

## **Report from the Strategic Plan Programme Group**

The Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG) received with appreciation the mandate from President Najla Kassab and the Collegial General Secretariat (CGS) to review the current status of the programmatic work, along with the capacity impact created by new responsibilities during this interim period. The president and the CGS offered further interpretation regarding the long-term financial sustainability and its implications.

The SPPG at its 4-5 May meeting in Chicago received and affirmed statements summarizing the work of the CGS and the executive secretaries by the president and the CGS in relation to the present challenges as well as opportunities. As the reference groups could not meet the SPPG had members of the SPPG, the moderator of the “COVID and Beyond” project, and the chair of the General Council Task Group present, along with the president and CGS members.

The SPPG took note of the fact that based on recommendations from last year’s SPPG meeting, a more network-oriented programmatic work system has been initiated. Member churches have responded positively to this, allowing them to become more engaged in the programmatic work of the Communion. The SPPG further agreed to strongly recommend its last year’s affirmation that “this is not a time for scaling back, but a time for stepping up.” The SPPG commend and commit to developing a new working model that is less leader-dependent. Gifts of leadership and the willingness to serve are spread throughout our Communion. Executive staff leadership would take the form of networking, oversight, coordination, collaboration, and communication.

The SPPG also took note of the fact that the Collegial General Secretariat seemed to have worked sufficiently – and even appreciated in many ways – since September 2021, internally, externally, and throughout the Communion. Though the larger challenge is capacity; besides the regular responsibilities as executive secretaries, the general secretariat responsibilities were taken up as well as initiating a sustainability program along with strengthening the regional systems. This did allow for a synergistic model, integrating programs into communion building and raising funds.

The SPPG affirms that WCRC is not a Communion in crisis, but instead it is united, enthusiastic, and engaged. In the midst of institutional challenges, the WCRC shifts from a traditional organizational system (based in Northern, European models and reliant on this economics) to a postcolonial model; there is still plenty of work needed for this transition, but it is being received positively.

The SPPG affirms that the “COVID and Beyond” process has enabled the Communion to understand that this is a time to be disturbed and to call for a new imagination (as noted in the Wittenberg Witness), that WCRC is pushed into new thinking, new ways of working. The WCRC is discovering the richness in resources it has around the Communion.

The SPPG evaluated the impact of the pandemic on the Strategic Plan which forced disruptions and challenged the WCRC to shift the programmatic direction. Now coming out of the pandemic, a considered review of the Strategic Plan is necessary from two vantage points: 1) How the Strategic Plan was taken up into the “COVID and Beyond” process; and 2) How the Strategic Plan and the learnings from the “COVID and Beyond” process may help the Communion to take orientation and direction towards the next General Council. This would also help the Communion to look back at the last four years programmatically and evaluate — Was the Strategic Plan a useful device? How did the WCRC match its potential strategic planning priorities into the future? Programme planning and prioritizing?

The SPPG received the Report of the Programme Executives, with thanks and gratitude (also contained within the CGS Report). It is a fact that the CGS is working, yet overburdened. Moreover, the CGS is discharging the responsibilities of the programme executives along with general secretariat and sustainability tasks. The SPPG strongly feels that staff capacity and the enormous work capabilities needs to be monitored. The leadership of the WCRC should extend all the needed care and support to the members of the CGS. The SPPG affirms the hard work of the members of the CGS and wholeheartedly thanks them for providing coordinated, organized team leadership.

The SPPG commends the work of the CGS and the executive secretaries and agrees that the CGS has given the ecumenical world a new model. It also affirms that the WCRC programme budget is doing very well (despite challenges in the core budget). This is a clear sign from the ecumenical world of the strength and relevancy of WCRC as well as its continuing commitment to justice is noted, appreciated, and affirmed by all partners.

The SPPG affirms that the WCRC is in the moment of problem solving, paradigm shifting, direction setting. The priority is how do we leverage investment in common interest and build consensus to do so? A strong part of the work must be involving churches regionally, with and through the various area councils. Programmatic work has to be operationalized through the regions and member churches.

The SPPG also notes that simply naming collaboration and cooperation is easy but doesn't necessarily achieve much; and that the WCRC's centralized systems do not encourage effective cooperation; thus, a more flexible, more open model which would allow more possibilities needs to be evolved. And the WCRC needs to clarify and define how could member churches with their programs work on behalf of the whole Communion? Which level of flexibility and identity-focus is needed and demanded?

The SPPG observes that the Communion has realized in the “COVID and Beyond” process what is possible in the way of involving people from all over the world in the work of discernment. In some ways the Communion is more connected and more activated than ever. The SPPG commends the executive staff for their creative, flexible, and effective leadership in these challenging times. Despite the difficulties the work has moved forward with quality and

capacity. Now is a good time to use creative imagination to find new ways to work together and experience a multiplication of energies and an even stronger communion.

