

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

Rev. Najla Kassab

We are happy to hold the Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) here at the Kappel monastery, in a place that played an important role in the Zürich Reformation where just close by the Reformer Huldrych Zwingli was killed in the battle of Kappel. We are happy to come back to Switzerland as a previous home for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches then and WCRC now and believe that Switzerland will always be part of our journey with who we are and hope to be. We gather here in a special time as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and appreciate greatly the invitation of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Zürich and the Federation of Swiss Evangelical Churches (SEK).

We gather under the theme “Let your Light Shine Forth: Seeking Shalom in the Midst of Empire,” guided by two biblical texts. First, where Jesus’ called the disciples to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), and the prophet Jeremiah encouraged the people in exile in Babylon to seek the shalom of the city to which they had been deported (29:7).

To let our light shine and become shalom-makers is such a challenging task. To be a shalom-maker could lead to struggle and problems. Many times people perceive peace (shalom) as merely the absence of war or troubles. Some understand peace as keeping the status quo; no problems and all is smooth. On the contrary, peace is linked to the well-being of the people, flowing out of God's will for all to have "fullness of life." Living peace is the hope of achieving a dignified life for all aside from religion, citizenship, gender or race.

To work towards shalom is to have our eyes focused on human dignity. That is why when we work for justice and peace we could get upset and angry and strive to do something to overcome all pain and restore the dignity of the people. We become concerned with living out God's will for God's people and to defend them with all that this commitment requires. Jesus was ready to get fully involved and pay the price.

Many times we misunderstand peace to mean only my comfort, or what is good only for my nation. Peace should be what is good for all, and to keep the shalom of the city is to get involved in the struggle that gives dignity and well-being to all in the city. To put the dignity of the people at the centre and struggle towards that is the call that the Reformer Zwingli puts in front of us. Zwingli challenges us in being involved even in reforming the political system. There is no way to have our light shine away from keeping the shalom of the people in the city, in the nation and the world as the light house for our journey, which could mean daily struggle, speaking up, disturbing the status quo and even paying a price.

We gather at a critical time where the world is surrounded with lots of injustice, starting from the recent terrorist attacks on worshippers in Sri Lanka, or Muslim worshippers in New Zealand, or the daily killing in Nigeria, besides the difficult social, economic and political situation in Venezuela. We recognize the political conflicts in Cameroon between the anglophone and francophone areas that resulted in a humanitarian crisis.

We are also troubled with the situation of the countries that are still struggling for peace, whether it is in South Sudan, or Israel–Palestine, Yemen or Syria, where death remain a daily reality and people are suffering with war situations. We are faced with the refugee crisis where people were forced to leave their countries and became stuck between challenges that hosting countries are facing, or the difficult

possibility of returning home, due to an insecure future or family issues where the younger generation became established in the new country.

We think of the countries that are still discerning the road to peace, whether between North and South Korea or Colombia. We are challenged on how we can help the people who have suffered due to natural disasters, whether it is earthquakes in Indonesia or the Philippines or the cyclone in Mozambique and southern Africa, leaving many people homeless and dead.

Still we stand with great concern about the changes that Europe is facing whether with the growth of the radical right or the authoritarian and populist ideologies, besides dealing with the refugee situation in Europe. Not to forget the Brexit issue that Great Britain is facing and the concern of many about the future. Still the climate change issue remains a serious concern that has its impact on the earth and daily life raising issues of ecological justice.

One cannot but see the economic roots that are behind injustice in the world and has left people in poverty. If we may say the economic greediness has led many countries to grow to empires while other nations suffer, and urging the people to seek other countries for the sake of security for their future, seeing their home countries as hopeless places, taking the risk on the account for their dignity, culture and personal peace as well.

Amid this troubled world that is fallen among thieves (John 10:10) we are called as a communion to journey towards justice, and to be actively involved through discerning, confessing, witnessing and being reformed together.

Discerning the signs of times is a vital step towards the journey in living up to our Reformed identity where we are invited to confess and witness and be shaped anew as a Communion in the hands of God. Discerning the signs of time urges us to hold responsibility and get involved even when that means pronouncing statements that do not sound popular or favored in the eyes of many.

