

Introduction to the Extraordinary Executive Committee Meeting: 29 November – 1 December 2021

At such a Time as This

In May 2021, the Executive Committee met under the theme “At such a time as this.” In the months afterwards, this word from Esther 4:18 has been picked up on several occasions. The verse has allowed us to express the stress that we experience under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption of the “old normal” has sensitized us afresh for the challenges around us. In ordinary times, our established patterns of working, living, and believing make it relatively easy to close our eyes to the suffering and injustice. They filter our perception of the world and, most of the time, give us the feeling that the little that we can do is an adequate response to the state of the world.

At such a time as this, these filters are shattered. The pandemic is a great revealer and confronts us much more directly with the problems around us. Almost all of us have lost relatives and friends during the last 18 months. We have been holding the hands of people who could not breathe. We have experienced helplessness and anger when we saw how ill-equipped health systems have been unable to deal with the pandemic, how women have been abused at home, and children have been deprived of education and support. In several member churches, the majority of people earn their living in the informal economy. This is often hard even in “normal” times; during lockdowns and in shrinking economies, this becomes life-threatening. Many countries do not have access to vaccines, oxygen, and other important medical equipment. Politicians and businesses have taken advantage of the situation to maximize their power. Existing divisions in our societies and throughout the globe have increased. People who have been vulnerable and marginalized are now living in even more abject conditions. In our “COVID and Beyond” process, many people have described this situation as hardening of global apartheid.

But despite all these challenges, during our Executive Committee meeting in May, we could discuss this difficult situation and its impact on life, the work, and the sustainability of the WCRC in a spirit of hope. Our President Najla Kassab described the situation as a *kairos* and outlined several directions in which we could respond to the challenges in the spirit of a renewed imagination. In this light, the word “At such a time as this” opens up a space. It does express not only the difficulties but also marks a special moment. The clarity of the view of the problems around us expresses itself as a calling. The filters that in the “old normal” should shield us from the problems have been shattered. We are forced to see the world with open eyes. And it becomes abundantly clear that we have to act.

However, this newly discovered clarity is difficult to bear. We have been isolated by physical distancing regimes that have disrupted important structures that provided for solidarity and care. Many of us have suffered psychologically. The urgency of the challenges and the awareness of our limitations overwhelms us. And this feeling that we are just not strong enough can make it difficult to grasp the opportunities that the *kairos*, after the disruption of the “old normal,” could offer.

This stress becomes even more severe when we realize that these problems will not end anytime soon. Long COVID is not only a medical condition that describes the long-term

impact of a COVID infection on a person's health. It also expresses a social reality. The "moment of truth" that the experience of a *kairos* makes us so urgently aware of lasts much longer than a moment. Under these circumstances, a *kairos* does not only call to grasp an opportunity in a particular moment. Under the conditions of Long COVID, the *kairos* calls for a new approach to life that can sustain us through a longer period of time: carried by hope and in the confidence that God will sustain us in our attempts to bring justice to this world.

During our "COVID and Beyond" process that brought all parts of our Communion together throughout the last 12 months, this experience of a long *kairos* called us to go back to first principles. We asked: "What does God require of us? (Micah 6:8) Discerning, confessing, and witnessing in times of COVID-19 and Beyond." And in asking this question in the context of a global process of discernment, we built a communion in which we can comfort, support, and sustain each other in our attempts to meet God's call in our proclamation and witness.

This communion experience strengthens our confidence in God's guidance: We keep our eyes wide open to the injustices of this world. We confess God's justice against all attempts to normalize marginalization, oppression, and abuse. We witness in our many attempts to further peace and justice. And we allow ourselves to be Reformed by God, who sustains us and gives us the strength to persevere in times of crisis.

