



THE CARIBBEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN AREA COUNCIL

*CANAAC is the regional
expression of the World
Communion of Reformed
Churches in the region of
the Caribbean, USA, and
Canada*

A Message from the Assembly of the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches October 30, 2018

Introduction

We, delegates from the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC) of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), gathered as an Assembly in Georgetown, Guyana, October 25-30, 2018.

We came from the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, Iglesia Evangelical Dominicana, Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada en Cuba, Guyana Presbyterian Church, Guyana Congregational Union, Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbyterian Church of Guyana, Presbyterian Church of Trinidad & Tobago, Reformed Church in America, United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands, United Church of Canada, and United Church of Christ.

Under the theme “Living Faithfully, Building Relationships” we came together to strengthen bonds across the region, address critical issues—especially those presented in Guyana—elect new leadership, and set a course for future work, framed by the five interlocking dimensions—communion, justice, theology, mission, and ecumenical engagement & interreligious cooperation—as found in the WCRC’s Strategic Plan.

Immersion Learning Experiences

Our time together began with immersion visits to organizations that are engaged in work which intersects with our concerns and goals as a Communion rooted in the gospel’s concern for fullness of life for all. We split into small groups to visit the following organizations:

Red Thread: Born from a movement of women who protested bans on food imports that drove up the prices of food, Red Thread became an organization to support opportunities for education and economic empowerment. What emerged was the reality that women’s intersectional realities call for attention across multiple areas: worker rights, domestic violence, rape victim advocacy, educational supports for children, and food security.

Plastic City: Human communities residing on land that suffers regular flooding and serves as a de facto dumping ground for the river in the *Vreed en Hoop* (Peace and Hope) township, our delegates discussed the need for education and a greater consciousness of environmental sustainability and issues of pollution (the need for recycling), creation of employment opportunities to disrupt cycles of generational poverty, increased ownership of land, use of land, housing security and adequate housing, environmental health, and sanitation for prevention of disease.

Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination: SASOD originated as a student-led advocacy organization to include in the University of Guyana's constitution language against discrimination based on sexual orientation. SASOD's circle of members and supporters has since grown beyond the bounds of the university and now includes homophobia education, services for vulnerable people and human rights. Visiting delegates heard about the ways that religious homophobia has been perpetuated through full-page ads in newspapers which state anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and advertise churches that are in favour of exclusion. There are a small number of religious bodies that are supportive of SASOD efforts—not necessarily out of support for LGBTQ practices but out of a commitment to anti-discriminatory practices (the Anglican and Catholic church as well as Muslim communities). Reformed congregations that support LGBTQ inclusion exist, but are not vocal about their stance, resulting in invisibility.

Mangrove Restoration: The Guyana Mangrove Restoration Project was executed during 2010-2013 under the National Agricultural Research & Extension Institute. During their visit, delegates learned about practices that contribute to the disruption of interconnected cycles of life (including the adverse effects of economic development on efforts for restoration) and the ways that inadequate opportunities for waste disposal and recycling lead to unchecked practices of dumping. They also learned of the need for raised community consciousness on the necessity of mangroves for the preservation of coastline and the need for multiplied efforts of restoration.

Theme Plenaries

In addition to immersion opportunities to learn about issues on the ground, delegates participated in focused conversations, informed by panelists, on the following topics:

Human Sexuality: Member church issues raised included child marriage, co-habitation and sexual relations between youth, the practice of abortion as birth control (resulting in fertility challenges). These realities are exacerbated or undergirded by regression or lack of sex education curriculum, increased tensions in some denominational bodies and societies as questions of LGBTQ inclusion are pressed, denominations that are fully inclusive of LGBTQ persons offer resources and models for education, conversation, and discernment to accompany those congregations faced with debates.

Call to action: Commit to standing against discriminatory practices, while nurturing relationships in the midst of difficult and potentially divisive conversations.

Racism in Church and Society: Efforts to combat racism and racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance were discussed as part of the panel, including the UN's "Decade of People of African Descent" (with a particular focus paid to those who are in the African diaspora). Each CANAAC country struggles with unique issues, histories, and forms in which racism manifests.

Call to action: Member churches are urged to be voices of courage in confronting and dismantling theologies, practices, and narratives that allow racism to go unaddressed.

Accra Confession: Presentations on economic justice, ecological justice, gender justice and food justice and their relationship to empire were presented and discussed. Questions and concerns included: What does it mean to be an ecological church? Confronting the fact that

the church has been (and continues to be) complicit in the workings of empire, which can lead to practices of excluding, marginalizing, or silencing dissenting voices or those who ask the difficult questions. How to make these analyses accessible and communicated to congregations? How to engage and compel persons for individual action? How to translate what was discussed in engaging and relatable ways (i.e., video, social media, resource sharing) and create a space to develop and share resources?

