

## Report of the General Council Task Group

The Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches that met in May 2021 created a task group to lay the foundations for the next General Council. The task group was to take on the following responsibilities:

- to propose a location for a 2024 General Council.
- to identify sources of income and to present a balanced budget for the General Council.
- to create the conditions for the appointment of the necessary staff resources.
- to propose a theme and suggest a general programme structure.

At the extraordinary Executive Committee meeting in late 2021, the Task Group reported on its progress, and the Executive endorsed the preferred location of the next Council as Thailand (with the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) acting as hosts). The Executive also approved the delay of the Council to 2025, due to the pandemic. It should be noted that 2025 is the 150th anniversary of the WCRC, and this could be factored into the Council.

Finally, the Executive requested that the task group “consider other texts and themes for the General Council in 2025.”

In March 2022, Philip Vinod Peacock (as staff support for the task group) and Hanns Lessing (with his experience as the coordinator of the 2017 General Council) visited Thailand, meeting with CCT leadership, including Executive Committee member Prawate Khid-Arn. They developed a memorandum of understanding between the WCRC and CCT (see appendix A). This agreement will be signed by officials of both the WCRC and CCT during a visit later this month at which possible sites for the Council will be surveyed.

While details on the exact location of the Council are still needed to finalize a budget, it should be noted that the CCT is reliant upon the financial support of other Asian churches to effectively host the Council. Initial discussions with a group of Asian churches showed strong interest in partnering on this. The task group therefore recommends the Executive Committee take the following decision:

- **Asian member churches shall form a consortium that will collectively support the General Council financially, ensuring that the agreed budget is fully covered.**

Taking up the request of the extraordinary Executive Committee meeting on the development of the Council’s theme, members of the Strategic Plan Programme Group (SPPG) were invited to join in this work. The SPPG also considered how programme work could be better oriented toward the next General Council (see their report). The proposed theme and additional texts can be found below. The theme is commended to the Executive Committee for adoption.

With the Task Group’s essential responsibilities nearly complete, the Officers’ Committee has proposed the creation of a General Council Planning Committee to build on these foundations with the following mandate:

The General Council Planning Committee shall be responsible for the planning of the 27th General Council to be held in Thailand in 2025. Responsibilities include working with the WCRC staff to develop a detailed programme, timetable, budget, publications, discernment processes, and symbolic events of the General Council.

The General Council Planning Committee shall work with representatives of the host committee in Thailand on all aspects of the hosting operations, ensuring that the housing and conference facilities are adequate for the General Council.

The General Council Planning Committee shall coordinate with the consortium of Asian churches and WCRC staff to ensure that the General Council budget is balanced.

The General Council Planning Committee shall be composed of the following people:

- Dario Barolin (moderator)
- Najla Kassab
- Prawate Khid-arn
- Nancy Lin
- Veronica Muchiri
- Gerardo Oberman (moderator of the worship committee)
- Victoria Turner
- Karen Georgia Thompson
- Hanns Lessing
- Philip Vinod Peacock
- Phil Tanis

It is recommended that the Executive Committee take the following action:

- **A General Council Planning Committee is established consisting of the members so named and with the mandate noted above.**

An essential component of any successful General Council is worship. It is thus recommended that the Executive Committee take the following action:

- **The Officers' Committee, working with the General Council Planning Committee, is authorized to appoint a General Council Worship Committee to develop the worship services and spiritual aspects of the 2025 General Council.**

## **2025 General Council Theme**

### *Signs of the Times*

The WCRC General Council will take place in 2025 in Thailand. As the road to the 2025 General Council opens before the Reformed fellowship, there are a myriad of challenges and opportunities facing the church, the global ecumenical community and the world. While we have no way to predict where we will be with this global pandemic, the most recent data shows that over 15 million lives have been lost in this health crisis.