Lately we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One of the interesting persons who is part of the Jesus story is Caiaphas who said, *"You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish."* Now he did not say this on his initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that he might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill him (John 11:49-53).

Caiaphas prophesied that that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish. Jesus' salvific act sets a logic that is central to our Christianity; it contradicts the logic of the world today, where nations die for the sake of power of one person, or other nations die for the sake of one nation.

The world is troubled today by attitudes where strong countries feel they can control small, weak countries and even decide their future. That is why a dialogue around church and state that will be part of our Executive meeting will enrich us as we journey towards justice. It is high time for the Communion to lift issues that that are political in nature, where the church can no more be silent. We cannot be on the journey of justice without being straightforward struggling with political issues and hearing live stories from different contexts of the communion, that will help us to think practically about justice. The mere fact of meeting in Kappel opens our eyes in our involvement with the society, and Zwingli challenges us on our stand with issues related to the dignity of the people even outside the church.

Also the world is trapped with radicalism. If we want to summarize what is happening in the world today, we cannot see clearly how the world is overwhelmed with the culture of fear rather than hope. Radical groups have succeeded in planting fear around the world.

As a Communion, we are challenged to take the risk and be a sign of hope, even if in small steps of crossing boundaries, challenging all culture of fear that separates us and creates borders, and have a dialogue of life that changes our perceptions and proclaims hope beyond fear. We are the people of hope, not because we trust that we will change policies, but rather because we stand as a paradigm of hope. The mere fact that we are ready to tackle the issue of church and state is a sign of hope.

We are happy that the **WCRC Strategic Plan: 2018-2024** was adopted in our last Executive meeting and a "Draft for WCRC Program and Organization Implementation Plan" will be presented to us with timeline and calendar suggestions and will be adopted in this Executive meeting. One of the valuable and complimentary approach for our Strategic Plan is "the implementation and monitoring strategy, the Strategic Plan itself defines that." It is not enough to have a strategic plan, or develop programmes, but rather evaluating how these programmes and activities impact lives and move the Strategic Plan into a tangible force of change. The evaluation of the Strategic Plan will not be measured by the amount of activities, but rather what impact these activities create on the life of the Communion and the world around us. This is why the role of the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG) is a vital catalyst that will guide us on our way forward especially through a yearly report that we will receive in our Executive meeting. I am sure you will hear more about this but I would like to highlight that as a healthy sign for evaluating and working in the spirit of communion.

The tasks of the SPPG are:

- *Clarifying which programme will be coordinated by which Reference Group;*
- *Monitoring if programmes are implemented according to the vision and the values set in the Constitution and the Strategic Plan.*
- *Receiving the reports of the Reference Groups and submitting them through the General Secretary to the Executive Committee.*
- *Receiving the Executive Committee decisions on programmes and submitting them to the Reference Groups.*

Midterm review of the General Secretary

The WCRC Constitution, in Article XII, Point B, states: "A comprehensive performance review will be scheduled at the midpoint of each seven-year term and prior to the decision to appoint the General Secretary to a second seven-year term. The performance review shall be conducted by persons appointed by the Executive Committee."

Since the officers are appointed as the Personnel Committee, the officers did carry out the midpoint comprehensive performance review of Chris as he has now served more than four years in his term. Many of us know that the midterm review was around the General Council and this is why it was postponed at a time that the whole Communion was busy with the Strategic Plan. We are happy that many people responded to the online questionnaire, and a report from the officers will be presented to the Executive.

Visitations of the President

June 15-19: Keynote speaker at the Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) annual advocacy summit in Washington, DC, USA

“An organization which works to mobilize US Christians to embrace a holistic perspective and to be advocates of equality, human rights, security, and justice for Israelis, Palestinians, and all people of the Middle East.” It was an occasion of lifting the issues of injustice in the Middle East and challenging US policies. It was an event where the participants met with politicians on Capitol Hill and discussed issues of injustice on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. The conference focused on the voice of Christian and Jewish women leaders and some of them are involved in reconciliation projects.

