

Drafting Team Report: 18 May

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Questions for the Discernment Session on 17 May 2022 focused on the Address of the President, the Report of the Collegial General Secretariat and the Report of the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG).

Address of the President

The President expresses her hope that the next meeting of the Executive Committee will be in person. She pulls upon the Communion to put our resources together to make this happen. Our coming together will rekindle a strong encounter as a Communion.

a. How can regions and member churches contribute to allow an in-person Executive Committee meeting in 2023?

There was a general recognition and acknowledgement of the inspiring and challenging nature of the President's Address.

Across the four Discernment Groups there was a general consensus that there was undeniable value in meeting face-to-face and that although the use of online platforms had allowed us to meet over the pandemic there was now a *"need to focus on human relationship as one family of God"* and that we had been *"distanced by electronic means."*

In deciding on the format of the 2023 Executive Committee we must not, however, not take heed of concerns expressed regarding:

- the financial expense of such a gathering: We have become accustomed to virtual online platforms, and Zoom is inexpensive. In the context of supporting members to attend, should consider whether pooling resources would allow all participants to attend. Are there regional considerations to be made in supporting members to attend?
- the environmental cost of meeting: Should we not be hearing the concerns of climate change and international travel in the context of our Christian stewardship of creation? One group questioned should there not be a conversation on this Christian duty first, before making any decision on the format of Executive Committee 2023. While technological issues may cause challenges for virtual meetings, are these not easier to solve than mitigating the environmental concerns?
- the travel challenges: These ranged from applying and obtaining visas to resurgences in virus variants. This may also have regional implications.

Recommendation: While the value of face-to-face meetings is undeniable, all groups raised concerns that WCRC Officers were encouraged to consider, analyse, and discuss before making any final decisions. On a more practical basis, offers of potential locations were noted in various groups, and the importance of receiving information on the decision of format as soon as possible was highlighted.

Report of the Collegial General Secretariat

The WCRC is in the process of establishing a Reformed Ecumenical Office in Rome that shall seek ecumenical dialogue and engagement and joint action for peace and justice with ecumenical partners in Rome and present significant Reformed initiatives to the ecumenical world.

- a. Examine the potential of the office for strengthening the relations with the Roman Catholic Church. In which areas shall the two communions collaborate more closely?**
- b. Discuss which WCRC initiatives could gain a stronger global visibility by promoting them during the annual event in Rome.**

There was general commendation of this process and all groups saw opportunities to enhance witness, ecumenical development, and expression of faith. Presence in Rome would advance communication between the communions and this, in turn, could be utilized to advance WCRC priorities and objectives at an ecumenical level. Specific examples relating to ecumenical relationships already active with the Waldensian Church and the Church of Scotland were provided. The concept of organizing once a year a conference by Reformed churches as a way to lead ecumenical work with the Catholic Church was mooted.

Discussions across the groups could be summarized as focusing on two particular aspects:

- doctrinal / theological reflection
- practical actions

The main focus of ecumenical dialogue and engagement from a doctrinal perspective very much centred around the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. A number of groups saw this as a means of catalysing formal dialogue of theological issues and, in particular, discussing in some detail issues of justice. This led to the listing of a number of specific initiatives where an ecumenical approach with the Catholic Church could, possibly, strengthen WCRC activity and promote global visibility. These included: the role of laity, ordination of women, communion, the concept of non-violence, social solidarity, poverty, disability and the whole concept of being created in the image of God, movement of migrants, environmental issues, and Indigenous people.

Report of the Strategic Plan Programme Group

- 1. The SPPG recommends that the learnings of the programme work and the COVID and Beyond process should be harvested and developed to build momentum towards the 2025 General Council.**
 - a. Which are the most important learnings of the work of the WCRC since Leipzig that should receive primary attention in the preparation of the 2025 General Council?**
 - b. Are there important statements (like the faith stance on the ordination of women), ecumenical agreements (like the JDDJ and the Wittenberg Witness), or symbolic acts that you would want to be developed?**

There was a general theme throughout the group reports that even with all its negative aspects the pandemic and the COVID and Beyond process had brought people together, had

ensured contact with one another — a degree of people-centredness — and that it was important that this was not lost as we move forward. This possibly should be one of the main objectives of the General Council in 2025.