During the Executive Committee meeting in May, this spirit of hope allowed us to discuss with confidence the challenges that the WCRC is facing. Today, we pray for the same spirit when we discuss the impact of Long COVID on the life of our churches and our Communion:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Heb 12:1)

Towards a New Imagination for the Life and Work of the WCRC

The sustainability challenges that the WCRC is facing are older than COVID-19, but the pandemic aggravates the challenges. The corona situation affects the life and the financial situation of our member churches. In several ways, the COVID pandemic has accelerated processes that have gained momentum for quite some time already. We have become more digital and perhaps also more individualistic and inward-looking. Diminishing resources let us become more careful to make commitments. We look much more circumspect at what will serve our purposes and what will not.

However, this more cautious approach is not necessarily an impediment to the life of our Communion. On the contrary, if churches ask for assurance that their engagement will be worthwhile, they simultaneously express their wish to participate more intensively in the life and work of the WCRC. We have heard from several sides that mere membership does not motivate sufficient commitment. Churches want to participate in the richness that the global network of the WCRC can offer, but they want to participate in a way that enriches the lives of their congregations, ministries, and seminaries.

This expectation is not a farfetched dream but addresses a reality that already exists. In the programme work of the WCRC, we never experience a shortness of people who want to

become engaged. They offer their time, their energy, and their networks and often act as ambassadors of our Communion. This engagement is a crucial asset in times of dwindling resources. A Communion that understands itself as a *koinonia* that is discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together depends on that its mission is becoming alive. All efforts to improve the sustainability of the WCRC require that we create more space for the energy in the member churches to enrich, extend, and sustain the mission of the Communion.

At the moment, the WCRC is going through an interim period. The decision to postpone the election of a general secretary was partly motivated by sustainability shortfalls. This is not a momentous problem; the underlying issues reach much deeper. The WCRC has experienced sustainability challenges for more than 20 years. Many forms of fundraising have been explored and yielded some success. But the efforts could never secure the long-term sustainability of the organization. In many years, the core budget could only be balanced by cutting of costs and extraordinary contributions in particular by churches in Europe, North America, and Northeast Asia. Both strategies have reached their limits. There is hardly any staff left in the Hannover secretariat that could be made redundant, and the abilities of churches in the Global North have passed their peak.

Both developments require a new strategic direction. As we already said during the discussions of the Executive Committee in May: To sustain our work we need a less centralized working model for the WCRC, which involves member churches, ministries, partner organizations, and volunteering individuals in the planning, implementation, and also financing of programmes. And we need to activate new forms of support for the WCRC, particularly in the Global South. As a Communion, we can only flourish when more churches contribute actively to the life and sustainability of the WCRC. The potential for such increased commitment is there. Let us use the energy that we find in the WCRC to build a more stable organization!

Executive Committee Decisions for the Interim

This renewed imagination has guided in its decision on structures and objectives of the interim period. To allow the WCRC to function during the interim and to prepare the preconditions for improved sustainability that will allow the election of a new general secretary, the Executive Committee in May 2021 adopted the following actions:

[26-28] Appointed and set the terms of reference for a sustainability task group.

[11-12] Appointed and set the terms of reference for a General Council task group.

[19] Approved the proposed interim plan, which resolves that the WCRC shall operate under the interim leadership structure from 1 September 2021 until 31 August 2022.

[20] Requested the Officers Committee to conduct a mid-term review on the progress of the search process and the sustainability campaign in February 2022 and to make a proposal to the Executive Committee on how to proceed if these processes do not provide the expected results.

[21] Mandated the General Secretary Search Committee as currently composed to continue its search for a suitable candidate to be presented to the Executive Committee for election at its meeting in May 2022.

[22-24] Endorsed the leadership model during the interim period.

[14] Engaged with the proposal of the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG) to develop a less centralized leadership model for the WCRC programme work and referred it to the general secretary for further consideration.

[15] Engaged with SPPG proposal to extend the peace and reconciliation work of the WCRC and referred it to the general secretary for further consideration.

These actions have been implemented as will be seen in reports from the Collegial General Secretariat, the Sustainability Task Group, and the General Council Task Group.