The SPPG appreciates the “COVID and Beyond” project, which held the Strategic Plan and the most relevant theological, ethical, and spiritual reflection and response of the Communion to the pandemic and its challenges together. The “COVID and Beyond” process provided the networks and regions a chance to engage and express, as well as an opportunity to get challenged and empowered.

SPPG affirms that the “COVID and Beyond” process:

- was a *kairos* moment in the life of the Communion. The Strategic Plan should be looked at through this lens and make the WCRC a people of vision, mission, and theology.
- also helped the WCRC to celebrate its communion, liturgically exploring and hermeneutically reimagining four verbs of the Strategic Plan: discerning, confessing, witnessing and being reformed.
- has also brought the people to the centre — youth; children; women; Indigenous people; people with disabilities; migrants; people of diverse identities; people who suffer marginalization exclusion and extinction because of racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism; people who are victims of war and violence — and enabled a deep listening process in its discernment as the WCRC moves towards becoming a just Communion

The “COVID and Beyond” process was through Zoom, and the SPPG stress the need to be vigilant of the digital divide within the WCRC. The technology accessibility and inclusion, as well as the technology inaccessibility and exclusion and the disadvantages of technology need to be articulated.

The SPPG notes that pandemic time has pointed out some new areas of privilege, and new power dynamics — including Zoom, which includes infrastructure — even without thinking about who this is excluding. This can perpetuate the exclusion of those already marginalized (especially poor and rural contexts). The process also brought to attention the question of language, and the dilemma of being virtual when the experiential is an important component of seeing understanding, acting, and witnessing.

The SPPG took note of the fact that the members of the governance structure apart from a very few participated. It would have been great to have the active engagement of a majority, in terms of ownership, as well as inspiring the member churches.

The SPPG recommends that the proposed regional meetings of the “COVID and Beyond” process are organized and that the final gathering may still have relevance and is crucial for harvesting all the fruits of process for the benefit of the communion.

The SPPG strongly recommends the publication and dissemination of the wealth of material produced during the “COVID and Beyond” process have to take priority for the benefit of the WCRC and the ecumenical movement (digital, video, soft/hard copy).

The SPPG affirms that the “COVID and Beyond” process was successful in making visible and energizing the groups already at work in the Communion. It also revealed some shortcomings: several regions had challenges, the WCRC doesn’t have strong connections to various parts of the Communion, there were divergencies in how the pandemic was being experienced and responded to.

The SPPG agrees with the proposed theme for the 2025 General Council — “Persevere in Witness” — and would recommend that now onwards the programmes will focus on the theme and build a momentum towards the General Council.

The SPPG affirms that the “global apartheid” concept and the need to continue with reflection on global apartheid as we focus towards the 2025 General Council.

The SPPG emphasizes the emergence of poverty as the major concern of mission, after the emergence of the COVID pandemic.

The SPPG also took note of the following programmes:

- On the publication of *Reformed World*, especially with the special issue on people with disabilities;
- Lombard Prize winning essays and the proposed webinar for youth;
- Building up a WCRC Youth Network, GIT, and Youth Summit;
- A three-year process on Indigenous Peoples (North America, South America, and Asia) which will begin with Asia with focus on theological education;
- Covenanting for Justice: NIFEA, GEM School, ZacTax Campaign, Decade for Climate Justice, Gender Policy of WCRC, a meeting of women leaders of WCRC and CWM;
- Doing Theology for Transformation: on the issue of Freedom of Religion working with the LWF, building on the Emden Synod anniversary, on exploring Presbyterian polity and discernment/consensus processes, on building theological networks to strengthen theological education throughout the Communion by connecting seminaries/theological colleges around the world as well as a conference on migration/migrant churches.

The SPPG is of the opinion that the time is now to strengthen the partnership, collaboration and working relationship with the Council for World Mission. in the light of the Strategic Plan (page 27). It affirms that working together with CWM is about mission together.

The SPPG also discussed the imminent appointment of a new executive staff person especially seeking a woman from the Global South who might lead in the area of peace and reconciliation and oversee the Global Reformed Advocacy Platforms for Engagement (GRAPE). This position would include work in advocacy and networking. The Presbyterian Church (USA), EMW, and *Brot für die Welt*, as well as possibly Church of Scotland and Protestant Church of the Netherlands, will partner with the WCRC in accompanying and supporting member churches on the grassroots level to become effective advocates.

The SPPG welcomes the imminent inauguration of an office in Rome, with the threefold purposes: 1) liaison to the Vatican, 2) make visible the Reformed contribution to world Christianity with an annual event, 3) liaise with other ecumenical bodies in Rome, where the Church of Scotland and the Waldensian Church will collaborate with WCRC.

The SPPG recommends that the major emphases of the Strategic Plan that were absorbed into the “COVID and Beyond” process now need to unfurl in exegeting and interpreting the General Council Theme “Persevere in Witness” in discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed towards building a just communion and doing justice.