

The background features a series of overlapping, flowing, wavy lines in shades of orange, yellow, and white, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lines are most prominent in the lower half of the page, where they curve and swirl together. The overall color palette is warm and vibrant, with a gradient from light yellow at the top to deep orange at the bottom.

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Editorial

This publication is a modest tribute to Setri Nyomi for fourteen years of service to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and, after 2010, the World Communion of Reformed Churches. A modest tribute, because, undoubtedly, many others could have contributed to it and, of them, we asked some, who, although having wanted to write, were not able to submit an article in the end.

The authors come from two different groups. Quite a few are members of WCRC's Executive Committee. Two, Dora Arce Valentín and myself, are Setri's direct colleagues. We represent as such those who have worked with Setri over the years as members of 'his' staff. I, therefore, want to mention some characteristics of Setri's leadership in the office.

First of all, he is very keen on showing respect for the organisation and its leadership. Staff can, of course, criticise decisions taken by the governing body but that should preferably stay and be discussed within the team of staff members. Setri carefully listens to the critique, sometimes clearly shares it but it is his strong desire to submit to the "outside world" this critique with one voice. His colleagues did not always find this easy but they have seen over the years that he tries, by all means, to be a good spokesperson of the concerns of his staff. In an organisation where cultural and language differences are so prominently present, this interaction between staff and governing body has been wise.

Secondly, I want to mention Setri's 'open door' policy within the office. In principle, his colleagues can always enter his office and have a conversation with him or arrange one for a later moment. I myself, I have to admit, have interrupted Setri in his work quite often but I have never seen a sign of irritation on his face and always felt welcome. Let this not be misunderstood as if he had all the time of the world for this. He had not in fact. Setri, with a bit of pride, often referred to his 'late shift'. The pride was justified because in order to complete the tasks of the day he often came to

the office around 10 pm for a second round of work until after midnight. Only in this way he could have re-sponded so fast to the numerous emails he received daily and only so he was able to write all the reports he had to do over the years. When you wanted to see a highly nervous Setri, you had to be with him in a place where there was no Internet connection. For others, like me, that is a nice bonus of extra free time. For Setri, this was as if a lifeline had been cut off.

Certainly, his staff has seen over the years his passion for matters of justice. The word 'justice' is as prominent in his vocabulary as it is meaningful. For Setri, the history of slavery e.g. was not something of a bygone past. It was, as one of the deepest examples of injustice, something present in his emotions. Also the world's financial structures, ruining many lives, were something that should not be accepted as a fact of life. They have to be changed and he worked for that in his own way. He realises that this is a long process with many obstacles. He also realises that we need many allies, most of all in the world of politics and economics, to change matters in this field. I think he is even aware that we may not see more just structures for a long time. However, all this does not hinder him to work for it because, I think this is how he sees it, doing nothing means not obeying God's call.

I come to the last thing that I want to mention. Setri is a man of faith. He has the good combination of a social activist and a strong believer in God's presence in his life and in the world he lives in. I would not hesitate to call him evangelical in the best sense of the word. Worship is as important in his life as action.

Fourteen years of service is a long time. Certainly, when we think of the many changes WCRC has gone through. Setri started with WARC in Geneva and he ends with WCRC in Hannover. No one can deny that behind this is a period of work that has consumed much of his energy and his talents. He will go back to Ghana, as it stands now, he will be less of a frequent flyer and will hopefully have some time to study and to write and, above all, some more time for the family. Because that is something for sure we have seen: Setri is a 'family man'. He even liked to call the staff team 'family'. As a member of that family he will be more at a

distance from us but we like to remember him and let this unpretentious publication be a help to remind us what we owe to him. It is at least written by all authors with much love and appreciation.

Douwe Visser



TRIBUTE TO REV.DR.SETRI NYOMI

Yvette Noble-Bloomfield

Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi is a man of God's own possession and a particular gift to the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). He has straddled the last fourteen years of change and challenge as someone truly called to a time such as this. His passion for righteousness, his consciousness of the history of pain, his servant heart, his warmth and ease of communicating even in the most difficult of circumstances, his keen eye for details, his capacity to work in the deep hours of the night into the dawning and his genuine love for people enabled Setri to speak with an authentic voice about social justice, communion and mission. Beyond the surface of his person is a burning desire for a lived theology which should be the constant mark of the WCRC.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches cradles within it the antecedents of Reformed faith and theology from the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). Transitioning from Council and Alliance to Communion significantly changed the nature of the dialogue, focus and action of the Reformed family. As with any new organism there are struggles surrounding identity and nature even though we are familiar with each other and do hold in common some basic tenets of polity and ethos.

Whilst the WCRC is called to communion, it has to already be committed to justice. In order to live out the reality of who we are and whose we are as the WCRC, Social Justice, Mission and Communion must then work in tandem. There can be no real communion if we fail to struggle for social justice. The innovative tension must however inaugurate within the Communion with the maintenance of respect for all who belong, thus ensuring that the justice can reign. It would be farcical to expect the world to listen to our platform of social justice if member churches within the Communion

exist in a context of marginalization and power play. Financial capability, numerical strength, deep historical presence in the antecedent bodies and theological forte are entitlements that if elevated can destroy those who come to the table without any of these capacities. There ought to be a space at the table for equity and justice inside the Communion for all. Then and only then can we challenge the current damning financial architecture and seek to encourage new movements towards fair trade, just and livable wage, proper working conditions *inter alia*. It is however the strong and deep presence of greed and the need to have far more than enough which leads to the marginalization of the ninety percent. Setri Nyomi is adamant that there is the need for a new financial and economic architecture. This is also the foreground of the Accra Confession finalized within the real space of the Elmina Castle within Setri's homeland.

The heart of the Communion must pound strongly against the social inequity, injustice and the destruction of women and men, girls and boys through sexual exploitation and human trafficking. This scourge on humanity seems to be escalating and member churches need to be in the leadership against this act of modern day slavery. The eyes of all must be opened and the hearts of perpetrators must be challenged even and we march towards the eradication of this evil. The nature and role of poverty and the lure of greed resulting in the dehumanization are key components that perpetuate human trafficking. The WCRC must work assiduously to dismantle this monster.

Gender justice in particular has a strong place with Setri as his own consciousness goes beyond gender balance in all spheres of the Communion leadership and life. The struggle for the Ordination of Women is also clearly an area of critical significance for him as well as the WCRC. The Spirit has indeed been poured out on all flesh and the Church that enables both genders is reflective of the Church of Jesus Christ. We crave the day when vision will become a reality for all and when it is not mere tokenism but real acceptance.

The WCRC must speak with a credible voice against the ecological destruction of mother earth which threatens the very existence of too many places where people dwell. Water

and food security as well as the equality distribution of these commodities have become critical to our conversation and must inform our action. The pain of hunger and thirst by one person in one corner of the world must translate into care and action from the Communion. There is enough bread to share if we took only our just amount.

The theological framework for our mission work is well placed. It is a mission that invites renewal and transformation, peace, integrity and reconciliation. Today's world cannot linger with a Communion that does not go beyond speech. So whereas our missiological dialogue is important, people are awaiting our action. They are seeking from us real presence as they struggle with their lived realities. Member Churches in their locale want to know that the WCRC can and will accompany them in the darkest hour as they present Christ to a fractured context. Our mission must take on proportions that engage minds and hands and at times might be sacrificial even as we seek to obey the God who beckons us into mission. The mission is indelibly marked urgency towards reconciliation as we see the various strained relationship at the macro / world and micro / organism levels. Is the WCRC called to lead the rigorous dialogue and to pioneer and broker peace and reconciliation in troubled areas? Yes, we have a divine calling towards such, if we are to truly become the presence of Christ in the world.

One can argue well about the inherent unity of the Communion which is indeed a gift from God. The very nature of the Communion speaks to that which we hold in common with each other. Our theology of communion enables us to work towards the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The walls that divide us, although slow in declining are becoming less obstructive to our work and calling as the Church of Jesus Christ. This is undergirded and lived out in our ecumenical commitment in response to the High Priestly Prayer for oneness. Even as we are in partnership with Christ and Christ's mission, we must be in real partnership with each other. This must remain our sharpened focus as we continue the legacy of Setri Nyomi.

Setri Nyomi has led a time when theological and spiritual senses have been deepened and expanded. Our work and

struggles will continue beyond his time as he has positioned the World Communion of Reformed Churches well to fulfill our high calling as a prophetic voice and forte in the ecumenical and wider world.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Yvette Noble-Bloomfield is the Moderator of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands and holds a Doctor of Ministry Degree from the Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, USA. She is a Vice President of the WCRC.

COMMUNION AND JUSTICE: HOW DID REC AND WARC GET THERE?

Richard L. van Houten

I have known Setri Nyomi for about 12 years. We worked together intensely for several years when the movement to merge the two organizations we served took shape. When I was invited to contribute an article for this tribute to his work, a few personal thoughts entered unbidden in my mind. Why, for example, does Setri not eat any green leaves? Or, how many people know about his original interest in pastoral counseling? However, the theme we authors were invited to reflect on was Communion and Justice, so I set such personal queries aside to think about weightier matters.

Throughout his term as the General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), and subsequently as the General Secretary of its successor, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), Setri has been known as a champion of justice. He traveled around the world, probably half of every year, and I doubt he ever gave a speech where he did not weave this idea in as a core element. He is a tireless worker for the sake of the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged. He has, I am sure, thousands of personal relationships. He is friendly and open in conversation, but no one should doubt that if you accepted or tolerated some form of injustice, he would be willing to challenge you.

For the decade that he served WARC before the formation of WCRC, Setri made sure this was the message of WARC as well. Of course, he was not the only one who did so, nor was he the first. WARC had already made a historic stand at Ottawa in 1982 when it declared a *status confessionis* on apartheid and suspended two of its South African member churches. In the 1990's Setri's predecessor, Milan Opocensky, began raising the question whether a similar *status confessionis* could be made about economic inequality, the injustice of persistent poverty in the face of the world's growing wealth. Eventually, with Setri now in office, that process culminated

in the 2004 Accra Confession, a call for churches to confess failings in correcting economic injustice, and denouncing those social forces deemed to be responsible.

I served the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) for many of those years (1987-2010). REC had a different reputation. While it debated apartheid fiercely for many years starting in 1953, it preserved fellowship with both black and white member churches from South Africa, while it could. Meanwhile, an equally ferocious debate developed about homosexuality, after one member church declared in 1979 that it would not exercise pastoral discipline on homosexual members who had same-sex relations in the context of a loving and committed partnership. Both of these issues were matters of justice for the people concerned, and deep analysis of the nature of the problems came before the REC gatherings. But REC spent at least as much time in these discussions on the nature of the fellowship. They saw themselves as a body pursuing a unity based on the historic Reformed confessions, named in their constitution. It was a debate about the nature of their communion, though they rarely spoke of it as such. Instead, the language was about Scripture and the Confessions. In each case, they asked whether the actions of member churches violated Scripture or the Reformed confessions, and they often sent member churches back home from their international synods or councils with a request to explain or defend their views and actions in those terms. Did these actions, whether they be racism or acceptance of homosexual Christians in churches, conform to the confessions that were in the common basis of REC?

I am not very qualified to speak about the nature of WARC, but I believe it began with an outward purpose, that its members might have a common witness, a common testimony to society and to the Christian world. To be broadly in the Reformed tradition was enough commonality to share in the common witness. REC was formed first as a body to develop unity on a common basis, and only from there would common witness go forth. In its early history, much attention was given to exploring various theological areas to assess how common their understandings were. Only some years after its formation did REC begin something that could be called ecumenical activity in the usual sense of the word. Still, the

coloring of that beginning casts its rays down to the end. Although it is a caricature, one might say that REC entered WCRC with a sense of communion prominent and WARC entered with a sense of justice as prominent. Each knew the importance of the other theme, so to portray WCRC as committed to communion and justice was deeply attractive to the membership of both organizations.