The conference was an enriching experience where the church and the society were in dialogue. Several secular voices contributed to the discussion. It was a golden opportunity to introduce the WCRC to participants, besides forming a network with Palestinian and Jewish women leaders, and it was a first time of encounter with Christian Palestinian women where the war in the Middle East created borders, and we cannot visit each other

June 20-23: PC(USA) General Assembly, preacher at the ecumenical service

Under the theme “Kingdom Building for the 21st Century” I had the honour to be the preacher for the ecumenical service where I spoke about bridges for reconciliation, mainly at a time where migrant children were separated from their families in the USA. The service was a time of pointing to injustice, whether in the Middle East or in the USA and how the church can be a bridge for reconciliation. It was a time of strengthening and celebrating our communion with the PC(USA).

August 21-24: Youth Symposium, Amsterdam

I had the privilege to be a speaker for a Symposium for Youth, held in Amsterdam around “Hospitality on a Pilgrim’s Way of Justice and Peace.” As celebration for 70th anniversary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and besides the Symposium, I participated in a table talk with the youth together with the general secretary and president of WCC, discussing the role of WCC and WCRC in ecumenism. I also took part in a worship service in Amsterdam Cathedral as part of the celebration.

September 15-20: Tumekutana, Johannesburg, South Africa

It was a great privilege to be a keynote speaker in 2018 Tumekutana gathering held in Johannesburg, South Africa; as plenary speaker on the topic “Women as Stewards, Woman you are the Image of God.” I also participated in an interactive session of sharing with the women and hearing the challenges and joy of key women leaders from 22 countries in Africa, besides some partners around the world who support women’s work in Africa and empower their role in the body of Christ. Elder Veronica Muchiri is on the Executive of the Tumekutana and Rev. Mary Ekinde Salle was a delegate.

October 18-26: Solidarity visit to Iraq

The solidarity visit included a delegation from PC(USA) where we visited the three remaining functioning Presbyterian churches in Bagdad, Basra and Kirkuk. We also held a consultation in Bagdad for the leadership of the three churches, pastors and elders, where we discussed the needs of the churches in Iraq and how they can cooperate as a synod. One of their main concern is becoming members of WCRC and networking with the Reformed churches in the Middle East, mainly NESSL and Synod of the Nile in Egypt.

January 7-10, 2019: Visiting the Uniting Church in Sweden

I was a key speaker in a conference for all the Swedish pastors and leaders from the Uniting Church in Sweden in Gothenburg. The delegates of the conference were pastors, deacons, youth leaders and other employees from the 700 local Uniting Church congregations throughout Sweden. The theme was “To be a Changing Leadership (A Leadership in Change).” It was a time of strengthening the communion with the Uniting Church in Sweden.

January 30-February 3, 2019: Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba

I attended the Synod of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba (IPRC) and a commemorative conference, “Jose Martí: For the Balance of the World” (Martí was a 19th century revolutionary philosopher and political theorist who laid many of the foundations for Cuba’s quest for independence), tackling the topic “Peace and Christian Ethics.” The visit was a solidarity visit connecting with the church in Cuba that is still struggling with the embargo and isolation. Rev. Aginaldo P.Gomes from AIPRAL and Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, co-moderator of the PC(USA), were attending as well.

Points of Concern

Sustainability is at the heart of our concerns as an Executive Committee, not merely for securing a healthy core budget and financial resources, but it is a sign of commitment to the WCRC. We are happy that there is an increase in commitment of some churches who show their commitment in sharing their resources and paying their membership dues. In the line of our Strategic Plan, we are called as Executive Committee members to be:

Encouraging an increase in the level of contributions and special donations to the core budget from those member churches who have the potential to do so by developing Executive Committee-led work groups in each region.

I believe this is an important responsibility that is ahead of us as an Executive Committee.

Empowering the regions remains a vital task that helps in building a stronger Communion whether in providing spaces for dialogue and action in the regions or enriching the work of the Communion on the global level. That is why we appreciate the role and presence of the regional representatives whether in the decision-making or presenting their reports. Still I think specifying through our worship time to focus on one region in every Executive Committee will give us a closer look at the concerns of every region.

Also as mentioned in our Strategic Plan some regions do not have regional councils, and we will start the possibility of forming regional councils in 2021. I know that some representatives of these areas are present; still we are called to start preparing for the formation of these councils from today, whether in visitation or in consultations that lay the ground for that.

