

Address of the President

Dear respected Executive Committee members and partners,

We gather today as Executive Committee members under the theme **Stand firm, giving yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**. The theme is taken from I Corinthians 15:58 which reads, “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” The text calls us to stand firm because our Labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Probably the text addresses the current status that many of us have experienced as we were struck by COVID, and are facing now the challenge of recovering; many of us feel knocked down with the new reality that COVID led us to. We feel it is hard to stand firm, even as we see visible signs that the protocols of lockdown are abating, still we question how will we continue our work and how will our work be affected — and whether our labour went in vain. The pandemic has impacted our lives and has particularly affected the lives of the most vulnerable. Still many discovered that the work for several years was challenged, as if we are starting anew, facing the weakness, loss, confusion, with less energy. Our bodies feel weak to stand up even and stand firm.

This is the feeling of individuals but as a Communion as well. We are challenged with all that happened, especially with not being able to meet in person as an Executive Committee since 2019, which led to real challenges in deepening the communion relations, keeping the motivation high, and the prioritization of the Communion work on our agendas and budget. This distancing and the inability to visit one another has created a puzzling reality. Had it not been for the “COVID and Beyond” program, the damage would have been much more.

This struggle for facing the aftermath of COVID was accompanied by the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has tremendously impacted the life and livelihood of the peoples of Ukraine, but also threatens peace and stability in Europe and the world. We seem to have moved from a pandemic into war. Just as the world was tackling the issue of refugees from different countries and lately the Syrian refugees, here the number of refugees from Ukraine has worsened the situation and more people are pushed to margins, and the scenes of scared children and fleeing families continues to threaten the life of the people and affects the possibility of dignified life. Indignity has become the new normal for people in new zones. In many countries and churches around the Communion this has been a daily lifestyle; the suffering of the people has become their daily bread. The new reality in Ukraine discourages many who are thrusting to a better world, better life for all. Just as we were waiting for the old pain to heal, we discover a new pain in Europe that did affect the world.

In my solidarity visit lately to Berehove, Ukraine, on May 13, close to the Hungarian border, I had the chance to get introduced to the ministry of the Reformed Church there. The Reformed Church in Transcarpathia launched a ministry with the refugees who moved from dangerous areas of war zones. Sitting with the refugees who have been there almost 80 days, despite their

thankfulness to the support provided by the church, still one can notice their worries about the future, and their troubled question around how long that could take. The staff working in the bishop's office were busy preparing plans for providing shelters that can protect the people. They are expecting that more people impacted by war could move to their areas. Safety has become the concern of people instead of dreaming of a better tomorrow. Survival has become their concern; their dream has become to survive a violent war.

I share this to say that war that has been for long in some areas of the world, is now started in new areas. **The language of war in facing disagreements is still alive**, even when we thought that this was in the past, and the world has better ways of resolutions and communication. We see aggression and violence and provision of weapons as a language that is received well today and even welcomed. That could mean more death, more refugees, more unstable situations, more indignity, and more unrest for the world. I believe we are called as a Communion to stand firm against this language, no matter which side on the globe we are. We are called to remain the voice of peace, assuring that war language should not be accepted and the roots for war should be tackled.

Today we are called to stand firm as we continue **to press on in our involvement in all injustices**. The Communion has been involved in several issues around injustice, whether related to general themes that are global, related to economic injustice, like the NIFEA process which is now a fully functioning program with the Methodists, Lutherans, besides Mennonites who are showing interest; or the ZacTax Campaign and publication of the ZacTAX Tool Kit; besides launching of the GRAPE program.

Also, gender justice work is central for our journey as a Communion on the way towards justice where completion of the Gender Policy of the WCRC as mandated by the General Council is fulfilled; besides initiating a gender audit of our member churches and encouraging the churches to reflect on the status of women in leadership positions and their involvement in the life of the church.

Still the Communion remains keen on peace and reconciliation endeavors in several countries, such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Indonesia, West Papua, Korean Peninsula, Zimbabwe, Israel/Palestine, and now Ukraine and other regions. It is natural that some regions are given special attention due to developments, still we are continually called to evaluate and audit our focus and involvement, to scrutinize our strategies in moving forward and creating impact. The scope of work of justice is quite large and how to secure balanced involvement so all injustices are taken seriously and are not overlooked. How to balance our involvement with issues of injustice and journey closely with the suffering around us is a great challenge to fulfill with the limited capacity that we have. We want to make sure that no one is forgotten. The intensity of the needs and struggle around us, and the long-lasting hurts that we face daily are overwhelming and how to keep the focus, the follow up, the journeying together, with all those who are struggling is at the center of our justice work. How to keep justice among injustices. Many are concerned that the world has waves of attention and in these days they could be forgotten. We are challenged to stay in focus and to audit continually our involvements.

To stand firm is to be called to strengthen the work of the regions. As a Communion we are blessed and enriched with the ministry and witness of the churches in the regions. We are a Communion that is rich with great human resources in the regions. To encourage the work in the regions is at the heart of a strong Communion. The strength of the Communion is not centered in the global office, despite the capable staff who are fully committed to the work of the Communion; still empowering the work in the regions goes side-by-side with the work on the global level of the Communion. Cooperation between the global and regions is at the heart of a healthy, blessed Communion. Holding regular meetings between the global and local work will create a better harmony and a better tune with stronger impact.

Today we are called to stand firm and to secure financial resources, stability, and sustainability in the midst of financial challenges that threaten all ecumenical work. Despite the fact that the Communion is blessed by the trust that we receive from different partners in the program work of the Communion and which encourages several organizations to support financially the program work, and many are ready to cooperate. Still the core operational budget, which finances large portions of the salary bill and office expenditure is still unsecured. While funds for programs are usually acquired without problems, we are challenged to bring the WCRC to a level of sustainability which allows the continuation of its operations.

