

## **A Reflection on the 2022 Executive Committee Theme from the Collegial General Secretariat: “Stand firm and let nothing move you”**

Our Executive Committee meeting has the theme “Stand firm and let nothing move you” (1 Corinthians 15:58). In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul puts this call at the end of his reflection on the resurrection. The appeal does not conceal the harshness of the realities of human life. One does not call upon people to stand firm when there is nothing to worry about. Paul’s letters explicitly refer to experiences of persecution, violence, and death. At no moment he would downplay the suffering, the pain, or the doubts. But at the same time, he is deeply convinced that death does not have the last word. In his faith, the resurrection opens a horizon of hope that changes the perception of the present. His appeal to stand firm calls us not to allow desperation and fear to move us away from the resurrection and continue to explore the potential of hope even in the most challenging situations.

As the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we hear this call in a situation that is still marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and challenged by wars in different parts of the world. These events test our faith in the potential of the resurrection perspective to testify to the God of life. Both experiences reveal the deeply entrenched injustice and violence in this world and force us to revisit established patterns of thinking and acting.

In recent months, it has been particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine that provoked this kind of self-examination of the sources of our hope and the foundations of our peace witness. As the WCRC, we have always been sceptical of the notion of peace. Our analysis of empire pointed us to engage with the underlying destructiveness of the current world order. The Russian invasion demonstrates how fragile the instruments are that have been developed after World War 2 to prevent wars. The Russian attack confirms the conviction of the Accra Confession that economic globalization is aggravating conflicts and is, therefore, an unsuitable instrument to maintain peace.

But the invasion also challenges the confidence in a global order based on international law. In the Russian example, the obligations of the international order even fuel aggression. Political and religious leaders reject the universal principles that are at the core of the international order as an onslaught on national identity, which must be rejected by all means.

In the Racism, Authoritarianism, and Nationalism (RAN) programme of the WCRC, we have detected this violent pattern in several current conflicts. The current war affirms the need to engage with this destructive dialectic of the universal order as a matter of urgency. We need to find a way to get out of the violent alternative that only gives us two options: We either accept that universal values must be enforced, or we condone that identity must be defended against this enforcement. Even if we regard the universal principles of the Enlightenment as substantial resources for peacemaking, we must acknowledge that both options are inherently violent and legitimize military force.

In this situation, the theme of our Executive Committee meeting becomes very relevant. Paul’s call to stand firm in the resurrection perspective is a rejection of all forces of death, howsoever they are motivated. The appeal to not move from the hope of the resurrection

calls us for a renewed engagement with the question, “what does God require of us?” (Micah 16:8). In a situation where old paradigms are shattered, what is our calling in receiving God’s gift of peace?

In an opinion piece, Marco Hofheinz, a German Reformed theologian, in his search for an answer to this question, points to a letter that John Calvin wrote to the congregation in Aix en Provence in 1561. Facing brutal religious persecution, the congregation had written to Calvin: “What can we do in persecution? Should we defend ourselves against our enemies by force of arms? Should we give in to our enemies and let them triumph?”

In his answer, Calvin clearly distinguishes between legal rights and Christian calling. Legally, it is legitimate “to avenge ourselves on a mutinous populace, because this is not resisting the order of justice; nay, that the laws themselves arm both great and small against robbers.” But while Calvin affirms the legal right to resist, he cautions the congregation that by taking up this right, we “prevent God from coming to our relief.”

At first glance, this sounds very cruel. By waiving the right to resist, the only option left seems to be to give in to the oppressor. But this was not Calvin’s intention at all. Indifference to the suffering of innocent victims of war for him is not an option. But instead of condoning armed resistance, Calvin called for active perseverance as a third way that should lead Christians out of the dilemma of choosing between either giving in or violating God’s commandments. For Calvin, active perseverance is a blessed state that allows God, who is faithful to the promise to sustain and protect his people after their enemies shall have vented all their rage, to come to our relief.

It is this active perseverance that the theme of this Executive Committee meeting is calling us for. As the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we should never condone injustice, oppression, or violence. But even if we agree that, in some situations, armed resistance is legitimate or even mandated, we are called to act within the space that God’s promise opens for our witness. The Accra Confession calls such witness “covenanting for justice”: By entering into God’s covenant with all creation, Christians become part of God’s saving work that promises to bring life in its fulness for all. If we look at the responses to the Russian invasion, we see many examples of such covenanting.

The violent division of friend and foe does not cover the whole reality. The vibrant civil society in Ukraine, which has been invigorated by the challenges of the war, is an impressive example: The firm will to not give in to the forces of destruction is not directed against anyone but wants to secure spaces in which life can flourish even in the atrocities of the war.

Churches and civil society groups in Ukraine, but also in Europe, North America, and Asia are working together to let humanity prevail in times of war. This witnessing for peace is neither naïve nor ignorant of people’s suffering in war. But it opens a horizon of active engagement that is completely invisible in the binary logic of military engagement.

And even if churches and civil society are not strong enough to stop the brutality, they can contribute much to fostering a spirit of defiance that will not give in to the notion of defeat.

The firm conviction that war is wrong is a vital resource for the perseverance required to sustain prolonged periods of hardship. As in many other war zones, life will remain threatened in Ukraine. This situation will be an enormous challenge to all people determined to uphold their humanity against the forces of terror and oppression. In such a situation, the belief that God blesses the peacemakers becomes a very significant political resource.

At this meeting of the Executive Committee, the WCRC will officially begin the journey that shall lead us to the next General Council that will take place in 2025 in Thailand. On this journey, we will continue discerning what God requires of us. As the Reformed church always reforming according to God's word, we accept the challenge that requires new ways of discerning, confessing, and witnessing. We are aware that this journey might lead us through stormy waters. We might find ourselves in situations where we get to the brink of desperation when we see how little we can do to put an end to injustice and violence. At these moments, we will need the assurance that God is faithful to God's promises. God will bless us and our witness when we stand firm in the covenant and let nothing move us.