We all know that these two themes are intimately connected. We need only to look a little at our history to see this. WARC thought enough of the value of its membership, its communion, that they suspended two members for their theological defense of apartheid. WARC thought enough of justice for its own members that they intentionally brought people from the global South into its leadership. WARC insisted, as a matter of justice, that church delegations to their meetings have a certain percentage of women among them. REC spent effort in the 1980s and 1990s to figure out what their communion meant for sharing one another's burdens. It spent time assessing what development meant, and how churches could promote meaningful development. In 1999, the REC Executive Committee urged its members to support the Jubilee Campaign to forgive international debt, recognizing that international monetary and trade systems brought significant injustices to their members. In 2000, REC endorsed the Micah Challenge, supporting the UN Millennial Development goals. In the early 2000's REC explored the HIV/AIDS epidemic deeply, trying to help our member churches get clarity on how they could understand the disease, its causes, and how to develop a compassionate theological response. We worked with churches caught in ethnic wars in Nigeria, supporting a four-year-long peace process that continues to bear fruit in those communities today.

REC and WARC had a couple of false starts in their attempts to discuss their different ways of being together. However, the series that began in 1998, and which Setri continued just a few years later, finally bore the fruit of today's WCRC. Telling that whole story is not my intention here, but I will say that it was a combination of the changes occurring within our memberships, so that our common members were growing steadily larger, and some daring leadership. Setri and I played a role in nearly every meeting and made our contributions,

but I must also say that the role of our respective presidents at the time, Cliff Kirkpatrick for WARC and Douwe Visser for REC, was crucial. Although we surely had strong opinions, we were the secretaries, while they were the top elected leaders.

So, WCRC came into being under the banner of two key words: *communion* and *justice*. And there was a vague understanding that REC cared more for communion, while WARC cared more about justice. Technically, we avoided the language of merger at the time. We spoke only of the dissolution of each organization, and their reconstitution of all the former members in a new, successor organization. And formally, that is what happened. But essentially, we merged into one. And in mergers, that is a key to making them work, that each party brings something of its own into the new reality.

The communion ethos can be seen in REC's reaction to the merger proposal. In March 2007, REC gathered in an "Extended Executive Committee." It was about a year after the union was first proposed, and, like WARC, we gave our member churches time for an initial reaction. This 2007 meeting reviewed the written reactions of the members, and developed a Consensus Statement that urged moving forward on the proposal.

The Consensus Statement also offered two ideas that they considered important as the two bodies moved ahead. These matters touched on REC's core identity and offer some insight into how REC thought about its communion. They proposed that in the formation of a new constitution, the following ideas be given serious consideration for inclusion:

1. A sound Reformed confessional basis that faithfully reflects the essentials of the Christian gospel as historically expressed and understood in the major confessional documents of the Reformed churches worldwide, and
2. An organizational structure that fosters fellowship and theological kinship with other members of the World Reformed Communion (WRC) [later changed to WCRC] while maintaining the unity of the whole.

The first point is about the REC members' desire to have some specific reference to the confessional tradition that is linked with the Reformed churches. The people who wrote this statement knew that an ecumenical organization could no longer be so tightly linked, but they felt that calling attention to this confessional tradition would help identify the foundation of the communion they were entering. And this point places the Christian gospel first, calling the confessions a historical expression of that gospel. About a decade earlier, REC had named acting with Biblical and Confessional integrity as one of its primary values, and this is expressed anew in the language of this first point.

The second one pointed to the need to nurture our unity by fellowship and theological kinship. While there is a certain vagueness to these terms, they clearly called for interactions among members, mutual support, advocacy and so on. The WCC has used the term *theological convergence* to inspire theological dialogue that might lead to greater degrees of agreement. Although I don't think REC chose the word *kinship* with a great background of theological reflection, I think the word suggests that some common theological views are a basis, like a family relation that is sometimes closer and sometimes more distant but all within the bounds of kinship.

So, in both of these points, REC laid out areas where they felt the new communion needed to be strong. I suppose the question now arises, why didn't they name justice, the other half of the WCRC's foundational identity, in their desires for the new body? The answer lies partly in context. There was a sense that this would never be omitted by their negotiating partner, WARC. On the other hand, they were worried that the relatively close fellowship they had experienced in REC might be lost in the new organization, so they took care to name that concern.

It is fair, of course, to say that they knew such close fellowship would diminish, because it was in part a function of their size. REC Assemblies gathered about 200-250 persons together for 7-10 days, and many personal relationships among global church leaders could be developed in that context. These outcomes are much harder when there are 800-1,000 persons.

There is another factor in the blending of the cultures of REC and WARC. For REC members, I believe, their perception of justice and injustice came through the lens of their experience of communion. Because the members came to know fellow believers who shared a quite similar understanding of the Reformed tradition, they learned of the situations of life facing members in other parts of the world. The very contrasts themselves required attention. If we were not to look away from brothers and sisters in need, we had to think together about their life circumstances and stand by them when they suffered. Of course, that was imperfect and some in our history did not feel supported. No one can take the burden of those failures on himself or herself, though I still look back now and then with regrets for steps not taken. It was easy to meet someone for a few weeks and then return to the comforts of home and allow the intensity of the interaction to fade.

Still, there was a movement from getting to know people in other circumstances, and from that sympathetic knowledge to begin to understand the reasons for difficulties they may face. Then it takes only some courage and attention to begin to stand up for them. And where those difficulties and sufferings were systemic social ones, we could collectively bring our attention there, and together seek answers.

That general pattern was the framework for most of REC explorations of injustice. I think a review of any issue REC took up could be seen in that light – a movement from communion to addressing injustice.

To help flesh out this idea, I would like to explore just a little the notion of sharing in a communion. The language of sharing resources was common across the ecumenical world in the 1980's, and REC also picked that up. Many even developed the principle of shared responsibility in round-table decision making, where both donor and recipients of aid jointly decided how it would be used. In REC context, we began to talk about sharing resources, offering help where that might be needed, and began an ecumenical aid program in response to requests from some of our members. Soon, however, we felt the inadequacy of a shopping list of projects, and started to explore more deeply how help could

be given. This led us to several reflections on the nature of development.

In a discussion of sharing, all ecumenical groups felt that the sharing must involve mutuality. Whether we talk of round tables or partnerships in mission, there was a sense that everyone brings something to the encounter. And in REC, this question was first put quite baldly. What could an impoverished African church, whether small or large, bring to the table where wealthy European and American churches sat? In one of my first experiences of this in 1988, that question was asked directly by a Dutch minister to her African counterparts. The reply was vague. Spirituality and evangelism were the answers. But we have spirituality, and we also evangelize, she replied. No clear answer emerged.

We were not very good about naming what stood in front of us to see. I learned from a Mennonite project that sharing was about gift giving. It is voluntary, it is given without thought of return. And it involves relationships. Sharing material gifts is probably the most complicated of all, because the money or material divorces us from the people. We explored this idea several times in REC meetings and publications.

In the end, I began to think about power and weakness, plenty and suffering. Earlier in my life, I had asked myself why I seemingly did not suffer much for my faith. And we know that when we suffer for Christ, it is a blessing to us. The Bible does not require us to suffer for Christ, but when it happens, we may rejoice in it (I Pet 4.14-16). Could suffering be one of the gifts that the poor and disadvantaged bring to our table to share?

Of course, we do not condone suffering and must rail against the principalities and powers when they unjustly cause suffering among our fellow human beings. At the same time, we also know that through weakness, Christ's power is manifested. The apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, said he first complained of his weaknesses and begged God to have them removed. God replied to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (I Cor 12.9). Paul learned to accept that charge, and concluded, "I am content with weaknesses, insults,

hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (I Cor 12.10). Could it be that presence of Christ is there most deeply not among prosperous, wealthy churches, but among those who have suffered more for his sake? I hesitate to say only "Yes" to this question, but there are deep resonances in my soul that suggest this is so.

Now we can only share in suffering when a deep relationship is present. What could be deeper than the communion we share in Christ? And if we have that experience, should not our voices be raised, should we not shout out that this suffering is unfair, unjust and must be removed? And if it is removed from those who share our bond in Christ, will it not also be removed from others around them, where the same social and political circumstances prevail?

That hope has lain deep in REC tradition. I have seen it, too, in the members of WARC in many places. It runs deeply in the hearts of Christians everywhere, if we only expose ourselves, allow ourselves to hear and know believers who live far away and in far different circumstances from ourselves.

It is good thing that Setri Nyomi has helped the merger of our two former ecumenical bodies. His passion for the poor, the hungry, those discriminated against, and those displaced is well-placed. May that vision continue to inspire the members of WCRC even as he steps away from this important role. Setri, may the blessings of God follow you as you follow him in the next phase of life.

Dr. Richard L. van Houten is the former General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC).

COMMUNION AND JUSTICE: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Clifton Kirkpatrick

When I think of Setri Nyomi and that his time of leadership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches is coming to an end, I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, "I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil 1.3-6)

I do thank God with great joy every time that I remember all that Setri and his leadership have meant to me and to the broader Reformed family. I count it an even greater joy to have been able to share with him in a "partnership in the gospel" as we have worked together in so many ways through this World Communion – and especially in the years when we worked as the closest of partners when I was President of WARC and Setri was our esteemed General Secretary.

It is no accident that in those years as we moved toward a union between the Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, all of us (inspired by Setri's leadership) came to focus on communion and justice as the fundamental callings for our Communion. These were always Setri's greatest passions in ministry, and he inspired us all to claim this vision for the renewal of Reformed Christianity in our time. It was not only a vision of the importance of these two aspects of our calling – communion and justice – but that they were part of the same fabric. Setri taught us all that both were crucial for being a credible Reformed witness in our time and that we dare not separate them one from another.

Called to communion

I therefore want to title my contribution to this special issue of *Reformed World*, "Communion and Justice: Two Sides of the Same Coin."¹ I have come to see such a combination of communion and justice as representing the unique genius of the Reformed tradition – that the unity of the church and the unity and reconciliation of humankind and the world can never be separated from one another. For Reformed Christians, communion and justice are two sides of the same coin. We are called into communion not just for ourselves but for the sake of the world that God loves. The call to communion, unity and renewal of the church is integrally connected with our participation in God's transformation of the world.

As Odair Pedroso Mateus made clear in an unpublished paper for WARC's former Communion Network, the founding vision of the World Alliance was a far cry from either a biblical or a contemporary understanding of communion. The term "alliance" was not chosen by accident and over the years WARC has gone out of its way to make clear that the Alliance was at best a voluntary federation of autonomous churches that have come together for cooperation on joint projects. It is clear in our history and our previous Constitutions that churches are not expected to give up their doctrinal, liturgical, ministerial or financial autonomy. As the Reformed Ecumenical Council came into being – partly because they could not envision being in communion with WARC – there was more intentionality about belonging to one another, first naming the new body the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. But as it became increasingly clear that the member churches in REC did not intend to act as a communion, the title changed to "Council" – still a much richer concept than an "alliance."