Numerous suggestions were made on the development of actions for the General Council. For example:

- Is there scope for liaison with the proposed Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order in 2025, a year that will mark the 1700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea?
- The faith stance of the ordination of women remains a sensitive theme for many WCRC member churches and ignoring this issue at General Council would not be serving the Communion.
- Issues associated with disability and ensuring inclusivity was an area for development.
- The importance of hearing voices from the regions and, in particular, the voices of youth and young people.

A recurring view arising from many groups was that to focus on statements should not be a priority of the 2025 General Council; instead “ecumenism of the heart” should be encouraged as this would go beyond academically, philosophically, and culturally influenced text in order to consider the pragmatic aspect of the life of the church and of Christians.

- 2. The SPPG recommends that the concept of “global apartheid” that had been explored during the COVID and Beyond process should be developed in the contexts of the WCRC response to poverty, marginalization, exclusion due to war, racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism.**
 - a. How would the concept of global apartheid inform the reading of the signs of the time in your context?**
 - b. Which forms of witness would be inspired?**
 - c. What are potential problems that should be considered by using the concept?**

Of all the set of questions this seemed to be the statement and associated question tasks that had caused most lack of understanding, dilemma, and possibly confusion. The term “*global apartheid*” was generally thought not “*to have lots of traction.*” There was a call from the groups that there was a need for a clarification of the Christian concepts associated with the term “*global apartheid*” to be more visually emphasized. As one group summarized, “*the associated and relevant issues of the concept must be tackled but the term – global apartheid – might not be suitable title for this.*” Indeed, one group expressed concern, or at least queried, whether the term itself might prove divisive.

In terms of which forms of witness would be inspired, the areas that appear to have been discussed by the groups ranged from the apartheid that exists against people of differing gender identities, concerns regarding refugees, and contextualizing the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

- 3. The SPPG recommends that the WCRC should develop a new working model that shifts the role of the secretariat from implementing programmes to strategic leadership in networking, coordination, collaboration, and communication.**
 - a. Identify strengths in the work of your church/region that could be utilized in programmes that express the vision and mission of the WCRC.**
 - b. Describe the advantages that the shift to a network model would bring.**
 - c. Name possible dangers that should be considered.**
 - d. What would be the main role of the general secretariat in this new working model?**

Not all groups managed to discuss this question and the final question below. It was noted that there would be time later in the Executive meeting to discuss issues of leadership (on Thursday). Other groups had found their discussion encompassed both this set of questions and the next question in the same consideration.

Specific to questions stated in this section was the view that the Communion is not the global office, but brothers and sisters meeting in chapels and churches all over the world. This creates a challenge for WCRC and all similar organizations. Ministry across borders and regions — as the solidarity visit of the President to Ukraine — is much needed. This means that any activity that can link fraternity and fellowship, such as linking member churches in the UK to Ukraine, for instance as a cited example, is important to transcend any kind of boundary, national, or ethnic divide.

From a sustainability angle, it is important to be questioning the new model in as pragmatic a way as possible. One group highlighted that, as churches in regions are usually active and typically do not need coordination of their (local) activities, the central office should concentrate and work on more global and central issues.

- 4. The SPPG recommends that the WCRC should become more flexible and creative in securing the necessary staff capacity to coordinate its programmatic work.**
 - a. Which staff resources do you see in your church/region that could support the work of the WCRC?**
 - b. How should such staff resources be integrated into the structures of the general secretariat**

There were a number of suggestions as to how staff resources could be used collaboratively across member churches, supporting WCRC activities and initiatives. Some of the examples cited included the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) initiative coordinated by CWM, and various initiatives of the WCC. The Collegial General Secretariat (CGS) has a central role to play in the coordination and development of such networks to strengthen and highlight the work of the WCRC, to develop collaborative reciprocal relationships and ventures — all with the task of making WCRC's actions more impactful.

It was also highlighted that this was not necessarily an issue of physically integrating resources but of developing communication. A suggestion was made that at a local level we should be encouraging churches to ask local church press officers to speak about the WCRC and what is happening at the global level.