

Report of the Collegial General Secretariat

In May 2021, the Executive Committee endorsed the leadership model described in the Proposed Interim Plan that, during the interim period, the core functions and responsibilities of the general secretary as found in the Constitution and Bylaws shall be delegated to the “Collegial General Secretariat” (CGS) composed of the three executive secretaries [Action 22]. Hanns Lessing was appointed as acting general secretary during the time of the interim for legal and specific representational purposes.

Perception on the Structure of the Collegial Secretariat

The appointment of a CGS has found a lot of interest in the WCRC and ecumenical partner organizations. Several people see the model as a timely experiment of non-hierarchical leadership that is more open to accommodate the diversity and richness of 21st century church life. Others have pointed to the collegial tradition of Presbyterian and Reformed churches that have adopted the office of powerful general secretaries only recently. References have been made to the Trinitarian nature of the life of the Church in all its aspects. The exercise has clearly captured the interest and the imagination of many.

However, other people have raised the concern that the structure strongly depends on good personal relationships of the three members of the collegial general secretariat and offers only limited resources in terms of conflict. Several people have pointed to the ambiguity of authority in the system. In the collegial structure, it was not always clear where the authority was located. This could impact the effectiveness of the work because their leadership would not be taken seriously by some parties. Some people pointed to the situation that the structure of the interim was making contradictory demands on the office of the collegial general secretariat: On the one hand, the appointment of the CGS was an expression of the transitory nature of the interim. The collegium should, therefore, always make clear that their appointment was only temporary. On the other hand, the CGS was called to start a far-reaching transformation process of the WCRC. To be effective, they should therefore be empowered to do the work that they are appointed for.

First Experiences

The CGS started its work on 1 September. Because of the transitory nature of the exercise, the structure perhaps does not warrant a too thorough analysis. There are, however, some learnings that should be taken seriously in future discussions on the leadership model of the WCRC:

- **Transparency and accountability:** Because decisions can only be taken in the collegium, the executives must be in continuous conversation with each other. This has led to a much-improved quality of discussion and a deeper integration of the activities. The system has also improved the communication between executives and administrators. Issues in relation with member churches or projects can be addressed in a much more focused manner and with greater depth.
- **Integration of member church relations and programme work:** Since the sustainability model adopted by the Executive in May 2021 calls for the mobilization of member churches, the CGS is now coordinating member church relations and programme work much more closely. We seek to involve the member churches in

planning, implementing, and financing programme activities and have approached the regions to cooperate in this exercise.

We will continue to report about experiences that might be significant for the development of leadership and working models of the WCRC.

At the same time, we also want to share the challenges we are experiencing in the interim structure. These difficulties are not of fundamental nature. So far, none of the concerns quoted above has seriously impacted our work. Every new beginning requires an investment in relationship building. Some partners needed a moment to adapt to the new system. But after some conversation, we usually managed to establish good contacts.

The point on which challenges become most palpable is of importance for all discussions on the development of new leadership and working models for the WCRC. The strategy to increase the sustainability of the WCRC by activating the Communion requires significant capacity for coordination and accompaniment. There is high potential in the invitation of churches, ministries, seminaries, and individuals, but many of these activities need encouragement and support, often also on a regular basis. The WCRC will surely gain capacity in a less centralized working model, but much of this capacity will have to be invested in relationship building.

In our short experience with the CGS structure, we experience that this engagement is worthwhile and bears fruit. At the same time, we are already experience the limitations of the possible. This challenge will need strong attention in the future.

Staffing

Over the summer an extensive review of the work both taken on by the WCRC's administrative assistants and the needs of the organization was undertaken. When combined with the reduction (due to budgetary constraints) from four to three administrative staff members, it was decided to increase the responsibilities of the three positions from assistant to administrator. The EKD's personnel office provided a review of the new job descriptions to set the appropriate compensation level for each.

Thus, Amritha Perumalla is now the Administrator for Projects and Programmes, Anna Krüger is the Administrator for Finance and Sustainability, and Godwin Muoneke (who began in August) is the Administrator for the General Secretariat.

In these new roles, the administrators have taken on more management responsibilities, instead of simply providing administrative support to the executives. For instance, Anna drives the budget process, working with the General Treasurer, the volunteer Finance Administrator (Gerhard Plenter), and staff; while Amritha manages all aspects of the Reformed Partnership Fund.

The increase in responsibilities not only better reflects the actual work that these staff members are doing but also has allowed the organization to function more effectively.

It should also be noted that after postponing the recruitment of a new intern due to pandemic travel restrictions, we were pleased to welcome Ismetyati Natalia Tuhuteru (Taya) at the end of October. She is from the *Gereja Protestan Maluku* (GPM: Protestant Church in the Moluccas). Our longer serving intern, Meta Ginting, will complete her service with us at the end of January 2022.

Strategic Direction Set by the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG)

In its report to the Executive Committee in May 2021, the SPPG addressed the reduction of staff capacity in the Hannover secretariat because of the sustainability challenges that the WCRC experiences and made the following proposal:

3. The primary answer to the diminished staff capacity should—wherever possible—not be to downgrade goals, but to develop a programme model that will allow the implementation of the objectives of the Strategic Plan.