At the same time that they struggled with names, these voluntary federations brought churches together in such a way that certain forms of communion began to emerge among us. We implicitly came to understand that we do share pulpit and altar fellowship. There emerged a genuine love and fellowship among our churches. We even came to

1 I first shared this theme of communion and justice as two sides of the same coin in my President's Report to the WARC Executive Committee at their 2007 meeting in Trinidad.

the point of setting boundaries or limits on the theology which any of our members can uphold and still be a faithful part of the Reformed family. This was most obvious in Ottawa in 1982 when the 21st General Council established a *status confessionis* that a theological justification of apartheid is a theological heresy and grounds for suspension of member churches from the fellowship.

As we moved toward our union, the tension became clear between being a common confession or being a federation of autonomous churches. The issue of the adequacy of seeing ourselves as only an alliance or a federation was again squarely before us. Growing out of the deliberations, it became clear that one of the foundational theological issues for this period in our history has to be a serious look at whether we as Reformed churches are being called to move from being an alliance or council to being a communion of churches.

The concept of communion or *koinonia* is a deeply biblical image for how churches and Christians are called to relate to one another and to God. It certainly has a much deeper resonance with scripture than do concepts like federation or alliance, or even synod or council. In many ways this concept has risen to new prominence in the modern ecumenical movement with the adoption by the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Assembly in Canberra in 1991 of the statement, "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling"². That action sparked a new phase in the search for Christian unity where the ecumenical movement moved away from previous efforts at full structural unity between churches to efforts focused on full communion in holy and important things and reconciled diversity as a basis for understanding our unity in Christ.

Joe Small, in his article in the June 2006 issue of *Reformed World*, "What is 'communion' among churches? When is it full?" does a thorough study of the understanding of communion in scripture. Out of that he concludes that true Christian communion includes at least the following:

2 "The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling (WCC 7th Assembly, Canberra 1991), in Kinnamon, Michael, and Cope, Brian, eds. *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1999). pp. 124-125.

Communion with the triune God;
Communion in faith, hope and love;
Communion in sacraments;
Communion in the truth of the gospel;
Communion in faithful living;
Communion in the reconciliation of differences;
Communion in patterns of mutual responsibility and
accountability.³

Are we, as Reformed churches, willing to take these steps toward communion with one another? The very existence of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, brought together under Setri's leadership is an affirmation in hope that Reformed Christians really do seek to live out the fullness of communion. At its core, our life together as a fellowship is modelled on the wonderful image that the apostle Paul uses so often of the church as the body of Christ, nowhere more eloquently than in I Cor 12. Diversity is to be celebrated. But as it is with a body when it is working properly, different parts do not exist to compete against one another or to seek supremacy over one another but rather to complement one another in building the body up in love. In this body of the church all the parts are to be respected and expected to make a contribution and none is more important than the other. The head of this body is Jesus Christ, and it is Christ that gives each member and the whole body its purpose, its strength, and its mutual accountability to Christ and to one another. Living in a fellowship that is modelled on this vision of the body of Christ is the essence of what it means to be in communion, and it is, I believe, what we are called to be in WCRC and in all of our churches.

Expressed through justice

The struggle for communion, while incomplete, is alive among us in WCRC and that is one of the lasting legacies of Setri Nyomi. Still, communion is never an end in itself.

³ *Reformed World*, Joseph Small, "What is Communion among Churches? When is it Full?", (June, 2006), World Communion of Reformed Churches.

As Jesus reminds us in John 17.21, we are called to be one in Christ, not for ourselves, but so that the world might believe and know the love and justice of Christ. Paul reminds us in II Cor 5.17 that "God was in Christ reconciling the world.... and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation." The Bible (appropriately) closes with that remarkable picture in Revelation of the New Jerusalem where God will be with us, where suffering, pain and injustice will be banished and where "the leaves of the tree will be for the healing of the nations." (Rev 22.2) Justice and peace are God's ultimate intention for our world – and our fundamental calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

One of the great legacies of John Calvin is his understanding of the connection between justification and justice. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church of his day often focused on justification by works and the Lutheran reformers rightly countered with justification by faith, Calvin knew that the equation was not quite so simple. Following scripture, he was clear that we cannot earn our salvation because it is a gift of God. However, when God saves us, justifies us, it is not just for us but to enable us to live our lives for the glory of God – to be an active participant in God's transformation of the world. Or, as the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order states it, "Election is for service as well as for salvation."⁴ We are chosen by God to be part of God's plan for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This insight is a great gift of the Reformed tradition and one that we must offer freely and lovingly with the church ecumenical.

During our visit to the slave dungeons in Elmina, Ghana, both during the 24th General Council of WARC in 2004 and at the gathering of the Executive Committee of WCRC in 2013, we saw how easy it has been for Reformed people to lose sight of this core calling. On the site of some of the greatest cruelty and injustice the world has ever seen (some have appropriately referred to it as the African holocaust), we saw how easy it was for Dutch Reformed Christians to build a chapel right on top of the female slave dungeon and see no contradiction between their worship of God on the

4 Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Order*. Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, 2013-2015. Foundations F-2.05.

top floor and the violation, oppression, and destruction of women one floor below. What made it all the more grotesque was to realize that they had moved their chapel to the top of the female slave dungeon because they felt it would be sacrilegious to worship in the same space as the chapel where the Portuguese Roman Catholics celebrated mass. What a distortion of what is truly sacrilegious!

Each time we leave Elmina, which in many ways has become a point of pilgrimage for Reformed Christians, we have made a firm conviction that never again should Reformed Christians turn a blind eye to the enslavement and destruction of people and never again should we fail to see the connection between the God we worship, the faith we hold and the fullness of life that Christ intends for every human being and for the creation. The external expression of communion (loving and caring for one another) is justice (love and care being expressed in structural forms in the world).

As a matter of the integrity of our faith, we must say “no” to slavery in all of its forms. While we have noted in recent years the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by the British Parliament, we are painfully aware that slavery is still with us, especially in the various forms of “human trafficking” that continue to enslave millions. My own church and others in the United States have been working for justice with migrant farm workers, who are probably among the most exploited people in our society. In that work we have noted that in the last year there have been criminal convictions of people responsible for holding more than 500 desperate immigrants in debt bondage slavery to pick our crops, and that is probably only the “tip of the iceberg” of those who traffic in human slavery with migrant labourers in the United States. Countless thousands of children are being sold into slavery and prostitution against their will all over the world. Slavery continues to be an active component of war in too many places. To all of these forms of human enslavement, we must say a resounding “no!”.

But as we affirmed in the Accra Confession, an equally pernicious form of human enslavement is being wrought on millions through the process of neoliberal globalization that is driving a dramatic and growing wedge between the

rich and the poor, so that today the richest one percent of the world's people has more resources than the poorest 57 per cent. This system causes 24,000 people a day to die from the diseases of poverty and malnutrition, millions to suffer from HIV/AIDS, and wars to be fought with horrifying consequences to civilians to protect the economic interests of the rich. We are indeed dealing with what the Bible calls "powers and principalities," that threaten the future of humanity – as well as the future of our planet that is surely on a trajectory toward catastrophe.

In the Accra Confession, which WCRC affirmed in its founding General Council as its foundational commitment for God's justice, we made it clear that standing against this system of inhumanity and injustice is not just a social justice concern but a matter central to the integrity of our faith in Jesus Christ, who came that "all might have life in fullness!"⁵ (John 10.10). This is our hallmark action as a Communion and is the very reason that God has called us into communion as Reformed people and churches. We dare not fail in this important calling.

Two sides of the same coin

While this integral connection between the call to communion and the call to share in God's justice and peace is central in the life of the Communion, it is far from central in the lives of many of our churches and far from a reality in our world. Both communion and justice are centered in the love of God – for the community of believers and for the world that God loves. We could give no greater gift to Setri Nyomi than to offer ourselves to be ambassadors of this vision, both in WCRC and in our churches and our lives, that communion and justice are two sides of the same precious coin of God's intentions for the world.

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5 For more information on the Accra Confession and its call for justice, see <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/hunger/pdf/accra-confession.pdf>

FROM ALLIANCE AND COUNCIL TO COMMUNION

Theological Reflections on Koinonia or Communio

Douwe Visser

Introduction

When Setri Nyomi took office in 2000 as General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), he was – without even realising – on the brink of drastic changes in the Alliance. As he leaves office now in 2014, WARC is no longer in existence or better said – it joined with the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and became the *World Communion of Reformed Churches* (WCRC). This happened at the Uniting General Council in 2010 in Grand Rapids.

At WARC's General Council in 2004 in Ghana, the Accra Confession, a document that speaks out strongly against the evil effects of the neo-liberal economy was adopted. This commitment continues in an ecumenical movement that strives for a new financial architecture.

It is obvious that Setri Nyomi could not have been just a passive observer in all this. The conclusion can only be that, as General Secretary, he has been upfront in these movements. As someone having worked closely with him for more or less the whole period of his term in office, I have seen that his first passion is his commitment to justice. To say it with a classic ecumenical distinction: Setri Nyomi is more a 'Life and Work' than a 'Faith and Order' person. On the other hand, it has also been clear that the change from Alliance to Communion was something of a personal commitment for him.

In this article, honouring his work, I try to develop a firm theological basis for the statement that there can be no justice without communion and – as a consequence – no communion without justice.

1. Communion as a gift and a calling

It is not possible to work out a strategy on what it is to fall in love; what happens when you decide to fall in love; and when you finally fall in love. That's not the way, as everyone knows, falling in love comes over you. In fact it is the same with communion: it comes over us. So, in this article, while reflecting theologically about communion, it should be made clear right away that theological reflection is not a condition for the reality of communion. That reality starts with an overwhelming feeling of 'amazing grace'. Communion is a gift from God. It is the gift of '*koinonia*' that Jesus lives out. Through this '*koinonia*' or '*communio*' we participate in the body of Christ especially through baptism and the Lord's Supper. This participatory aspect is essential. We are invited to participate in something that already exists. It is not something we build and then open to ourselves and others.¹

This participation is unique and general. It is unique in the sense that I am invited as the unique person that I am. Nothing in my life is an obstacle, not even my sins. That is the amazing grace. It is general because we are all invited and no one has priority over the other. Therefore communion is first of all something to be celebrated. When we are together at the Lord's Table, nothing hinders us from being in full communion with Christ and with one another. This participation is as powerful as only love can be. It is the firm basis of Paul's bold statement that "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ" (Gal 3.28).

In 2010 in Grand Rapids (USA), the WCRC came into being, after a relatively short process wherein the Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches built this new communion together. It all started

1 Cf. Faith and Order Document no. 111 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', § 19: "The eucharistic communion with Christ who nourishes the life of the Church is at the same time communion within the body of Christ which is the Church. The sharing in one bread and the common cup in a given place demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers in all times and places. It is in the eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested."

in 2006, also in Grand Rapids, when eight people, four from REC and four from WARC came together for a meeting to see how far WARC and REC could go in working together. A bold step was then made to say that WARC and REC should together build a *communion* of churches. Participants of this meeting² never hesitated to say that the Spirit came over them. They heard the call to communion and they believed they should respond to that call. It is only wise to understand communion as a calling. It is wise because it is a fact, but it is also wise because the Reformed community has a long tradition of being divided, sometimes being deeply divided. For the meeting in 2006, not much theological preparation was done. Participants did not come with a complete plan about what it is to be a communion of Reformed Churches. It also wasn't the end of a long process wherein divisions within the Reformed community no longer were there. REC had been going through a painful process of its member churches leaving the organisation³. WARC was confronted with on-going debates about the Accra Confession adopted in 2004⁴. A debate that did not lead to member churches leaving the Alliance but the discussion sometimes had a sharp tone. By all means both WARC and REC could not say that they were more united than ever. But still, both felt called to be a communion.

