

Address of the President

from Najla Kassab

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground, and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety (Hosea 2:18).

We thank God for the opportunity to meet again in person for the first time since 2019, after four years of separation due to the COVID pandemic and the distancing that pushed us to a new reality, impacted the lives of our churches, and posed new questions and concerns. The COVID pandemic changed individuals, institutions, and churches. Although the pandemic is weaker today, we are still trying to handle its aftermath. We are left with many concerns about how to retain our strength and function with integrity. This pandemic created fear, fragmentation, fragility, and insecurity about the future.

We meet today as suffering and injustice prevail around the world, and peace initiatives do not succeed. The situation in the Middle East remains critical, especially after the escalation between Israeli forces and militants in the Gaza Strip, the war in Sudan, violence in Pakistan and Haiti, and the continued struggle for peace in the Korean Peninsula. Or the continual threat to Taiwan and many other troubled areas that leads to more injustice and indignity for the people. We observe today that new allies and powers are coming together for political and economic agendas. The world is in a waiting mood to see how the new order will affect simple countries.

Just after believing that wars were restricted to some areas of the world, we were surprised by the war in Ukraine that has affected Europe and the world. The war in Ukraine has led to more refugees, and just as we were striving to face the issues of refugees around the world, we have new floods of refugees from Europe and in Europe. The injustice of war has kept into many lives and families, and the fear in the eyes of the children that we have seen for so long in the eyes of children in the Middle East, Sudan, and Korea has affected the children of Ukraine. The difficulty is that no one knows how long that could be, but more death, pain, and injustice are affecting the people, and in the end, simple people are the ones who pay the price.

Besides war, economic injustice is another tough reality that the world is facing today. Poverty and inequality are serious concerns that threaten several countries around the world. The fuel issue pushed many to a new lifestyle, and people are concerned about tomorrow. Not to forget climate change and the impact that it has on the daily lives of many and threatens their well-being.

We meet today under the theme, "Covenanting in God's Mission" based on Hosea 2:18: *"I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground, and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety."*

The theme that we gather around is a theme that speaks about a covenant that God has made with his people, and it is encouraging to see that the covenant with God is spelled out clearly in the lives of the people here on earth. It speaks about change where the bow, the sword, and war will be stopped, where safety is lived, and God's promise is that tomorrow we will have a better stand.

The text speaks about commitment, not for a short time but rather a commitment that God, who covenanted with his people, promises us a better tomorrow and will bring safety, justice, and shalom for all. This encourages us to be in covenant with all who are suffering, face poverty, and struggle to live with dignity. It is easy to stand with people for a short time, but to be committed to their struggle and be in covenant with them, is a different story. To journey with them till dignity for all is lived. As a communion, we have committed ourselves to covenant with all who face injustice, and I believe in this spirit of covenanting. We meet in South Africa as we affirm that we come back to hold our Executive Committee meeting, to check on issues of injustice that the people and the Church continue to face, and say that we will be in covenant with you till the dignity for all is lived. For the well-being of the people, shalom is a lived reality.

The theme shows spirituality that works toward fulfilling change, where our commitments move us to action. Unless our spirituality meets the struggle of the people in their daily lives, in their pain, we become a poetic communion where we talk and express ourselves in nice words, but we do not help people move towards lived justice. This is why worship and justice are inherently combined and help us see that the purpose of elevating God, manifested through worship, praise, and reverent prayer, is to ultimately elevate the commandments of God, which will shape every area of life.

In the prophets' worldview, to worship the God of Israel is to worship the God who rescued poor slaves out of Egypt, brought them out of their misery, and gave them abundance. If we worship a God whose fundamental nature is to pay attention to the poor and oppressed, then that's the kind of society that will result—a society that reflects a God who takes care of the poor. On the flip side, if we turn our backs on that kind of God, then the poor will be abused and neglected.

Then to be in covenant with the poor is to combine mission and advocacy together as central to our commitment on our journey towards justice, and we place justice for the vulnerable, dispossessed, and excluded at the center of our work, as the Accra Confession calls us in Article 19 in an invitation "to covenant with people and the earth for peace and security" (Hosea 2:18).

Today, we are challenged by the youth in our churches, to be relevant to their struggles and concerns. Despite their faith commitment, they question what the church is providing to them in their daily struggle. Being the church in the public sphere is a challenge that we are called to face. Focusing on advocacy work is one step forward in stepping into the public sphere with integrity in how we understand our identity; how we live our faith; and how we can be an impactful communion that trusts God, who could use us for the good of all, including nature and all creation.

We meet today to celebrate God's goodness as we survived the continuous challenges that COVID posed to us. Being a Communion where people could not meet and no one could travel was a great risk for the life of the communion. When communion is about coming together, the COVID pandemic was a force of separation and discouragement for many.

The financial challenges that the churches faced due to COVID have impacted the financial status of the Communion in terms of contributions to the core budget that supports salaries for staff. This led to the Communion's inability to provide the needed salary for a general secretary.