Strategizing our travel: Strategizing our travel in a way that supports our plan and challenges is a key factor in moving forward in the coming years, whether it is the traveling of the general secretary, president or officers. I know now as a president the load of the invitations that I receive and many I cannot fulfill. I know the traveling schedule of our general secretary and time and efforts that he puts in that. But I believe it is time to strategize our traveling in a way that helps the Communion in a stronger way. The discussion started among the officers, and the general secretary and I are working on that now. I say this here to plan with the regions the possibility of visitation so that all regions are visited before our next General Council.

2024 WCRC General Council: Concerning WCRC General Council 2024, the officers started to explore possibilities for the place of our General Council, and a letter to churches was already sent, we hope to receive soon an invitation giving priority to those who did not host earlier. We hope in 2020 we will have clarity about the venue and plan, and we will have our committees starting the task of preparation. I believe four years before is not too early for a well-organized General Council.

Communications: One of the vital elements to build a communion is communication, which can strengthen both the Communion itself and also its public witness. That is why in our Strategic Plan, a special attention is given to communication and we hope through the communication desk we will have a short video to present our Strategic Plan and a friendly document that can be used in promoting our identity and WCRC's vision and work. Also enhancing our relations as communion through media helps us in creating a network through which we come to know more about the ministry of the member churches.

Capacity concern: A close look at our strategic plan will easily pose the question about capacity and the possibility of four executive staff, four administrative staff and two interns to accomplish all that is required in fulfilling our Strategic Plan and the goals of the organization. I believe if we were to do our work with a higher level of competence, we have to take this topic seriously. We thank God for the qualified and enthusiastic staff, but I believe we have to be creative in finding ways to expand the number of staff through a variety of means. Also, it must be noted that the current staffing does not properly reflect gender justice, and I hope that this issue of gender balance is met soon and not delayed any further. I know the general secretary is following up on this matter, but the aspect of urgency is becoming inevitable.

Dear friends, we come together as the Executive Committee of the World Communion of churches to discern the will of God and to continue our journey towards justice. The needs are many and the challenges increase day after day. **I believe follow up is a key road to success**, where many times we tend to tackle issues and get enthusiastic about them and then we proceed to meet all the other responsibilities in our crowded schedules. Prioritizing and picking our battles is important for our Communion. If I may ask, what is at the heart of our struggle as a Communion? What issue will we give special attention to? We are not called to repeat what all other ecumenical organizations are doing, where we can partner with them still, but rather choose the road less trodden.

In my last visit to Iraq, I discovered that the church in Iraq has become a remnant, and there is a serious threat about the Christian presence there, and probably this is the same in Iran and Palestine. I believe as the third largest Christian body in the world, we have great responsibility, and we are called to believe in our important role. Holding a conference in Iraq about reconciliation in 2020 will give us a new breath and strength. This is just one example about the many needs around the world.

What is at the heart of our Communion is a question that I leave with you and I struggle with myself.

Today the world is threatened with radical attitudes, and we are challenged as a Communion to fight radicalism with hospitality and to be a body who dares to get into a "free space," as Henri Nouwen said is defining hospitality. He says:

Hospitality is a fundamental attitude towards our fellow human beings, it means to create a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not

to change people but to offer them space where change can take place for spiritual growth and transformation.

As a Communion we are called to provide that free space, where we are transformed ourselves. I believe everyone here has felt at some time as a stranger even within the communion, whether with issues related to culture, spirituality, way of thinking, personal struggle. We are here to secure that we have a free space, where we are strangers and we invite strangers as well, but we meet in this precious free space “WCRC” to hear the voice of the one who invited us to be around the table and the one who is ready to change us and shape us anew. I pray that our meeting will be a time of blessings, discernment and envisioning and also a free space.

Today we miss great people around our table, namely Rev. Robina Winbush and Rev. Peter Borgdorff—two precious strong voices who challenged us always to secure the free space in this Communion, the freedom to speak and the power to be transparent and speak for the struggle.

For these two friends who taught us a lot about committed, zealous, Reformed servants of the Lord, we pay tribute, and learn that we cannot take life for granted, but rather it is time to rise, shine and live peace and justice.

To God all Glory, Amen.

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