We so often put matters to test and the experience of being called should be tested too. We in the Reformed Churches certainly test the call to ministry of candidates who say they experience that call. So the call to communion is put to the test. I would not like to get too technical about this process. I must however affirm that it was a powerful moment when representatives from all member churches witnessed the signing of the document that instituted the

2 Setri Nyomi was one of the eight participants. I was there as President of REC.

3 Two issues played a role: homosexuality and the apartheid system in South Africa. Because of the first issue several member Churches left REC at the assembly in Harare in 1988. The second issue gave the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa reason not to continue its membership of REC since there was great disappointment that REC could not adopt the Belhar Confession.

4 Cf. Douwe Visser, 'Europe's discussion about justice, *problems-perspectives-visions*', in Martina Wasserloos-Strunk and Martin Engels (eds), *Europe covenanting for justice*, 2009.

World Communion of Reformed Churches on 18 June 2010 in Grand Rapids. The member Churches officially adopted the communion and this adoption should always be considered as a fact whatever critical comments are made on the 'state of communion' of the WCRC.

However, notwithstanding the fact that WCRC *is* a communion of Churches, the reality on the other hand is that WCRC is still navigating its *way towards* communion so that it can become a wholesome reality. I wish to mention a few questions that were on the table in the run-up to the 2010 General Council and that should still be on the table:⁵

- Is there within the communion a full pulpit and table sharing as is one of the conditions confirmed by WCRC's constitution;⁶
- Within the communion there is a discrepancy of wealth among the member Churches but does communion not imply a sharing of resources since we could add to Paul's statement that 'in Christ there is no rich or poor';
- Does the communion speak for the member Churches and does the communion really imply '*Verbindlichkeit*' (mutual accountability);
- How can there be—as is the case—great differences in doctrine and life between member Churches who are part of the same communion?

These are questions that still remain unresolved and it would be an illusion to think that they can all be resolved soon. However, communion can still be experienced, be it as Paul writes: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Phil 3.12)

2. The ethos of the Reformed communion

The basis of our life before God is that we are all sinners. But the 'amazing grace' for all of us is that we may stand before

⁵ Cf. Visser, Douwe, *Reformed World* 'The World Communion of Reformed Churches as a global Christian communion', (March, 2010).

⁶ In article III / A.

God, being adopted and forgiven. Through Jesus Christ we are justified. "Justification is the basis of our life before God and that life is sanctified. And that sanctification can only be visible in a life of justice. The total of human justice – *justitia humana* – is a holy matter. When a church or an organisation of churches, cry out for justice, that cry can only be made clear with the assumption that this cry for justice is a holy matter. God has sanctified us to cry out for justice."⁷

Through this communion, it is possible to speak out in the world we live in: speak truth to powers and sometimes this calls for a prophetic voice. A biblical passage that underlines this can be found in Acts 5.29: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." These words are spoken by the apostle Peter, who together with the apostle John stands before the Sanhedrin. They have been arrested because of their preaching in the name of Jesus. Answering the question of the high priest why they continue with their unlawful preaching, Peter says—in the words quoted above – that they couldn't do otherwise. They have to obey God more than they can obey human authorities.

The Reformation started with the principle that God has to be obeyed more than any human authority. Luther's words in 1521, standing before the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand. I can do no other". are a direct application of Acts 5.29. It does not make much of a difference whether he said these words or not, as is now '*communis opinio*'. They are either real or legendary but it is a confirmation of his conduct. Disobedience to the authorities lies at the origin of the Reformation, whatever the contradictory developments thereafter may have been. It is even part of the word used when referring in general to the followers of the Reformation: 'Protestant'. The root of the word is not simply to protest in the sense of being opposed to but it is the Latin word '*protestari*', which means 'to declare publicly'. As such it means not being silent whatever the consequences may be. So, the name 'Protestant' in Acts 5.29 becomes a reality.

Prophetic witness has to be a convincing witness. It is good to nuance this and to have thorough preparation before coming

7 Visser, Douwe, *Reformed World*, 'The World Communion of Reformed Churches as a communion committed to justice', (March 2010).

out with the message. However we should not think that a clear message is not possible. The exegesis and application of Biblical texts may be a complicated process but firm standpoints can be taken. For example, the passage from Ps 146.7-9: "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." This is not just an ornament of clarity in an ocean of floating words that swim in all directions. This is the guiding theme of the Old Testament. And as for the New Testament: Jesus is a person full of surprises with a multi-layered personality. But Jesus is also a person who struggles for honesty, integrity and works for peace and justice.

It is true that modern societies are very complex, making it difficult to point out the evil but it is not impossible. There may have been a lot of discussion about the Accra Confession and some may think that things could have been said better but who would deny that there is something *rotten* in the modern state of world economy? It is not a silent Communion that gets respect? Better a communion that is confronted than a communion that is ignored. But the prophetic voice is not just shouting out. It requires building up thorough expertise. Emotions may be a good start but they should not be in conflict with critical rational thinking. As a communion we should also be self-critical and not just opting for the right, political correct ideology. It should also be firmly grounded in its own tradition. We are certainly not the first to speak out.

It is true that in most societies the Church is marginalised. That is a blessing in disguise because a Church that is powerful can easily be corrupted to align itself with other powers in order not to lose influence. The Reformation stands after all, and in principle, for a certain degree of anti-clerical thinking.

"Obeying God *still* means not to be silent about the story of the gospel, even though this transpires with modesty, or almost in complete silence, or, especially, incidentally; this could still be sufficient for a particular moment in a particular situation. When, however, the passion to obey God by not

being silent about what you have seen and heard, is lacking, the Spirit is quenched. This is self-evident, because a church that is silent, dies".⁸

3. No communion without justice, no justice without communion

Around the General Council in 2010 there were some critical comments that striving for a communion of churches might be in competition with speaking out with a clear voice against injustice. The underlying assumption was that for the sake of unity and keeping all *on board*, the prophetic voice would be kept low profile.⁹ This can only be viewed as a sincere concern. I myself have been in too many ecumenical gatherings where ecumenical diplomacy resulted in powerless documents. We kept everyone on board but the ship could not even start sailing. However, if we really understand what 'koinonia' means then we can only say that there can be no communion without justice and no justice without communion. If we share the body of Christ, then we are one body. All chains of injustice should be broken because otherwise we would be stalled in sharing the body of Christ.

The gift of communion is the reason why we should be deeply committed to justice. The commitment to justice is the way to live out the communion: "The call for justice requires our churches to listen deeply to those who suffer and to act in solidarity with them, even when it is costly to us. In responding to this call, we experience God's gift of communion to us."¹⁰

4. Communion and unity: conflicting interests?

The title of this section may sound bizarre. How can communion and unity be in conflict? Is communion not a participation in Christ and how can Christ be divided? Do we have any right to call ourselves a communion if we are not in unity?

8 Visser, Douwe, *Reformed World*, "We must obey God rather than human authority", (September 2011).

9 Cf. Peacock, Philip Vinod and Holder, Rich Cynthia, *Reformed World*, "Justice and the World Communion of Reformed Churches: Actions, Concerns, and Hope", (September 2010),

10 'Cartigny final statement on Communion and Justice', Documents for the General Council 2010.

Unfortunately, the Reformed community is divided. We think differently about theological and ethical issues. We as churches are also not always 'one' in working for justice. But does this mean that there is no unity? What is the nature of unity within the communion and when does it suggest that Christ is divided?

As already mentioned above, REC in the 80's was deeply divided on especially ethical issues, of which the overarching issue was that of homosexuality. To some it looked like one part of the council was still following the Scripture and the other part had left behind any scriptural foundation of opinions and practices. But that was not the case. All were one in this understanding: what we each say is the result of how we each read the Scripture. For example, let us take the ordination of women. This became an issue not because of no longer reading Scripture, but *because* of reading the Scripture. That does not make the discussion easy. But it is not a discussion between those who want to follow Christ and others who only want to adopt a modern way of thinking and living. So we are here on the level of a hermeneutical challenge. REC decided after a catastrophic and highly confrontational assembly in Harare in 1988 to reflect deeply on the issue of hermeneutics and ethics and to publish a document with this title. It did not make matters easy. It did not heal divisions, at least not in all cases. It also remained an open-ended process. But with my sister or brother who thinks about matters so differently from me, I can do no better than to sit together with them, to read the Bible, to listen with respect but also to ask them in all honesty to listen with respect to what I want to say. This leads to a long and even risky process. We are inclined to think first about how far we can go in respecting the other. We also feel that we should spell out the limits of how far we can go in accepting the opinion of the other. But that is a critical matter. In a crisis we have to speak and act now with one voice. There are examples of such a crisis in our past.

If we agreed to be a communion, and we had agreed in 2010, we need to take time to listen to one another and we need to accept to live with differences. I am always impressed that Jesus himself referred to a difference in situations. In Matt 12.30 he says: "Whoever is not with me is against me..." In Mark 9.40 he says: "Whoever is not against us is for us." It looks exactly

the same but there is a difference in nuance. In the second quote, Jesus draws the circle wider. There may be moments when we close the circle, or that others close the circle for us, or that they even make the circle we have drawn big enough to include themselves. But nevertheless: 'called to communion' means the on-going commitment to widen the communion. For Christ cannot be divided. Not even by our differences in opinion and practice. The communion can live with quite a few of that.

Conclusion

Setri Nyomi has worked hard to make visible the *communion* of (Reformed) Churches. He has done this tespecially through his pastoral visits to various member churches. However, over the years, the word 'justice' has been more prominent in what he wrote or said than the word 'communion'. But there can be no doubt that to Setri, the word 'justice' is implicit in *koinonia* or communion coming to life. He entered an alliance, he leaves a communion. Most of the work done between start and finish are the milestones of a communion committed to justice.

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REVIVAL AND UNITY OF REFORMED CHURCHES: HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS CHALLENGE?

Jerry Pillay

This article is in honor of my colleague and friend, the Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, who has served both the WARC and the now WCRC for the past 14 years as General Secretary. The journey and development of Reformed Churches have always been part of his passion and responsibility and, no doubt, will continue to be so in his ongoing ministry. Hence, I thought it would be appropriate to reflect a little on the need for revival and unity of Reformed Churches. In this paper I shall briefly reflect on the meaning and relationship of revival and unity to one another, stress the need for Reformed churches to seek revival and unity, explore some of the issues which prevent this from happening, and suggest ways in which Reformed churches can address these challenges by making specific reference to the work of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Introduction: Reflections on revival and nity

In Acts 2 we see that revival and unity go together. The descriptive characteristics here for such a state are found in the fact that they were:

- 1) united in prayer that brought them to one accord to one place,
- 2) filled with the Holy Spirit which signifies that it is God who brings revival,
- 3) devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship and the breaking of the bread,
- 4) filled with awe and experienced many miraculous signs,

5) inspired to sell their possessions and goods and gave to those who had need and,

6) praising God in their homes and enjoying the favor of all the people.