The past two years have been defining, with the pandemic being apocalyptic in the Biblical sense, that is to say that it unveils or reveals something. We have been witnesses to how the pandemic has unveiled the deep inequalities that exist in our world. While the pandemic rendered many unemployed and exposed the inadequacy of global health care systems, at the same time a handful of people made obscene amounts of money due to the pandemic. Poverty increased and the gap between the few wealthy and the many poor only widened.

During the pandemic we were also witnesses to increasing racial inequalities and all forms of discrimination; we were witness to how authoritarian regimes used the pandemic to squash dissent and increase surveillance. Furthermore, we are all living through a climate crisis that threatens all life on this planet, with an increasingly shorter time in which we can make amends. The situation of the poor, Indigenous people, women, people living with disabilities, and children worsened with gender-based violence and unemployment fueling homelessness, hunger, and human trafficking.

The wars in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and in other parts of the world have broken hope and expectations of peace. We are witnesses to the cruelty of war, torturing and taking lives. These have further contributed to loss of life and the displacement of people globally. War, famine, climate change, and drought are forcing people from their homes and into unsafe situations. There are currently over 80 million people living as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants trying to find places to live. We are losing faith in humanity as we continue to see the lack of caring for the lives of others and the absence of the love of God given to us.

We have seen the tiredness of people struggling over and over for justice and peace that does not come. We have seen people receiving stones and snakes instead of bread and fish. People have been broken and no longer expect anything better than this. Life of God's creation is at stake if we accept and succumb to this "new normality" of injustice and exploitation.

The General Council will gather in the shadows of these and other challenges, each providing an opportunity for the church to be witness and respond to the needs of the world. It will be important for the theme of the assembly to acknowledge the times and provide hope for those who have witnessed and experienced loss. It will be a time of lament as the whole Communion gathers for the first time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. And it will be important for the theme to provide encouragement for those who are growing weary in the ongoing fight for justice on behalf of communities that continue to live in the margins created by greed, privilege, hierarchy, and dominant cultures.

The proposed General Council theme is "Persevere in Your Witness."

### *Persevere in Your Witness*

*Persevere in your witness* is a prophetic call to the church. This theme offers encouragement to the church, even as it engenders hope for a future yet to be realized, where love and justice will prevail on behalf of all people. Yet this theme also allows us to encapsulate the

pain and brokenness of where we are as a people. It further draws on Palestinian ideas of *somood* which speak of staying firm in the midst of trials.

This call is not new but it has a strong presence in several biblical testimonies:

*Hebrews 12:1*: “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” (NRSV).

The whole epistle to Hebrews is read like a homily. The community to whom this preacher is speaking is under political unrest, even facing persecution. This community, like the members of the WCRC, has been suffering and it seems that this dire situation of suffering is far from being over. Like us in this pandemic, the future is unknown and it is easy to lose sight of faith.

In this context, the homilist affirms that they are not alone and that their ancestors in faith are watching over them as “a cloud of witnesses.” With this comforting assurance, the homilist encourages them to carry on with life with perseverance. The word, “perseverance” in Greek means neither passive nor forced endurance but involves an active resistance in terms of never giving up hope, holding on to the resilience of life and its fullness and its dignity that are claimed by God.

*James 5:11*: “Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (NRSV).

The exhortation to perseverance in James appears in the midst of a context of suffering brought because of their faith. As if the announcement and practice of Jesus' good news had generated a counterculture (4:4) that faces rejection and persecution.

The exhortation is to keep integrity of faith, to practice it (1:22). In 5:7-11, James calls for patience with the certainty that something new will happen, which is like the certainty of the farmer who sows the seed. In this same category we can include the certainty and confidence of the prophets he invites to emulate. On the other hand, James calls not to give up but to persevere.

Patience and perseverance are not a submissive acceptance of suffering but denounce it (notice the mention of Job as an example of it). This is vital because James' letter works on the theme of coherence between what one believes and what one does to avoid falling in hypocrisy (2:12). Practical perseverance affirms us in what we believe and in turn it drives us more strongly to action.

*Luke 21:19*: “By your endurance you will gain your souls” (NRSV).

