Council for World Mission-WCRC Summit, Hannover, Germany
- 12-14 April:** WCRC Europe meeting, Budapest, Hungary

14-15 April: Reformed Church in Hungary visit**Concerns and Insights**

17. Dear friends, despite the fact that some of my concerns and insights are dealt with in the proposed strategic plan, still I hope to shed the light on them as one way of helping us grow together as a communion.
18. Building communion starts with our work together in the Executive meeting. We hope there will be space in our executive meeting to come to know more about our churches and regional ministries. We come from different cultures where relations are valued differently. We hope that in our planning our schedule we will create a space for sharing where we come to know each other and to journey together.
19. Our Communion is strengthened by empowering the work in the regions. I hope we can strategize to hold our Executive meetings in different regions that are part of our Communion. I know the financial and organizational challenges toward such a decision but our presence in the regions will bring real empowerment to the regions and will shape us in a better way as a Communion.
20. Communication among ourselves as Executive Committee members is vital and necessary. I hope we can develop a stronger network between us as members in the Executive Committee, benefitting from the new ways in media to bring us closer together as a committee.
21. Regular written reporting is vital in keeping us informed on what is happening in our life as a Communion. It could also be a shared video among the Executive Committee. I believe one year is a long time where we are informed about the progress of our strategic plan. I hope that we will be more informed besides what the communication office is posting on media.
22. One of the main concerns that lies ahead of us is how we can promote the WCRC to the world. As our general secretary put it one day, "We are 100,000,000 individuals around the world and hardly people know us." We are called to put our efforts in preparing visual material that could be used in speaking about the WCRC and used to inform people on the pews about who we are. I believe our role as Executive members is vital in that.
23. One of our strengths as WCRC is our relation with our partners, whether the World Council of Churches, Council for World Mission, Lutheran World Federation or other organizations. We are called to make sure that these partnerships are growing, healthy and are empowering to us and to our partners. Regular summits, just as the one we had lately with CWM, encourages us to evaluate and move forward with our partners.
24. The General Council entrusted us with a big number of actions, concerns and challenges. Prioritizing and setting a timetable is vital for our success and progress. I

believe the strategic plan will help us in that, and a timetable for our activities will help us to stand accountable to fulfilling our plan and in securing balanced involvement among the regions.

25. Sustainability of the WCRC is an important aspect that we ought to keep our eyes on. Although sustainability is not merely centered on finances, still financial contribution is a sign of commitment to the vision and mission of the WCRC, even when that meant giving the least coin. Contributions from member churches in funding the core budget is an important sign of belonging, commitment and empowerment to the WCRC. This is a challenge that requests our involvement, efforts and attention as Executive members.
26. Last but not least, the WCRC in electing a women president made a strong statement for the world; still, this does not mean that we reached gender justice. This is step toward gender justice. Changing minds and prejudices are the difficult part of the journey. I believe we will strive together as women and men to work together in living up to justice. Having women among the leading staff of WCRC is urgent in proclaiming and living justice. I want to confess that empowering women and all those who are marginalized will be at the centre of my attention. We will walk the journey with those who are suffering and with those who are rejoicing. Let me share with you the encouraging story from the Reformed Church of East Africa, who decided to start ordaining women. "Being at the General Council inspired us further and led the General Synod to pass the resolution to okay ordination of women," said RCEA Moderator Rev. Musa Kipkorir Kapkong Maina. Our commitment for accompanying change on gender justice will remain a call central to our Communion.

Conclusion

27. Dear friends, we are here as a Communion who are "committed to worship, work, listen and pray together as a community of faith, seeking to discern God's will around a common table for both worship and decision making." We are here to learn together how we live justice, and the context of the Korean peninsula urges us to spell justice in practical steps of crossing borders and meeting others and hearing stories from the other side of the grass. We indeed chose a motto that challenges our faith—"From Life, For Life: Transforming, Reconciling and Renewing"—and every time we are silent or we distance ourselves from the suffering we contribute to injustice. May the Lord guide us and teach us how to be a Communion committed to justice.
28. I end with the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).
29. May we be those ambassadors and may we be a voice for reconciliation.
30. To God be all glory!