Revival brings the people of God together in unity and unity prompts revival and change. There is a tendency to separate the order of these two things: revival and unity. There are some who say that you have to have revival in order to have unity and there are others who say that you must have unity in order to experience revival. For example, Billy Graham illustrates the former in the following words: "The greatest need among Christians and churches today is for genuine spiritual revival. Wherever God has touched His people in special times of revival, lives have been changed, and Christians have experienced new power to do God's work (together)". Joy Dawson expresses the latter in the following statement: "If the Lord were to pour out revival upon the body in the condition that we are in now, our current lack of unity would hinder us from being an adequate "vessel" to hold and maintain the revival that He would pour out... I have changed my priority to pray for *unity first, then revival*. Unity in the body is a direct answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17, and a unified body provides a proper 'vessel' into which revival can be poured out." It is true that the last prayer Jesus offered before going to the cross is for the unity of believers so that the world may believe. Judging by this it is clear that Jesus was concerned about the unity and witness of all believers. Jesus also realized that to be effective in God's mission in the world believers would need to first receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. He thus cautioned the disciples to "wait for power from on high" before they could go out to proclaim the Good News. The point I wish to make here is that we need not spend too much time debating this issue. What matters most is that if Christians are to be effective witnesses in the world to Jesus Christ then what they need are both revival through God's Spirit and Christian unity.

The history of the Christian church all through the ages has shown the need for both revival and unity and at different times though certain aspects were emphasized, derived out of a particular context, the tendency has always been to see

them together rather than apart. The church has needed at times to be revived because it lost its focus, purpose and excitement of witness. In this sense, revival refers to a spiritual reawakening from a state of dormancy or stagnation in the life of believers. It encompasses the resurfacing of a love for God, an appreciation of God's holiness, a passion for His Word and His Church, a convicting awareness of personal and corporate sin, a spirit of humility and a desire for repentance and growth in righteousness. It generally involves the connotation of a fresh start with a clean slate, marking a new beginning of a life lived in obedience to God. Revival breaks the charm and power to live in the world but not of the world. In the following section, I shall refer more to the aspect of Christian unity.

Challenges of revival and unity among Reformed churches

The concept of revival and unity is not strange to Reformed churches. In fact, at the heart of the Reformation was the intent to reform, revive and renew the church. Basic for the understanding of ecumenism is that the Reformers did not intend to found a new church but sought to reform the whole church. In their minds, the church was not standing up to the realities of its time in confronting financial corruption, sexual immorality and political power. Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the others called for the 'reawakening' of the Church to address these issues. In so doing they did not hesitate to point out the inadequacies and corruption of the church which impacted on its life, work, witness and theology. These, for example, are reflected in Luther's *95 Thesis* and Calvin's "*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*" (1543). This renewal was to impact on the structure, polity, theology, mission, worship and witness of the church.

It is sad that even in our day and age the Christian church faces similar challenges as we deal with corruption, political turmoil, sexual immorality, secularization, spiritual apathy, religious factions, violence, abuse against children and women, etc. In most of these situations the church itself is not exempt from these challenges but, in fact, may even be responsible for, or silent in the midst of these occurrences. It seems that what we need at this time is a revival of Reformed churches which brings transformation within the

church and in our world at large. We need to ask whether our structures and theological emphases are relevant for people in the world today. It must be recognized that many of our younger generation of Reformed people are not interested in the Reformed tradition, its confessions and its polity as such, but rather in a Church which is effectively and imaginatively addressing the challenges of mission and outreach in our time.

Whilst the Reformed tradition seems to grow in some parts of the world, it is true to say that in other parts it is declining and diminishing in significance and impact. We are mostly surrounded by churches that are aged, financially struggling, and irrelevant and have lost or losing their place in impacting the community in which it is found. Whereas at one time Reformed churches were quite seriously involved in community transformation, economics and politics – and accused of the social gospel – today we seem to retreat from society largely because of financial challenges and a lack of vision and focus to make a difference in the world. We are being overtaken by other charismatic and Pentecostal churches which once advocated a distancing from the engagement of the ‘this-world’ focus and have now become the champions of what Reformed Christians have been saying all along. They are able to succeed in this, no doubt, because of their financial resources and growing membership. The tragedy is that many Reformed churches have become stuck in a maintenance mode rather than becoming a *missional* church. Perhaps, added to this is the ongoing fragmentation that Reformed churches continue to suffer from.

Reformed churches easily succumb to divisions. Their history since the Reformation is a history of multiple divisions and unfortunately the trend continues. Reformed churches have a tendency to split. In almost all countries in the world there is more than one Reformed church. Whilst this may be in some places the result of church planting by different missionary efforts, these are usually brought about by divergences over doctrinal or ethical issues or over aspects of church government or political options. In recent times, the issues of the ordination of women and sexuality has led to further divisions and strife. In such a context we need to hear afresh the need for Reformed churches to be driven by the

agenda of unity and tolerance. Whilst diversity may be one of the strengths which keep the Reformed family together, it is becoming increasingly apparent that it may also be its weakness.

John Calvin considered unity to be part of the nature of the church. His fourth book of the Institutes is a vivid expression of this conviction: "*On the True Church with whom we are to cultivate Unity because She is the Mother of all faithful*" (Inst.4.1.). He made repeated efforts to avoid the final rupture with the Church of Rome. In particular, he worked untiringly for the unity of the various Reformation churches. In this respect, his assumption was that as long as agreement on the essentials of faith was assured, diversity among the local churches was admissible. The one Church consists of several Christian communions that are one in the essentials of the faith and recognize one another on this basis (Pierre Jurieu, 1637-1713). Reformed theologians persisted in hoping that one day the divided churches would gather in a universal council and confess together the fundamental truths of the gospel.

In the course of the centuries, Reformed churches were at the origin of many initiatives toward unity – both internal and intra-confessional. The hardening of the Reformed tradition into Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and resulting splits provoked counter-movements. Both in Pietism and the revival movements, the quest for unity was alive. In spite of numerous challenges, Reformed theologians played an outstanding role in the beginning and shaping of the modern ecumenical movement (e.g., F.F. Ellinwood, William Paton, Wilfred Monod and Adolf Keller). The thought of some Reformed theologians had a decisive influence on the nascent ecumenical movement (e.g., Karl Barth, Josef Hromadka, John Mackay, Lesslie Newbigin, Hendrikus Berkhof). The focus on Christian unity is on the agenda of many ecumenical organizations, one of the strongest proponents of this is the World Communion of Reformed Churches, established in 2010 with the coming together of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC).

In spite of these great efforts, internal division remains a

characteristic of the Reformed family. While in some countries reunion of divided Reformed churches was successfully achieved (e.g. United States, the Netherlands), the movement of dividing continues in other countries (e.g. Korea and parts of Africa).

How can Reformed churches seek revival and unity?

In the midst of these given realities we ask: How can Reformed churches seek revival and unity? We recognize the need for these but what can be done to appropriate these ideals? In attempting to answer this question, I shall refer to the insightful work of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its attempts to address the same. One of the clear objectives of the WCRC is to promote renewal and unity. In the Uniting General Council Papers of 2010 it stipulated how it would propose to achieve this through its seven core callings:

- To covenant for justice in the economy and the earth
- To search for spiritual renewal and renewal of Reformed worship
- To foster communion within the Reformed family and the unity of the church ecumenical
- To interpret and re-interpret the Reformed tradition and theology for contemporary witness
- To foster mission in unity, mission renewal and mission empowerment
- To promote inclusivity and partnership in church and society
- To enable Reformed churches to witness for justice and peace

In 2011 the Executive Committee of the WCRC took these callings and provided a further refined and renewed strategic direction in what is described as the five key Directives. The WCRC aims to revive, renew, reform and work for unity among Reformed churches through these directives. I shall use these directives as a basis to suggest what can be done

to work for revival and unity among Reformed churches.

Mission renewal

It is my personal belief that revival and unity of Reformed churches will come about more solidly and effectively by focusing on mission. The purpose of the Church is to proclaim the Good news of salvation and life in Jesus Christ. It does so in both word and deeds. In this we embrace the holistic understanding of mission which includes: (a) propagation of the faith, (b) expansion of the reign of God, (c) conversion of the heathen, (d) the founding of new churches.

The church as a community does not exist for itself. It has received a commission; it is sent into the world to proclaim and praise God. It is sent to be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the realization of God's purpose in Christ for the whole humanity and creation. The church and churches proclaim in the name of the crucified and risen Lord God's saving grace and love for the whole world. In the midst of sin, brokenness, pain and suffering it proclaims to the world in word and deed that God's salvation, hope, and reconciliation have come into our midst in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It does so in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

If we want to see the revival of Reformed churches, we need to put more focus and energy into the development of *missional* congregations. Mission happens essentially through local congregations and not in the bureaucratic structures of the denomination. We need to equip and empower local churches for mission in their given communities and beyond. People join churches that are alive and making a difference in their communities not the ones that are insular and disconnected from the world. The key interest of young people today is not faith-tradition but faith-encounter. They are not so much interested in the tradition of their parent's church in as much as they are about a church that is 'doing' God's mission. They are keen to know about Jesus and what he means for the world today. This is the cutting-edge of mission: Who is Jesus for me today? If Reformed churches are to experience revival and unity, it is abundantly clear that it has to ask a new set of questions which relate to God and what is happening in the world. Its focus must not be exclusively internal but

consciously and intentionally external as it focuses on the world. In the time of the Middle Ages and the Reformation issues of doctrine and ecclesiology were crucial to the church. In fact many fought for these and councils even killed for these aspects of the Christian church. Today, whilst these may still be important yet we do not go to such extent, of greater significance is the matter of Christian mission in the world.

The first word of mission is God and not Church. As we are drawn into our common understanding that the church is here to serve God's mission, we will realize the significance and necessity for unity. A mission focus will also call for a revival of the church's vision, purpose and structure. We need to ask whether Reformed churches are structured to meet the challenges in the world or if we are going on with business as usual when the world around us is changing fast.

Communion and church renewal

If Reformed churches are to experience revival and unity then what is needed is a biblical and fresh understanding of what it means to be a communion and community of Christians working together in the name of the Triune God. Recognizing this, the WCRC provides a platform to bring Reformed churches together. We believe that Communion (*koinonia*) is a *gift* of God that implies the commission to Christians to shape their lives as *koinonia*, and acknowledge this gift in their *koinonia* with one another (John 17). It is this use of *koinonia* as a relational concept, integrating the different dimensions of the life of the Christian community that accounts for its significance for contemporary ecclesiological reflection and ecclesial practice.

We are one in Christ. This unity, however, does not mean uniformity. We are not called to suppress our unique and diverse particularity. In Christ our diversity is embraced and transformed into a mutually supportive communion. This communion requires more than mutual tolerance; it calls us to a mutual recognition, acknowledgement, and welcome. We are bound by the love of Christ which enables us to love the other. The reality of communion invites us to live out our unity with greater recognition and acceptance of diversity

and realize our diversity with a greater will toward unity. However, diversity is not fragmented unity, and unity cannot be cemented diversity. The love of God in Christ Jesus calls us to be more.

In light of all the challenges we face today, our unity must be reconceived as the mutual interaction of the many differing views on the subject to find mutual flourishing and blessing to others. Mission is based upon a theology of generosity and hospitality arising from our understanding of the truth which is revealed in Christ. Yet we must be willing to risk that understanding in conversation with others. Just as mission involves giving and receiving, gathering and multiplying, so it also involves challenging and being challenged. In being challenged, we need something more than arguments and counter-arguments. We need to find each other in the love, grace, peace and unity of Jesus Christ.

Recognizing the church as created by God, we need to learn to affirm the gift of communion with one another and 'maintain the bond of love', despite diversities and conflicts, imperfections and frustrations that arise from failures in the face of difficulties. Reformed churches need to ask what justifies their separate existence and to consider opportunities for developing new bonds of communion. Reformed churches accept the liberty of opinion and accommodate a variety of views. In this light, are we not prepared to agree to disagree in the desire to preserve something of greater importance: the unity of the church and its witness to the world?