Jesus is with his disciples at the temple in Jerusalem and they wonder at its magnificence. Then, Jesus starts to announce coming events before the fall of the temple (Luke 21:5-11). In 21:20-24 he announces the fall of the city of Jerusalem. In between those texts, Jesus

reveals events that will happen before the fall of the temple and the city of Jerusalem (21:12-19).

In this short unit Jesus, as a prophet, prepares his disciples for those events. He warns his disciples about political and religious persecution (v. 12), betrayal (v.16), hatred (v. 17) and even death (v.16) because of his name (v.12, v. 17). However, in the midst of such harsh times, Jesus sees a possibility for public witness (v.13). In addition, he ensures the disciples that they will be empowered with wisdom to face those that persecute them (vv.14-15) and that not a hair of their head will perish (v. 18, see 12:7). Finally, Jesus instructs them to persevere.

The events announced in these verses constitute the core of the narrative in the book of Acts. So, what here is a prophecy, they became past events for the reader of Luke-Acts. In this way, the reader can test out the veracity of the prophecy and also has the certainty of what was promised in Acts.

Luke twice uses the word “endure” (*hypomone*): 8:15 (parable of the sower) and in 21:19. This word in the New Testament is connect to a context of persecution (Romans 5:3-4; 8:25; 2 Corinthians 1:6; Col 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; Hebrews 10:36; 12:1; James 1:3-4; Revelation 13:10).

According to The Dictionary of New Testament Theology , “while *hypoméno* is at first ethically neutral, *hypomonéno* becomes a prominent virtue in the sense of courageous endurance. As distinct from patience, it has the active significance of energetic if not necessarily successful resistance” (p. 582).

The task group recommends that the Executive Committee take the following action:

- **The Executive Committee adopts “Persevere in Your Witness” as the theme for the 2025 General Council.**

## Appendix A

**Memorandum of Understanding  
between the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)  
and the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)  
on Hosting the WCRC's 27<sup>th</sup> General Council in 2025**

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### **1. Basic Information on the General Council:**

#### **1.1 Time:**

- 1) The 27<sup>th</sup> General Council will take place in 2025 at a date advised by the CCT (the final dates shall be determined during the WCRC's technical visit to the conference locations in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2022).
- 2) The General Council shall be in session for 8-9 days and is preceded by pre-councils for women and youth (2-3 days) and the Global Institute of Theology (14 days).

#### **1.2 Location:**

- 1) The General Council will take place in Chiang Mai, where the CCT has several congregations and operates the Payap University and other institutions.

#### **1.3 Participants:**

- 1) Some 500-600 people are expected to attend
- 2) The total is composed of 350-400 delegates and some 200 stewards, staff, consultants, and GIT students. Usually, the General Council also welcomes visitors.

#### **1.4 Finances:**

- 1) The expenses of the General Council shall be raised by the WCRC (General Council reserve) and the consortium of hosting churches in Asia (Presbyterian Church in Korea (PCK), Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (ROK), Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT), Presbyterian Church in Singapore (PCS), Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China (HKCCCC), and others).
- 2) The budget of the General Council is currently in preparation.
- 3) Once the budget is set, discussions with consortium members and the WCRC will settle on specific financial contributions.

#### **1.5 Planning:**

- 1) General Council planning shall be overseen by the General Council Planning Committee (to be appointed by the Executive Committee in May 2022).
- 2) Programme planning shall be coordinated by the general secretariat in Hannover and the General Council Coordinator (GCC), who will be based in Asia.
- 3) The GCC shall be supported by a local host committee that shall prepare the local activities in Chiang Mai.

#### **1.6 Logistics:**

- 1) Logistics (registration, visa, travel, accommodation etc.) shall be coordinated by the General Council Coordinator in collaboration with the general secretariat in Hannover and the local group of logistical volunteers (to be convened by the GCC).