Call to actions: 1) Seek creative ways for communicating and making accessible the analyses presented; 2) Recognize complicity with empire and identify practices or cultural norms that exclude, marginalize, or silence dissenting voices or those who ask difficult/challenging questions.

From Despair to Hope: The situation of the world today, rife with injustices with seemingly no solutions, can easily lead to frustration and trauma—both spiritual and physical. A panel presented ways in which churches are working to counter this despair, leading with—and to—hope. Unjust incarcerations in the U.S. were countered with donations to meet unattainable bail demands. Rampant crime in Jamaica was countered with peace initiatives led by churches, neighbourhood engagements and other activities. Intergenerational trauma inflicted on youth in Canada was countered with community building. While all of these realities, added to those named above, are cause for despair and grief, we recall the words of the apostle Paul in Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Therefore, member churches are called to lean ever more into strengthening community relationships within and across congregations for the purpose of putting faith into action, guided by the insights gained by the conversations we've had at the Assembly.

Call to actions: 1) Intentionally include the voices of youth in the discussions of hope around the dire situations which plague everyday life in communities within our Communion; 2) Reflect the theme of this Assembly in all the work CANAAC undertakes: "Living Faithfully, Building Relationships."

Issues Raised by Guyanese Member Churches

Through our rich visits across Guyana and our intense and purposeful discussions, we have noted the concerns that affect fullness of life brought to the fore by our member churches in Guyana. We believe that since we engaged in this country, these issues must be underscored so that as a Communion, we can accompany and support these sisters and brothers.

Migration Phenomena

- Across the Caribbean, and echoed through Venezuela, Cuba, and Guyana, the brain drain of youth is of critical concern. It has been estimated that in Guyana, 90% of college-educated, professional class Guyanese have left the country in search of more professional opportunities. This stunts national development at a meaningful level.

Clergy Shortage

- The churches have identified a problem in the lack of interest by congregants for joining the ordained ministry. In fact, some of the currently serving clergy hold two jobs, which affects pastoral care.

Resourcing Theological Education and Pastoral Training

- With respect to adequate theological training, addressing current theological issues and continuous training for clergy, the Guyanese churches find themselves at a disadvantage with a lack of facilities to engage this concern.

Socio-economic Conflicts: Race, Economics, Resources

- The history of the country, and of course the Caribbean reality, lends itself to major conflicts. Even within the establishment of the church, socio-economic realities have been present and real, causing friction and preventing the unification of the various denominations.

Environment: Imminent Exploitation of Oil Resources and Effects (Ecology, Social Impacts)

- Discussion around the environment in Guyana is usually approached in two ways: the developed coastline and the pristine rainforests of the interior. Whilst the country can boast of limited injection to the rainforests, this is in danger due to the projected development of recently discovered oil resources and the current business-as-usual model. The coastline, however, has seen constant pollution, mangrove destruction, reclaimed land issues, clogged waterways, lack of recycling initiatives and inadequate waste disposal avenues.

Election of Steering Committee

Following the CANAAC bylaws, a Nominating Committee put forth a slate of candidates who were unanimously elected to the Steering Committee, serving until the next Assembly. The officers elected: Convener: Angela Martins (United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands); Deputy Convener: Colin Watson (Christian Reformed Church in North America); Financial Secretary: Gail Allan (United Church of Canada). The committee members elected: Jesus Oscar Rodriguez (Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada en Cuba), Valeska Austin (Guyana Congregational Union), Matthew Sans (Presbyterian Church in Canada), Karl Heimback (Presbyterian Church (USA)), Simone-Asha Singh-Sagar (Presbyterian Church of Trinidad & Tobago), along with WCRC Vice-President Lisa Vander Wal (representative of the WCRC Executive Committee).

Closing Thoughts

*“And let us consider how we may provoke
one another to love and good deeds.”
—Hebrews 10:24*

This Scripture selection perfectly reflects our way forward and the path we endeavour to journey on as a Communion. Our renewed commitment and energy to making the workings of CANAAC more sustainable and intentional is dependent on and shaped by “provoking one another.” We highlight the need for each individual church’s adoption of responsibility one to the other, for truly we must live out the ways of being one another’s keepers in the Communion.

We strongly urge our member churches to commit to building relationships in the midst of challenging conversations. It is only through these relationships that we create a united and interdependent Communion. Let us attempt to expand some energies into rebuilding or establishing relationships between people, congregations, and denominations. This will make our shared requests for resources, training, exchanges of

youth and young adults, and networking for support of a successful reality for which we can be appreciative.

The journey from despair to hope engages us all and calls to question our definition of hope for a more honest exploration of the church's role in leading persons from despair to hope.

We are assured that as we build mutually supportive relationships, we can live faithfully in communion.