Justice and church renewal

If Reformed churches want to experience revival and unity then it has to give greater consideration to the quest for its relevance in the world today. One of the key focal points for relevance is related to the issues of justice, struggles and sufferings in the world and how the Christian church is attempting to address these. People in the pews want answers to their questions and they are not merely content with avoidance or spiritualization of these issues. They want to engage and understand them as they wrestle with their beliefs and faith. The social realities of our world have created a spiritual crisis that causes many youth to lose hope, and

avoid our relationship with God and with each other. In this sense, the matter of justice becomes crucial if we want to experience revival and unity.

Of course, this knowledge is not new to Reformed Christians. The founding history of the Accra Confession speaks about this. In this we have spoken quite strongly and powerfully about justice and its impact on economic and gender matters. We have spoken extensively about 'covenanting for justice and the care of the environment and earth.' It is encouraging to note that this confession has been offered as a gift to other ecumenical bodies, some of which have taken it and formulated their Theological Statement and work on its declarations. Moreover, some of the things it has stated have come true, for example, the economic recession we encountered in 2008. The challenge now is to continue to live out this confession in our daily lives and practices.

Perhaps this challenge needs to begin with us as Reformed believers. Proclaiming truth to power and exercising our prophetic calling can sometimes embarrass ourselves because we often struggle to practice what we preach. I was some time ago in India and had the opportunity to visit a Dalit village where the "untouchables" and poorest of the poor lived. I enquired from the leaders about what they were doing to challenge the existent caste system and help the people in the village; they confessed that they were not doing much. On further prodding, it was disclosed that the church was benefitting from the system and therefore preferred to remain silent. It is sad that the church should allow itself to become susceptible to the temptations of power but it is a reality in many parts of the world. I wonder how these impacts on the relationships we have within the Reformed family.

I get the impression sometimes that we don't mind talking about church unity but we get slightly irritated when we talk about justice. We need to understand that the God of justice and peace expects us to work towards these as well. We cannot have communion (unity) without justice or justice without the desire for communion (unity). Justice is a necessary part of building a communion. We cannot have true unity without addressing issues of injustice.

Renewal of Reformed theology

As we speak about revival and unity we must recognize that everything we believe, say and do needs to be theologically and biblically based. There are many emerging trends practiced among churches today that are biblically questionable and even untenable. Nevertheless, for some reason or the other they tend to flourish. Here I am thinking about the rise of the churches that focus on the "prosperity gospel" and motivational speeches for sermons and yet they seem to draw hundreds and thousands of people. Whilst Reformed Christians should not be driven by fads and trends, it is imperative that we ask fresh questions in terms of our theological emphases and priorities. Instead of seeking to be critical and judgmental on these developments, would it not be more appropriate to ask what we can learn from them and why are they growing at a rate that we do not usually see among Reformed churches, at least in Africa?

Central to the 16th century Protestant Reformation is allegiance to the authority of the Bible as God's word; continuing recognition of that authority is basic to our identity in Christ as guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3.16-17). In Reformed theology, we affirm our focus on the sovereignty of God, covenantal theology, the priesthood of all believers, sola scriptura, sola fide, etc. As Reformed churches we are also informed by creedal and confessional documents that summarize our understanding of Scripture. In some places we are still having conversations, debates and disagreements over certain confessions and declarations. These are valid and necessary and we should not undermine them in any way but we should also be mindful of what Christians are concerned about today.

In such an evolving context we need fresh understandings of reformed theology and new expressions of reformed identity. We need to take all that we have in the pool of Reformed theology, tradition, practice and spirituality and embed it in a contextual theology which reflects on our current realities, if we are to encourage revival, growth and unity. The WCRC is doing this in the Global Institute of Theology (GIT) in which young Reformed theologians are asking new questions, and giving new shape to Reformed theological thinking and

engagement. These are wonderful signs of hope and life that we must continue to encourage as we seek to “pour new wine into old wineskins.”

Spiritual and worship renewal

Reformed churches have experienced/ are experiencing conflicts, divisions and splits around the area of worship. What constitutes a proper liturgical style and basis for Reformed worship? There are some who have left the Reformed church because they believe that its style of worship is not what they prefer and if they desire to effect change then they must leave the Reformed family. Although, this is not true about the Reformed church because in reality we embrace a variety of ways and styles in worship and have the freedom to do so, yet in many local churches leaders are not prepared to think creatively about worship. In my own denomination I have come across leaders who are prepared to see their young children and youth go to other churches rather than change the way they prefer worship: loud music, instruments and free style of praise and singing and use of spiritual gifts are simply not welcome. In most parts in Africa, for example, Reformed Christians seem to suffer an identity crisis because deep in their hearts they prefer Reformed teachings but in the expressions of worship they are more at home with Pentecostals. They love singing, dancing and being moved by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that some of the Reformers, like Calvin, had much to say about worship and particularly music and singing in church. However, we need to realize that what was said in their time has to be relooked at in this new century. The fact of the matter is that most young people prefer more contemporary songs and music, visuals, lights, loudness, etc. It is imperative that we seek to find ways in integrating young people into the church; they are not just the church of tomorrow but, indeed, the church of today. It is fine to change our styles and approaches as long as we are able to maintain and teach in and through all of these mediums, the substance and essentials of our faith. There are many Reformed churches that are providing a balanced worship which caters for the needs and preferences of the variety of its members.

Renewal of ecumenical engagement

We have often said that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. This has, no doubt, been clearly visible in the history of Reformed churches worldwide. Reformed churches have strengthened ecumenical movements in their participation, desire and efforts for unity among churches. If Reformed churches want to experience revival and unity, it is necessary for them to continue to sustain ecumenical engagement and involvement.

Added to this is the knowledge that we cannot tackle all the problems in the world by ourselves. We need to link, connect and work with other churches and organizations in order to make a difference of substantial impact. As Reformed churches we need to work with other churches, Christians and organizations to address the realities in the world. We may also be required to work with organizations that are not necessarily Christian and with organizations and people of other faiths to address issues of poverty, religious factions, reconciliation and peace, education, health, etc.

In some parts of the world ecumenical interest is dwindling and ecumenical organizations are struggling to survive financially, this is symptomatic of the lack of interest and involvement by local churches and denominations. Ecumenical organizations must direct their vision and efforts into mobilizing and equipping local congregations and member churches for mission in the world. Over the years I have come to realize that true ecumenism is to be found in the pews and not among church leaders who are bent on protecting their territorial turf related to doctrine, polity and practice. It is the ordinary Christians who are more inclined to work well with others to make a difference in the world. As indicated earlier, churches that are growing and experiencing revival and unity are churches that are taking a keen interest in transforming their communities and working with others to bring about change in people's lives and circumstances. Reformed churches need to reawaken to this call and realize the significance for engagement and participation. God calls us to be a community and to work in community to build community. We are not called to be lone rangers on a mission for God. We are called to be God's people working

with others led by the presence and power of God's spirit to bring transformation, healing, reconciliation and peace in the world. We do this best when we join other churches and organizations.

Conclusion

We live in a day and age where the Christian church faces many challenges and contradictions. In order to address these challenges, we are called as Christians to witness and work together as we proclaim the good news of salvation and life in Jesus Christ. In this context, we are also alarmed by how Reformed churches continue to experience splits, breakaways, divisions and conflicts instead of seeking unity in our witness and mission as we bear witness to the saving love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is no wonder then that in some parts of the world the Reformed church is diminishing in significance and declining in numbers. In other parts of the world though, they seem to grow in numbers yet they continue to divide and fragment, weakening their base and sending mixed messages to the people around them. How much more effective would they be if they maintained unity and worked together? Mindful of this and of our given realities, the WCRC continues to work for the revival and unity of Reformed churches by seeking renewal in mission, communion, justice, theology, spirituality and worship, and ecumenical engagement. In the final analysis, it is through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work (as seen in Acts 2) that we can have true revival and unity, and for this we continue to pray.

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TOWARD A MISSION OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Ofelia Ortega

Introduction

The Second Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC) proclaimed the region to be a zone of peace at their meeting in Havana which was held in January from 28 to 29, 2014. We recognize that the search for an honorable peace embodies a fundamental change in ethical practice and implies a different frame of analysis and criteria for action. We must journey together as faith communities, sharing an ethical practice of peace that includes forgiveness and love for our enemies, non-violent action, respect for others, hospitality and mercy.

As the World Council of Churches "Faith and Constitution" document titled "*Cultivate peace, overcome violence: on the path of Christ*," recommends, I believe that we should unite to effect a process of theological reflection on violence and peace at international, regional, national and local levels. Such participatory theological exploration in response to the important challenges of our time has the potential to rejuvenate the ecumenical movement. It creates new possibilities for achieving increased Christian unity, and attempting to renew the significance of being a church in an increasingly violent world.

I. A "theology of peace" should include the search for truth

It is true, as Hans Küng states that the "theology of peace" demands a theology truly ecumenical, rigorously objective, ethically and politically relevant and oriented toward the future.¹ However, the "theology of peace must be always linked to the search for Truth.

¹ Küng, Hans, *Project for a world ethic*, (Editorial Trotta, Madrid, Spain, 1990), p. 159.

Juan Stam presents in his book, *A Theology of Path*, asks to what point can the church be considered a “zone of truth”² today? When we analyze the present situation of our churches, we have to ask ourselves if our theologizing, our ecclesiastical politics and our practices of faith amount to an authentic “zone of truth of veracity”.

Veracity is nothing other than an ethical requirement. That implies: sincerity, honor and authenticity with oneself, with God and with the rest of humanity. The affirmation of a truth with value only at the level of faith—but which isn’t manifested in daily life is already unworthy of faith. Sincerity must always be built on a personal relationship of confidence and the truth is that firmness, reliability, perseverance and loyalty. This experience of life, truth and liberty before God leads us to promote liberty and justice for others. It leads us to the necessity of trying to form effective options for humanity.

“He who sent me is Truth... God is Grace and Truth. Thus, with the truth we’re fracturing the system of injustice and practicing love.” (John 8.31) The way of truth is renouncing egotism and following the path of Jesus. It is what Ivone Gebara calls “the Christ life” and Juan Stam “the eucharistic life.” Because knowing the truth makes us free, and this truth is incarnated in Jesus, who discovers and conquers falsehood, is manifested through the Spirit of Truth.

When the Spirit of Truth guides us, we realize that “Absolute Truth” isn’t within reach of humankind. Our theological duty, our commitment and evangelical action must be zones of veracity, but we cannot claim we have “Absolute Truth”, which belongs only to God, who is perfect Truth. The truth of Jesus isn’t a question of simply telling the truth: it is rather a being in or “living in the truth.” It’s an existential truth.

To live the truth signifies a liberation that results from participation in the Being of Jesus—in living for others. Hence, in the Gospel of John, light is metaphorically equivalent to truth. Darkness, an agent of falsehood, is directly opposed

2 See Stam, Juan, *A Theology of Path*, Vol. 1, (Universidad Biblia Latino-americana, San José, Costa Rica, 2004), pp. 27-29.

to truth (light) and thus impedes life, (John 8.44) hiding from us God's plans for humanity and promoting other objectives. This makes it impossible to reach the abundance that God has destined for us.

Veracity then consists of searching for truth, thinking the truth, working for truth and proclaiming the truth; in a word, realizing truth as Jesus said in the Gospel (John 3:21) and defending the truth. Veracity is not limited, then, to not telling lies or even to telling only the truth, but includes a whole universe of attitudes about truth.

Reconciliation based in the truth encompasses the totality of human relations and lays the foundations of a new coexistence in daily life that breaks the barriers of race, class, gender, etc. until we reach reconciliation with the environment and with the cosmos as a whole. We must work diligently to transform the churches into reconciliation communities.