4. Such a programme model shall allow executive secretaries to call upon WCRC regions, member churches, and working groups to implement global programmes on behalf of the WCRC. The Hannover secretariat shall support the programme activities administratively. The role of the executive secretaries shall focus on the coordination of these activities and not so much on their facilitation. It shall be the primary function of the executive secretaries to develop the programme work according to the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan and to ensure coherence of the different programme areas with the vision and the mission of the WCRC.

Under the conditions of the interim, the need for developing a less centralized working model has become even more urgent. The responsibilities of the general secretariat and the demands of the sustainability initiative reduce the capacity for planning and implementing programmes severely.

A core group of the SPPG met face-to-face in November, reviewed the proposal, and reconfirmed the need to develop a less centralized working model for the WCRC.

The CGS has already started perspective discussions with member churches, ministries, and seminaries to explore possible synergies. We hope that these conversations will lead to agreements that will allow these partners to plan and implement programmes on behalf of the Communion.

The SPPG sees its role in this new model in accompanying these discussions as guardians of the strategic plan to ensure the coherence of the programme work with the vision and mission of the WCRC.

The “COVID and Beyond” Process

Many people have described the “COVID and Beyond” process as an example of a new phase in the life of the Communion. The digital format allowed a form of intense fellowship that the WCRC so far had not had outside General Councils. Since December 2020, the process gathered representatives of all areas of the life of the Communion to share experiences

during the pandemic. The process allowed for lamenting the pain, comfort in prayer, and solidarity in moments of mutual encouragement. During the process, the communion lived out its identity as a *Koinonia* marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing and being Reformed together. The richness of the contributions testifies to the spiritual and theological strength of our Communion and its commitment to radical transformation.

The process also succeeded in giving an expression by what we mean if we call for full and just participation. Not only all our mandatory balances (region, gender, age, etc.) have been met, but the sharing sessions provided a space where representatives of the churches in the regions could engage with people from groups that are often excluded from participating in discussions in the church (Indigenous people, people living with disabilities, people with diverse sexualities, etc.). The programme networks of the WCRC also participated and made important contributions to the conversation.

The organization of this process would not have been possible without the strong engagement from the regions. The leadership bodies either prepared contributions themselves or called upon people from the churches to prepare presentations. Several regions mobilized their member churches to participate in the sessions either on Zoom or by watching the YouTube and Facebook streams. The presentation from Indonesia was particularly impressive, because people from almost all the member churches participated. This experience shows the potential of digital formats to activate church members which do not yet belong to the circle that regularly attends WCRC programmes.

The rich material gathered during these sessions is currently being prepared to be published to allow church groups to engage with the contributions.

In 2022 we plan to translate the digital into the analogue. Deep discernment of controversial issues requires in-person engagement; the development of creative and impactful forms of witness needs sufficient time and space. If the pandemic conditions allow, we shall convene a series of regional meetings to involve the member churches more directly in the process. These regional meetings will also offer opportunities to reach out to churches, ministries, and seminaries to explore programme perspectives and organize sustainability roundtables.

Planning and conducting these meetings will occupy a large part of the management capacity in the WCRC secretariat in the first half of 2022. We believe that this engagement shall be a worthwhile investment that will strengthen the foundations of the sustainability of the WCRC in the future.

New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA)

The joint NIFEA process continued through two significant webinars, one on Indigenous people and the economy of life, the second on living sustainably and sufficiently. The second webinar also resulted in a joint letter from the constituent organizations (WCRC, World Methodist Council, World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, and Council for World Mission) to the G20.

For the G20 both Najla Kassab and Philip Peacock attended the Interfaith Summit at the G20 in Bologna, Italy, offering the WCRC visibility at this meeting.

NIFEA continued its presence at the COP26 with a session at the People's Summit on "Tax the Rich, Save the Planet." The session was in a hybrid format and was very well attended. The NIFEA team also produced a joint statement from the five ecumenical organizations for the COP26.

Finally, the ZacTAX toolkit was produced by the WCRC and is being used by all the members of the NIFEA process. This toolkit is available as a free download on our webpage as well as the webpages of the other organizations (wrc.ch/zactax).

Gender Policy

In accordance with action 31 of the 2017 General Council, the Gender Policy of the WCRC along with the implementation plan was passed by the Executive Committee at its May 2021 meeting. The Gender Policy is now being readied for a formal launching at a webinar in mid-December. Translations are also in various stages of development.

Focus: Palestine

In accordance with Action 55 of the 2017 General Council, the General Secretariat was tasked with producing a study guide in order to lift up the cries of the Palestinian people for the entire Communion and the wider ecumenical movement to study. This study guide has been released as a four-volume book and was launched at a webinar in October. This study guide has been extremely well received by our members and other partners, and is available for free download on the WCRC website (wrc.ch/justice/palestine).

Cameroon

The WCRC has initiated the Ecumenical Forum for Cameroon and a very well conducted and received meeting was held in Ethiopia in September on conflict resolution. This meeting was exceedingly successful in fulfilling its objectives as well as contributing to the discussions on peace in the Cameroonian context.