Despite our understanding that sustainability is not defined narrowly in financial terms as our Strategic Plan claims, still our organizational sustainability, including financial stability, is one important part of the faithful living out of our communion. How we will sustain the work of the Communion is a serious challenge to us all. Sustainability remains an expression of commitment, relations, ownership, and deepened communion. Sustainability is at the heart of strengthening the communion as a goal.

The Sustainability Task Group that was formed started its work to allow a new approach in this regard and think of a sustainability model which is more intricate than the current one. This is a process that will allow better evaluation of the present and will lay the ground for a stronger commitment for better ways of building a strong, sustained, and hopeful Communion. Our hope of sustainability is linked to our togetherness and commitment for our witness and work for justice.

We are called today to join hands and find new initiatives for sustainability, whether in raising funds or other ways of supporting the work of the Communion. We are called to take this matter seriously and to discover that if we care for the Communion we are called to care for its financial stability as well. So far we did not see tangible changes.

To stand firm as a Communion is to envision direction toward the General Council: We are currently in a mid-point between our General Councils. We are called to concentrate on evaluations of our plan towards the 2025 General Council. This is a time where we are called to prioritize our programs and with the help of the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG) find direction towards our next council.

Also today **we stand firm as we celebrate God's work around the Communion, where our churches give themselves fully to the work of the Lord, and their labour in the Lord is not in vain.** I wish I had enough time to narrate what is happening in the regions. I believe we will hear that in the reports of the regions; still, allow me to celebrate the election of the new leadership in AIPRAL at its XIII General Assembly 21-23 April. We are thankful for all the efforts of the previous leadership and welcome the new leadership:

- President: WERTSON BRASIL DE SOUZA (Brazil)
- Vice-President: BERLA ANDRADE DE VARGAS (Venezuela)
- Treasurer: YASMÍN MOSQUERA GARCÍA (Colombia)
- Youth Department Director: EMILIA AHUMADA TAPIA (Chile)
- Director of the Women's Department: BLANCA GEYMONAT GONNET (Uruguay)
- Director of the Dept. of Theology and Mission: PAULO C. M. PEREIRA JR. (Brazil)
- Director of the Department of Justice and Communion: DAN GONZÁLEZ ORTEGA (Mexico)
- Executive Secretary: DORA ARCE-VALENTÍN (Cuba)

Dear Executive Committee members, the past years have been difficult days and I believe this is a time to support one another. I hope that this will be our last Zoom meeting where we hope that **our next meeting** will be in person. It is urgently needed to put our resources together to make this happen. Our coming together will rekindle a strong encounter as a Communion.

I would like to take this opportunity to celebrate the decision to appoint a woman Executive Secretary for Mission and Advocacy and to start the search process for the right candidate, moving on the way towards gender justice in our office work. Despite the financial challenges, we are grateful to our partners who allowed this to happen.

Also, I am so grateful for the work done by the **General Secretary Search Committee** and their dedication to find the right person to lead the Communion. The committee is pursuing its work, and the members are key, dedicated leaders from our churches, but due to the inability of securing the necessary funds to finance the general secretary position, which has not been acquired yet, and the current state of the core budget only allows operations with reduced staff, and there are no firm indications that the financial situation might not improve as fast as hoped. The Search Committee will continue its interviews, and the candidates know already about the prevailing situation.

This is why the Officers' Committee is recommending to continue with the present Collegial General Secretariat (CGS) model till appointment of a general secretary. The officers are in close discussion with the CGS on how to sharpen the model through continual evaluation and discussion. Still I cannot but stress that this model has served our financial challenge and met lots of our needs. But this model has overwhelmed the executive staff who are torn between their program work and regular job description and the extra requirements of follow up on

general secretary work, mainly sustainability and building stronger relations with member churches.

Accordingly, we are called to take the issue **of staff capacity** and work load seriously. There must be a lot of clarity in the empowerment of the CGS where special attention and support is necessary. This model remains temporal, and we hope through the work of the SPPG we will work towards setting priorities, evaluating our program work in the line of our Strategic Plan.

We need take a breath and enjoy what the Lord has called us to. We are called as a Communion to think of our “brand” if I may say. What is special around us; what gifts can we give to the world, and what motivation and clarity God’s call us to. We should not be troubled to compete with any other ecumenical organizations but rather we are called to focus on our call, our talents, our identity and live accountability accordingly. Friends, we are all held accountable as leaders of the Communion meeting today, to give ourselves fully to the work of the Communion. Despite all challenges our work will not be in vain because it is inspired by the power of God.

Today, we come together as an Executive Committee not to merely respond to reports, or to take decisions, but to answer the question about what does the Lord require from us as we gather as a Communion — how will each member church support the Communion’s work and how will the Communion empower our work locally? This remains not an easy question to answer but rather answering this question will bring, trust, ownership, and solidarity in our work together.

To stand firm is a commitment to hope that tomorrow will be a better day for all. Despite the challenges, we continue to see God’s sustenance to the work of the Communion, whether in involving more young people and women in our work, in enjoying the continued partnership relations and especially with our partnership with the Council for World Mission, and other faithful partners, in recognizing the enthusiasm of the churches in the regions and their willingness to contribute to the work of WCRC. The “COVID and Beyond” program has shown us new horizon for God’s work that will shape our envisioning.

May the Lord provide strength as we stand together, and may we envision together how to live up to our call as a hopeful Communion. Our strength continually comes from above and in Christ we live hope and wait in hope. To God all glory.

—President Najla Kassab