We must not only announce the good news of reconciliation, but be the sacrament of reconciliation, because the Mission of the church is inseparable from its essence. That attitude must fortify our relationships with society, culture, Christians of other denominations and with other faiths and ideologies in our joint quest for a just peace. This reconciliation isn't easy or cheap. The apostle Paul tells us that, through the death and resurrection of Christ, God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor 5.18).

There is no reconciliation without forgiveness, and forgiveness doesn't exist without the practice of justice. Neither can there be reconciliation without truth. Nelson Mandela had presided the Commission, "Truth and Reconciliation" in South Africa. The outcome of all processes of reconciliation leads us to "restorative justice."

As Robert J. Schreiter states: "Both truth and justice are essential for the process of reconciliation. Due to the complexity of the past, it's important to be as clear as possible about the kind of truth and kind of justice one seeks at every moment."³

³ Schreiter, Robert J., *The ministry of reconciliation*, Editorial Sal Terrae, (Santander, Spain, 2000), p. 171.

In his book, *For a Church Beyond Its Walls*, His Holiness Aram I states, "Christianity is a religion of reconciliation. Reconciliation means living together, working together, and struggling together on the foundation of common values and for common objectives despite our differences".⁴ Thus, in this "journey to peace," the God of life invites us to rich and profound experiences of fellowship. This fellowship must constantly inspire our intentions, thoughts, words and actions.

Our entire existence is a network of relationships, where reciprocity, connection and interdependence are needed to achieve peace. Our churches especially should create and maintain such networks of relationships.

Konrad Raiser, in his book, *To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium*,⁵ invites us to return to basic forms of conciliation in order to strengthen our capacity for reciprocity, solidarity, dialogue and non-violent methods of conflict resolution. This guides us to the basic concept of *metanoia*: conversion or change of heart. Such a conversion shouldn't be only a momentary moral decision, but a continuous learning process and a new way of living in peace and harmony with God, with our fellow human beings and with all of creation.

South African theologians have closely linked reconciliation with Alliance (Pact). For John de Gruchy, "the Pact makes reconciliation possible, reconciliation makes the promise of the Pact a reality".⁶

The "Ethic of the Pact" offers us the vision of an integrated community of people, animals and the land, a vision which leads us always to live a spirituality that tries to restore and renew more just and sustainable relationships between human beings and the earth in a covenant, under God's care. Our heritage is that vision of "sacramental cosmology" in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Word and Wisdom of God, which are the source and renewal of life.

4 Aram I, *For a Church Beyond Its Walls*, Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, (Antelias, Lebanon), 2007, p. 306.

5 Raiser, Konrad, *To Be The Church: Challenges and Hopes For A New Millennium*, Risk Book Series, (WCC Publications, Geneva, 1997), p. 36

6 De Gruchy, John W., *Reconciliation, Restoring Justice*, (SCM Press, Great Britain, 2002), p.187

II. A just peace

It's not possible to conceive of peace independent of justice. In Psalms 85.10 we find that "justice and peace will kiss each other." Thus the Bible makes justice an inseparable companion of peace. (Is 32.17; Jas 3.18).

On the path to a just peace, it's evident that rationalizing armed conflict and war becomes more and more improbable and unacceptable. The path of just peace is essentially different from the concept of the "just war." Just peace embraces social justice, respect for human rights and ordinary human security.

In the Hebrew Bible, God is called the God of Justice (Is 30.18; Ps 119.131). God's justice extends to all human beings on the earth (Jer 9.24-29). Moreover, His justice extends beyond the boundaries of a nation, to include the entire inhabited world (Ps 9.7-9). This concept of God is the Biblical and theological basis for addressing all unjust problems in the world. It is God's desire and command that all nations practice justice.

In Father Naim Stifan Ateek's book, *Justice And Only Justice*,⁷ it is interesting that a theologian of the liberation of Palestine unites justice and love, and focuses on a remarkable theme: a discussion of power and laws, "when Justice entails Injustice." In the situation of Palestine with Israel, he delineates two ambiguities: one, those who establish the law; and the other, how the law is administered. Laws are established for those in power and problems arise when laws favor only one part of the population—those who are in power. Paul Tillich, in his *Systematic Theology* states: "We have to analyze not only the question of the laws, but also the question of power for the practice of justice."⁸

We know there are different classes of power. In the world today, we talk of economic power, political power and military power. Theologically, justice and power attempt to relate to and harmonize with the God of Justice and Love. Power can be used to maintain justice, peace and order in society, but

7 Ateek, Stifan Nain, *Justice And Only Justice*, Orbis Books, (Maryknoll, New York, USA, 2003), p. 115.

8 Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, Ediciones Sígueme, (Salamanca, Spain, 1984), p. 264.

can also be used to destroy those things (Mic 2.1–2). Certainly we need power to establish justice, promote healing and reconciliation. Without the use of power for the common good, nothing positive will happen. Evil triumphs when good people do nothing.

In *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios*, the Latin American theologian Ignacio Ellacuría tells us: “The Old and New Testaments are full of barren ideas about intolerance, injustice as act and situation; it is the great sin, equally secular and religious, that must be erased from the world. Injustice negates the very core of Christianity.”⁹ Hence, the church is forced to a struggle without quarter against injustice, and to an intense defense of justice. The concept of Hebrew justice is completely dynamic and not legalistic. In the words of Gerhard von Rad: “he who responds to the needs of a community relationship is just.”

Focused always on the context of relationships, justice acquires a very clear and pronounced significance in favor of the oppressed, the hungry, the enslaved and the marginalized. For justice to prevail, the marginalized, the oppressed and the bereft have to once again enjoy appropriate and correct relationships and fairness has to be restored.

The revolutionary key of the Justice of God implies changes of relationship, deep and radical changes of attitudes and lifestyles, ways of living and behaving at interpersonal and structural levels. The Justice of God then is a humanizing force. The idea of *shalom* as justice is a fundamental Old Testament affirmation, based above all on fair relationships between God and the people, and among God’s people. The term *shalom* presents a triple axis: relational, social and structural. It is characterized especially as relational. In that sense, *shalom* becomes a synonym of justice. The concept of *shalom* can be a useful link with other Abrahamic traditions. Other religious traditions may also support similar social structures.

9 Ellacuría, Ignacio, *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios*, Sal Terrae, (Santandar, Spain, 1984), pp. 247-248.

A committed missiology with a vision of “just peace” can help the churches, not only to realize that vision but also to work with followers of other religions for a true and just world peace. Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in his letter to the congregations of the Church of Constantinople says, : “The establishment of peace is an individual and institutional question. It’s in our hands to increase the harm done to our world or to contribute to its healing. Once again, it is a question of choice.”¹⁰

III. World peace and religions

As the Archbishop Anastasios de Tirana y Durrës, Primate of Albania said at the meeting of the Central Committee in Geneva, February 16, 2011: “In the twenty-first century, it has become more and more evident that world peace cannot prevail without peace among the religions...there are important elements and peaceful inspirations in the doctrinal stratas of the great religions that it is necessary to carefully discover, use and apply to the cause of world peace. More than anything else, a united search for world peace can contribute to the peaceful co-existence of religious communities.”

We recognize that the major world religions know that only love as a source of grace help overcome systemic violence. So we have to advance on this “journey to peace,” by creating structures and models of social life that will enable us to extend the experience of grace throughout the world. This path of gratitude can’t be achieved with arms, a path leading to death. It has to be a “dialogue of love” because the fruit of justice is sown in peace for those who make peace (Jas 3.18).

Dorothee Sölle, in *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War*, analyzes the text of Is 35.3-7, as a central message for people living in exile:

“Strengthen weary hands, make firm frail knees—say to those of weak hearts: ‘Be strong, don’t be afraid.’” With this text, she adds: “When the church fathers interpreted the Biblical texts, they insisted that everything not

¹⁰ Bartolomeo I: Peace is a question of choice. In.: <http://www.oikoumene.org/es/novedades/news-management/a/sp/article/1634/bartolomeo-i-la-paz-e.html>, Istanbul, 2011.

essential for our needs should be given to the poor. In light of that tradition, the atomic weapons race is the greatest imaginable theft of the poor.”¹¹

As Hans Küng states: “ The words of the moment must be: Begin here and now for global religious understanding!

Vigorously promote inter-religious understanding in local regional, national and international arenas!

Reach an ecumenical understanding with all groups at all levels!

The postmodern paradigm could be called, in the religious arena, ecumenical paradigm”.¹²

IV. Spirituality for a culture of peace

For Christians there is always hope. The Apostle Paul says we hope against hope (Rom 4.18). In other words, we remain full of hope, even when it seems there’s no sign of hope. Thus, hoping against all hope, in the midst of dark despair, means beginning to see the emerging signs of the great and mysterious Work of God.

Alberto Nolan in *Hope in an Age of Hopelessness*¹³ speaks about the acts of the “finger of God,” as Jesus puts it. He mentions the example of a prominent peace activist, who said there was so much news about the war in Iraq, that it produced an exponential increase in the number of people actively involved in peace movements worldwide. Could this be the “finger of God” bringing good from evil?

In Nolan’s important book, hope is emphasized as coming from God, the author of peace and the only one who brings reconciliation. Hope is something we discover, immersing ourselves in the mystery of peace. It’s true that this mystery sometimes manifests in unexpected places and surprising ways. That is what we have to discover: glimmers of grace

11 Soelle, Dorothee, *The Arms Race Kills, Even Without War*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, USA), 1983, p. 22.

12 Op. cit. Küng, Hans, Editorial Trotta, p. 163.

13 Nolan, Albert, *Hope in an Era of Hopelessness*, Editorial Sal Terrae, (Santander, Spain, 2010) ,p. 29.

in the middle of adversity, acts of kindness opposed to ruthless egotism, and moments of gentleness amid the harshness of incessant aggression.

The “Journey to Peace” will lead us to a spirituality sustained by hope, a spirituality reflecting the relationships of the Holy Trinity that sustain, transform and sanctify our broken world. A biblical text to guide our pastoral actions is found in Ps 34.15.

“Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”

As stated in the Accra Confession, “We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign. (No. 32)

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REFLECTIONS ON SAYING FAREWELL TO A RETIRING COLLEAGUE

Dora Arce-Valentin

I'd like to begin this reflection by extending my deep gratitude to God and my colleague, Douwe Visser for the opportunity to contribute to this special issue of Reformed World. On an occasion like the retirement of the Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, after fourteen years as General Secretary, first of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and since 2010 of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, it is truly a privilege to honor his faithful and continuous ministry of an undoubtedly heartwarming, but complex responsibility.

Through this article, I would like to add a voice to this magnificent chorus from numerous perspectives to recognize Setri Nyomi's undisputed contribution to our Reformed family and the global ecumenical movement. My attempt is only a humble contribution to this joint effort, from my brief experience as staff member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

In developing these ideas, I'm not going to refer so much to Setri Nyomi as an individual, although I admire and respect him as a leader and colleague, besides holding him in high esteem as a human being. Rather, I want to reflect on a theme which in my judgment has been a passion for Setri Nyomi throughout his ministry directing this ecumenical institution, a theme which forms an integral part of his thinking and commitment. The national hero of Cuba, José Martí, said once: "Honrar, honra." To honor, brings honor. May my humble voice be added to others, to honor Setri Nyomi in the hour of his retirement as General Secretary of the WCRC.

As my pastoral ministry is my primary vocation, I want to use a Biblical text as the fundamental basis of this reflection.