Global Reformed Advocacy Platforms for Engagement (GRAPE)

After several years of negotiations, we now have reached agreements with the core partners *Brot für die Welt* (Bread for the World) and the PC(USA) that allow us to proceed with the planning of the WCRC advocacy programme.

Economic and political advocacy has been a core commitment of the WCRC for decades. In conducting advocacy programmes, the WCRC lives out its vision and makes an essential contribution to the needs of member churches.

In the financial challenges that the WCRC is experiencing, every new programme must be scrutinized on its sustainability implications. The advocacy programme is designed in a way that it will not be a burden to the core budget but offers opportunities to stabilize the sustainability of the organization:

- The focus on advocacy allows support from mission partners and relief organizations and is open also for secular funding.
- Administrative fees on the funds for the project will contribute to the core budget.
- The programme will provide opportunities to mobilize member churches in all parts of the Communion. The “local to global to local” format in which it is designed will empower churches and local communities. At the same time, the global nature of the programme invites mission and justice ministries from all parts of the Communion to become engaged in the programme. First conversations with the ACRC council and several mission organizations indicate significant agreement with this approach.

The WCRC advocacy programme shall consist of three elements:

- The creation of the position of a female executive secretary for mission and advocacy. We hope to employ a person with an advanced leadership record on conflict resolution. This position will be funded by the PC(USA) with funds earmarked for improving the gender balance in the WCRC executive staff and with funds from other partners that support the advocacy programme.
- The formation of local, regional, and global advocacy platforms in which people from the churches will cooperate with activists and representatives from mission and advocacy organizations. Activities of these platforms shall be supported by funds provided by *Otto per Mille*.
- A training programme which will equip church leadership and local communities to become effective advocates of issues of their concern. This training programme shall be conducted in cooperation with the Economic Policy Research Institute in Cape Town, South Africa, and shall be financed by *Brot für die Welt* and other partners.

Depending on the availability of funds, the implementation of the programme shall begin in 2022. We hope to present a female candidate for the position of Executive Secretary for Mission and Advocacy to the Executive Committee in May along with a plan to create the first advocacy platforms. The training programme shall begin with two pilot initiatives in Africa: One project will prepare advocacy in a social transformation context, the other will improve capacity for conflict resolution. Both projects shall be planned in close cooperation with the ACRC. When we will be able to raise additional funds, we will also implement the programme in other regions.

Database

After some delays due to personnel absences and changes, the first phase of the database project has been completed. CiviCRM, a non-profit-focused, open-source system, is now our operational database. Of the several ecumenical partners invited to join with us in moving to CiviCRM, the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) has also completed their project. We will continue to cooperate with them in the sharing of training sessions and the development of customized applications.

While the database is operational, work continues to develop systems to ensure that the data contained therein is kept up-to-date. These systems will include the flow of information within the Hannover office, as well as how to best utilize the contacts in regional councils.

The next phases of the database development will include implementing paid subscription management for *Reformed World*, inviting regional councils to actively utilize the database, connecting CiviCRM to the new bookkeeping system (which is anticipated to be implemented in 2023), and customizing the event management application to handle the next General Council.

A fully functional database will undergird sustainability efforts, allowing more precise tracking of both membership dues and additional contributions, better means to communicate via mass email messaging, and the management of specialized networks within the Communion.

Communications

Besides the regular work of posting to social media platforms, writing and releasing news features, compiling and sending the monthly eNewsletter, coordinating the development of resources, and producing periodicals, several foundational communication projects are in process:

1. Corporate design refresh. When the WCRC was formed in 2010, a new logo was developed, along with a full design guide (colors, fonts, etc.). This was slightly modified during the 2017 General Council and is now being given a full reworking (outside of the logo, which is the foundation of the reworking).
2. New introductory brochures about the WCRC and its work have been completed in eight languages.
3. Videos introducing the WCRC, as well as each aspect of its work, are in development. It is anticipated they will be completed by early 2022. The introductory video will be customizable to also be used in the sustainability initiative.
4. FAP has provided the WCRC with a grant to redevelop the website. The last website redevelopment was completed in 2015, so the WCRC is “past due” on this. It is anticipated that this project will be completed by spring 2022. A part of the redevelopment will be an expansion of the resource area, providing more resources which member churches can freely access for use.

These pieces will each have a positive impact on the ongoing sustainability efforts, as well as deepening the Communion through better communication tools and presentation possibilities.

Conclusion

At the end of this report, we want to return to Hebrews 12:1, the verse quoted in the introduction to this extraordinary Executive Committee meeting: Yes, we are burdened by a heavy weight that impedes our movements and often hinders us from achieving the goals that we have set. The Long COVID reality and the sustainability challenges of the WCRC call for increased engagement and, more than once, we have felt that more is required from us than we are able to do with the little strength we have as an institution or as individuals. But in our Communion, we also experience what it means to be “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” which gives us comfort, encouragement, and support. This Communion is an important resource for our sustainability that lets us run with perseverance, even at times

such as this—with everything possible through the strength and support of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!

Hanns Lessing, Philip Vinod Peacock, Phil Tanis
Collegial General Secretariat