We thank God for the faithful staff who did all they could to keep the Communion functioning and worked as the Collegial General Secretariat, taking on the responsibility of the general secretary. This model of leadership has helped the Communion face the challenge of leading the Communion in the absence of a general secretary, empowered the program work at the Communion, and created a collegial spirit of sharing responsibilities. Still, this model has been an arrangement to meet the arising situation, and the Communion is in the process of discerning how to move forward and how to meet the post-COVID time. "The Committee" has done valued work in dealing with key issues in the life of the Communion, including evaluating the leadership model that will help us discern how we will move forward in leading the Communion to the 2025 General Council.

Despite all the challenges faced, we see that the Communion is alive in its programs, where there is great cooperation with other partners and valued financial commitment for the program work. This reflects the trust that we have built regarding handling the program's work. These efforts did bear fruit in having two new positions in the global office, led by two women: an Executive Secretary for Mission and Advocacy and a Program Coordinator for Gender Justice. Also, a third new staff person will be stationed in Rome in the Reformed Eccumenical Office to enhance ecumenical work. All these developments were supported by partners, and we hope that this will strengthen and deepen our justice work.

Financial stability remains a main concern that we need to pay attention to. Before COVID, the contribution of member churches started to improve, and moving towards "just" contributions from different churches and regions showed a healthy development. But during COVID time, churches faced financial challenges that affected their contribution to the core budget, which provides salaries for staff. The financial commitment of member churches is essential to securing the work of the Communion. The number of staff is already limited when compared to the amount of work and programs. Thus, as Executive Committee members, we are challenged to rekindle the spirit of "financial responsibility and commitment" of our churches towards the Communion. "Paying membership fees is a strong statement of belonging to and empowerment for the Communion." It is a covenant relationship in the good and difficult times that we claimed when we joined the Communion. I know that holding the Executive Committee in person has been a strong challenge to continue the journey of our work as an Executive Committee, and we appreciate all those who tried to secure the cost of their travel, besides the hosting church in South Africa, in order to secure a healthy communion. It is an important time

that Executive members of the WCRC have an important role in encouraging churches in their regions to express their belonging to the Communion through their financial contribution. If we need to secure the future of our work, we need to have the right human capacity needed in order to have fruitful and organized work. Our staff now have around 150 percent load, and this is an unjust situation for them and all those who serve our communion.

The relationship between the global office and the regions is key to a healthy Communion. As a Communion, we are blessed and enriched by the ministry and witness of the churches in the regions. We are a Communion that is rich with great human resources in the regions. To encourage the work in the regions is at the heart of a strong Communion. The strength of the Communion is not centered in the global office, despite the capable staff who are fully committed to the work of the Communion; still, empowering the work in the regions goes side by side with the work on the global level of the Communion. Cooperation between the global and regional levels is growing stronger, but we are challenged to have a regular rhythm of meetings to create better harmony and hold each other accountable for sharing our human and financial resources for the well-being of the Communion. We are now in the process of preparing for the General Council, and we hope that this will be a time of walking closely with the regions to secure all resources needed to have a successful assembly. Our commitment to the Communion urges us to share all that God has provided to us in service of ministry, justice, and a better world. In this spirit, we come together to share our gifts and blessings of God with all.

Leading the Communion together: We meet today as a committee that leads the work of the Communion after we have passed a crisis. I believe our understanding of our leadership is key to a better tomorrow as a Communion. Crisis brings leadership attributes, and I am happy to share one quote about leadership that says, "**Leaders absorb chaos, radiate calm, and inspire hope.**" The author is unknown, but it describes the trait of leader behavior during times of crisis. The COVID crisis is one that has impacted us all. We are called to be courageous leaders who provide hope to one another and try together to openly inspire hope. As the CGS uses the term "the communion is alive," it is alive because we could come together, we could pass the more difficult days, but because we trust that this is a *kairos* time; God's time where God could use us.

Lately, I was introduced to Kintsugi, an ancient Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by bonding areas of breakage with lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum powder. The philosophy of this art is that breakage and repair are seen as part of history and not as defects that should be hidden. The art focuses on brokenness and beautifies it, giving it a new look that is even more beautiful than before. As a Communion, we have been through brokenness, but the Lord provided the strength to come together in a new pottery that is even stronger and more beautiful. Today we meet in South Africa, where brokenness stories have affected many on the streets of this country, but this is a place that assures that pain will not have the last word. God is still at work. The pottery is in a shaping process where we learn not to hide the brokenness but are moved to a different experience and level.

I know the cross in the middle of our faith is like the kintsugi art where pain and brokenness are part of our history but do not have the last word; the resurrection changes our pain and moves us to a different reality with a new pottery in the midst of brokenness.

Brokenness will not have the last word; our challenges will direct us to a better reality that is even more beautiful. We will not hide the pain but rather work together to create a new reality. This new reality is made real by the work of the Communion on the local and global levels. How can we work together in a trusting relationship that will allow us to be enriched and live in a communal spirit that inspires hope?

Finally, I take this opportunity to thank the officers, especially those who were committed to the difficult journey and did not give up but held firm to the covenant. They are committed to the Communion and have not given up but have been and continue to be ready to meet at any time to work for the Communion. I would like to thank the CGS and the staff who worked full heartedly to secure continuity in moving forward as a communion.

I would like to close with these words from the scriptures:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:8–10).