I hope it will be received as a gesture of recognition, among the many Setri has already received and will continue to receive, before returning to his home country, Ghana.

The Biblical story in question appears in Lk 16.19–31. I have many reasons for choosing this text. The majority of them have more to do with the subjectivity of this occasion. In addition, this story is underpinned by a spirituality that connects not only with Setri Nyomi's contribution to our large Reformed family during all these years, but also with his own spirituality as pastor and theologian, his passion about the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its most complete dimension: the orthopraxis call.

The reasons to base my reflection on this portion of the Bible also have to do with the coherence between the Good News directed to the poor, marginalized and vulnerable, and the very leadership of Setri, which is marked by his constant search for a commitment to justice and an understanding of this as the heart of the Christian faith.

Of course, to all these reasons I also add my own subjectivity. Many Biblical stories mark our lives in special ways. Some because they form a configuration very close to our own experiences, some because their message has been definitive for our faith; others because they've marked the moment of our decision to follow Christ. This section from the Gospel of Luke is a personal special story.

The story's message has to do with many aspects of Christian life: our hope for life after death, the ethical feeling of faith, the mystery of the call to believe in Christ, the difficulty of the prophetic task. It's also a story that points intentionally toward a reality of Jesus' time, which, lamentably, continues to be a reality in ours. Although we know and believe in God's justice, in his proposition that all of humanity and creation can enjoy Life completely, human structures persist to impede the divine will from being realized according to the intention of our Creator.

This story is one of the most raw and severe depiction of scenes from the Gospel of Luke (and possibly of all the canonical gospels) about the consequences of our ineffectiveness in enforcing the plans of God. Nevertheless, the story also

shows us that despite our incompetence, God's will is fulfilled either within our limited human existence or in eternal, divine abundance. As if Jesus, ironically, had wanted to demonstrate to his obstinate audience how little the attempts of the powers of evil are worth in the eyes of God in trying to distort his plan of liberation and salvation.

Lk 16.19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ ²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ ²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The two people in this parable are well characterized. On one hand, we have a rich man. We try to visualize him for a moment as he's sketched in the story, dressed in fine linen and purple. I don't think this exercise takes much effort because the opulence of wealth hasn't gone out of style. It's interesting to note that this was how the high priests of Jesus' time dressed and the price of such clothing could equal several years of a worker's earnings. This rich man not only dressed with scandalous luxury but also ate the same way. According to the story, he was so rich that he could put on banquets daily.

In those times, as part of their culture, people ate with their hands and in rich houses, they cleaned their hands on slices of bread that they then threw on the floor. These were the crumbs the other person in the story, Lazarus, waited for and hoped to eat.

Lazarus, then, without a doubt, was extremely poor. On the other extreme of the social strata, he was a beggar, in a notably deteriorated physical condition illustrated by the description of ulcers on his body. To this deplorable image is added the possibility that he was so weakened by hunger that he didn't have the strength to chase off the dogs that came to lick his sores.

This is the first picture of the story. The scene of part one. Raw, realistic, too exaggerated, some will say, to describe something that could be understood with less of an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the most shocking thing, in my view, about this description, is how it matches completely with the reality of the world we live in today. Millions of people at this very moment can be classified as being in the same levels of poverty as Lazarus, the beggar in this story. Thus this parable isn't one of those for which we need time to understand its context, because this parable is the reality we live in. It is also the same world in which today's church tries to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is very good that we have a text like this one to remind us that our Creator remains engaged in the work of eliminating barriers created by human sin. That Universe I believe He made with His Word and for each thing created could affirm: "And God saw that it was good!". It is crucial that we remember this living reality because as Christians we assume God counts on us to demolish such injustices. This is the Biblical foundation that motivates a family as extensive and diverse as the World Communion of Reformed Churches in its commitment to justice as the fundamental content of its vocation: "called to communion, committed to justice." Setri Nyomi's leadership has been persevering and consistent with this prophetic lineage, which we recognize as Reformed family tradition.

But according to the Gospel's testimony, this Biblical narrative told by Jesus himself to the Pharisees who mocked

his teachings, has a second act, in which the scene changes completely. In this new scene, the situation of the protagonists is switched. We are no longer situated in the luxurious place where the rich man lived, wallowing in his wealth while Lazarus begged, in the most abject poverty. It turns out that death, which recognizes no social status, ended both the "good life" of the rich man and the "misery" of Lazarus.

The text tells us that suddenly Lazarus was with the angels in glory and the rich man was in hell, in torment. And it tells us moreover that there's no way to revert that established order because "a great abyss" separated those places, with no way to cross from one side to the other.

I've always thought that sentence from Abraham's mouth was a demonstration of the irony with which Jesus often addressed those people who, as we would say today, believed they had "grasped God by the beard." I've often imagined Jesus' tone while telling this story, and above all, his expression as he said this sentence from Abraham's lips. The reality is that, these walls and abysses that separate people by classes or castes, by ethnicity, by gender, by sexual orientation, by age and by an interminable list of other divisions, have been created by us, human beings. The eternal inventors of labels, of abysses or borders, of definitions that classify and separate human beings, have been us human beings. Are we not the specialists in walls and abysses? Hasn't it been us who have invented irreconcilable differences so that it makes no sense to look for ways to overcome those differences? Wasn't it us, human beings, who resigned ourselves to affirming there's a set world order, impossible to change and that there's no alternative to what is already established?

According to the story, this very invention God himself copied from us and inevitably separated the place for the "condemned" and the place for "the saved." We sell the patent and discover it when death takes over. "A great abyss is placed between some and others, in such a way that those who want to cross from here to you, cannot, nor from there can cross to here. (Lk 16.26)

I don't believe the heart of the parable lies in this detail of the narration, but the commentary is pertinent because in

my estimation, one of the strengths that has characterized the ministry and leadership of our colleague Setri during the years in which I have been part of the team, has been his commitment to dialogue and reconciliation, his capacity to always find meeting points to overcome abysses or barriers placed by our limited human vision about the liberating plan of God in Jesus Christ. He has been faithful in his commitment to construct a true communion of churches around the world, empowering those who, for many reasons, face the challenges of reconciling tensions between unity and justice.

The United Council of Grand Rapids, in June, 2010, delivered a mandate, calling upon its members, in partnership with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical bodies, to prepare an international ecumenical conference to propose a financial and economic architecture that is based on the principles of economic, social and climate justice; that would serve the real economy; account for social and environmental tasks; and sets clear limits to greed.

Since then, Setri has been the driving force behind this initiative and has worked with both our Reformed family and these other institutions to adopt this proposal, which today is taking shape and concrete expressions are being crafted. We search tirelessly for those alternatives, some embryonic and others only in the imagination of those who are currently victims of the unjust international order. Like many in the ecumenical movement, Setri is one of those who, in the most amplified sense of the word, believes that surely "another world is possible."

We now enter into the heart of this parable. Many today preach something called prosperity gospel. It is a pseudo-theology which professes that God makes the good prosper and by implication, makes the bad go through the "torments of Cain." I'm not very clear about the requirements to reach the "good" category but I can say that many people in the Universal Church, in our Reformed family, are so radically committed to economic justice, ecological justice, gender justice, the search for Biblical "shalom" and the fulfillment of life for all humanity and Creation, that we aren't in a particularly good category, according to the standards of this "pseudo-theology" of prosperity. According to these sects,

to prosper means having a life filled with material goods, without considering the impact on other people or the environment. According to them, an abundance of “things” guarantees an abundance of spiritual goods. Therefore, the content of the church’s mission should be about that, by their understanding; and of course, any attempt to undermine a world order that actually provides strong ideological support for such proposed “prosperity” would be something like an “anti-mission.”

On another note, reflecting on this story told by Jesus himself, there’s no way to avoid recognizing how much we sin as human beings and as churches, with our indolence, our insensitivity, our excessive waste; our failures to notice the needs around us. The great sin of the rich man was his indifference to the injustices of his time. And it’s the sin of the church that doesn’t assume responsibility for the community in which it has been called to preach the Gospel, a Gospel that can only reach other people through what we are able to do as Body. We can’t complain, like the rich man, about the scant attention paid to our supposedly evangelical message. We will have to say to ourselves over and again the words that Abraham said to the rich man: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” (Lk 16.31)

Our indolence, indifference and wastefulness open deep abysses between the church and the people we minister and serve, keeping them from hearing our message. In our times, if there’s one urgent action needed, among so many, it’s the rescue of the most elemental values for any community, from the right of all humanity to have the most basic material needs met—food, shelter, education, health—to the right to express our diverse spiritualities in an atmosphere of respect and freedom. These human rights point to what our faith recognizes as the heart of the plan of the Kingdom of God anticipated in Jesus Christ, that “full and abundant life,” which equally in the Biblical perspective must be lived with a high sense of responsibility with care for our fellow beings and the rest of creation.

In the language of the parable the rich man did nothing bad. His sin was that he did nothing. He crossed his arms before

injustice, before human need, before the suffering of others and squandered his capacity to have done much more. The rich man ignored the fact that all humanity deserved a dignified life because all humanity is created in the “image of God.”

The truth is that every human labor of love and justice deserves that we join it, no matter who gets credit for it. This has been the *leitmotiv* of Setri Nyomi’s ministry during all these years. His passion for justice emanates from a profound Biblical spirituality and has made it possible for churches that form part of this enormous, diverse and talented family/communion to embrace his commitment to justice as a foundation to grow in our call to be a true community.

Honoring the leadership of Setri Nyomi for me signifies a renewal of commitment to justice and recovery of the prophetic call of a document like the Confession of Accra, that before the reality of today’s world reaffirms itself as the prophetic voice of the united churches in that historic General Assembly held ten years ago in Ghana.

I finish this reflection with words from the Accra Confession (articles 26 to 31), with the hope that the World Communion of Reformed Churches will be able to continue utilizing our capacities, the great diversity of gifts that together we share, all the potentiality of work and creativity that we have as a confessional family, in order to serve all of Creation we are called to minister to. Let’s hope that with each commitment to renew justice, we will be overcoming the abysses that cripple the integrity of God’s world and try to divide human beings irremediably, as if we didn’t all carry, equally, God’s divine image in our own essence as his creatures. Let us trust that this same commitment to justice is the heart of our mission as a church of Jesus Christ, proclaiming the Good News of His Kingdom like a seed that germinates in each creature recovered in its dignity as divine creation.

Accra Confession articles 26-31

“26. We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God’s way (Mic 6.8). We are

called to stand against any form of injustice in the economy and the destruction of the environment, “so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5.24).

27. Therefore we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations—gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.

28. We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (Jn 10.10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Lk 4.18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

29. Therefore we reject any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation, in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to “steal, kill and destroy” (Jn 10.10) rather than following the “Good Shepherd” who has come for life for all (Jn 10.11).

30. We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible.

31. Therefore we reject any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.”

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What we do

Called to Communion....

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) – a fellowship of Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed, Waldensian, Uniting and United churches, was born through a historic merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council in June 2010.

Guided by the theme “Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4), delegates who met from June 18 to 28 in Grand Rapids, USA launched a landmark effort to unite Christians for common witness and service to the world.

Committed to Justice....

WCRC’s member churches act on common Christian beliefs to promote economic, ecological and gender justice around the world.

United in Christ and the historic Reformed creeds and confessions, WCRC churches respond to the spiritual needs and human rights of all people, while cultivating responsible use of the earth’s God-given resources.

By defending civil and religious rights, alleviating poverty and promoting equity between men and women, WCRC aims to fulfill Christ’s promise that all people “might have life in fullness” (John 10.10)

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www.wcrc.ch