## 2. Agreement

This MoU comprises the basic framework of the commitments of the CCT and WCRC in the planning and realization of the 27<sup>th</sup> General Council in Chang Mai. Details shall be discussed and agreed upon in the process.

### 2.1 Commitments of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)

#### 2.1.1 Time:

- 1) The CCT suggests a suitable time for the 27<sup>th</sup> General Council in 2025.

#### 2.1.2 Location and venues:

- 1) The CCT offers facilities in Chiang Mai (congregations, institutions, Payap University) to be used for the General Council, the pre council and the Global Institute of Theology. The details of management and expenditure budgets will be discussed further.
- 2) The CCT uses its local contacts to negotiate the best possible deal with local hotels (if needed for the General Council).

#### 2.1.3 Finances:

- 1) As part of the consortium of hosting churches in Asia, the CCT pledges contributions to the General Council budget (the amounts shall be discussed in the consortium).

#### 2.1.4 Planning:

- 1) The CCT supports the search for a General Council Coordinator and offers office space at no charge during the twelve months before General Council.
- 2) The CCT, in cooperation with the general secretariat and the consortium of hosting churches, convenes a local host committee to plan local events (special worship services, exposure programme, programmes to introduce the churches in the region and the CCT).

#### 2.1.5 Logistics:

- 1) The CCT uses its contacts with the government of Thailand to secure visas for all General Council participants and acquires other forms of government support.
- 2) The CCT, in cooperation with the general secretariat, convenes a local group of logistical volunteers to assist in registration, visa, travel, accommodation management, etc.

### 2.2 Commitments of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)

The World Communion of Reformed Churches agrees to take up the following commitments:

#### 2.2.1 Venues:

- 1) The WCRC conducts a technical visit to Chiang Mai to examine possible venues, accommodations, and other facilities for the different activities of the General Council. After this visit, the technical team and CCT leadership take the necessary decisions on dates, venues and other critical technical matters.

#### 2.2.2 Finances:

- 1) The WCRC contributes funds from the General Council reserve and approaches its member churches to raise the funds that cannot be solicited by the consortium of hosting churches in Asia.

#### 2.2.3 Planning:

- 1) The Executive Committee appoints a General Council Planning Committee that oversees the preparation and realization of the General Council.
- 2) The WCRC conducts a search process for a General Council Coordinator (GCC) who is based in Asia, in the twelve months before the council, preferably in Chiang Mai.
- 3) In cooperation with the GCC, the general secretariat appoints and accompanies a General Council Worship Committee and planning committees for the business sessions of the General Council.

#### 2.2.4 Logistics:

- 1) The general secretariat and the local logistical volunteers cooperate in registration, visa, travel, accommodation management etc.

### 2.3 Implementation and Monitoring

General Council planning is a continuing process that requires careful monitoring and frequent adaptation to changing circumstances. Therefore, to allow adequate responses to potential challenges, the different stakeholders convene the General Council Implementation and Monitoring Committee (GCIMC):

#### 2.3.1 Composition:

- 1) WCRC general secretariat and CCT each appoint a representative who, together with the General Council Coordinator, the Moderator of the General Council Planning Committee, and the convener of the consortium of hosting churches in Asia, form the General Council Implementation and Monitoring Committee.

#### 2.3.2 Task:

- 1) The GCIMC will meet regularly to monitor the state of General Council Planning and take decisions within the mandates of the General Council Planning Committee.

### 2.4 List of Committees

The following bodies shall work at planning and realizing the 2025 General Council:

- 2.4.1 General Council Planning Committee (appointed by the WCRC Executive Committee);
- 2.4.2 Consortium of Hosting Churches in Asia;
- 2.4.3 Local Host Committee (appointed by the CCT and its hosting partners in Asia)
- 2.4.4 General Council Implementation and Monitoring Committee (GCIMC);
- 2.4.5 General Council Worship Committee;
- 2.4.6 planning committees for the business sessions of the General Council;
- 2.4.7 group of logistical volunteers.

[To be signed by officials of both WCRC and CCT.]