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Live out our faith as witnesses to the grace of God

Léonard Tegwende Kinda

In June 2010 the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) will unite to form one body, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) Certain key considerations on both sides have led to the setting up of the one organisation: the desirability of being organised and becoming one family and to maintain one identity in the setting of world communions and religious communities.

Increasingly, the present situation has led us to a greater realism, to an ecumenism that includes the *oikoumene*, an openness to the whole inhabited earth, based on the historic confessions of faith and on a recognition of the cultural values of the churches both near and far. The churches have visions and cultures that differ to a greater or lesser extent, and their life, mission and witness are the foundation of the organisation. That willingness to respect local expressions of the faith is also favourable to ecclesiological diversity.

What sort of Reformed communion?

During the African theological consultation, participants reflected on the shape of the new Communion to come.¹ We prayed, studied the Word, meditated, studied the history of the two organisations, and our vocation 'to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3).

Through reviewing the history of the two world organisations with the help of a presentation by the WARC Executive Secretary for Theology, and drawing on the experience of other communions, participants examined the concepts of synod, council, and alliance (or covenant) to gain insights into the concept of communion. In effect, communion is an inevitable development from the history and activities of the two organisations. It is communion that unites us through our faith in Christ, baptism and eucharist (1 Cor 10.16-17).

¹ The African theological consultation, the fifth in a series of eight, brought together leaders of WARC and REC member churches in Africa, delegates to the 2010 General Council, the WARC General Secretary, and the WARC Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Engagement, who had also been REC President.

According to the WCC Canberra Assembly, the unity of the church to which we are called “is envisaged as a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God’s grace to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”² The WARC Executive Committee in Trinidad in 2007 defined communion as “an expression of our being together in the body of Christ as we move towards that oneness which is the gift and calling of God, fully expressed in the Trinity. Our desire to enter into communion signifies the commitment of our churches, in the richness of our diversity, to mutual caring, respect and service of one another, as witness to our common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.”³ That statement follows the line of the work initiated by WARC and REC

The participants endeavoured to discern God’s will by Bible study on Ephesians 4. That chapter contains in itself the whole message of the letter to the Ephesians: the church’s calling as the body of Christ and its mission in society. The one body of Christ includes a diversity of members who have answered the Master’s call (Eph 4.2), who are brought together to reflect their unity through faith in the Holy Trinity, as proclaimed in Scripture and received in baptism. The members of the body of Christ must “live a life worthy of the calling” that they have received (Eph 4.1). They must “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4.3). They are called to live a new life of holiness and love (Eph 4.20-32).

In the light of the gospel, participants all agreed on the need to move forward towards the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). As we saw it, the WCRC represents an already existing unity, but one, however, that is still to be achieved eschatologically and accomplished by Christ.

Although we were agreed on the need to move forward towards communion, some basic questions remain:

- How is it possible to reconcile the independence of each member church with the values and responsibilities of members of a communion where the members should make a common confession, owe one another mutual respect and mutual accountability, and are committed to work in solidarity for justice?

² Michael Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit* (Geneva: WCC and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p.250.

³ World Alliance of Reformed Churches consultation on communion and justice, August 2009.

- Are we to establish a Reformed world communion or a world communion of Reformed churches?
- What will be our approach to table and pulpit fellowship?
- What should be our response when a member of the communion has principles and practices that are out of step with the convictions of other members of the communion?⁴
- How can the communion hold together its two characteristics of being both confessional and ecumenical?
- What will be the mission of the new communion?

It is only possible at this stage to give tentative answers to those questions. They will have to be discussed at the level of local communities in order to provide maximum information to delegates to the Uniting General Council.

While not anticipating those responses, we agree with Douwe Visser that “being a communion should also be an ongoing process of reflection what it means to be a communion.”⁵

Communion and commitment to justice

In the Bible we frequently find passages in which God is calling Abraham’s descendants to be just, righteous, defenders of widows and orphans and to welcome and protect foreigners. “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” (Prov 21.3).

Justice is an extremely difficult concept to define. It is applied in a given context taking account of social peace and value systems and standards. To make a just judgement involves an assessment of the situation by someone who is wise in order to maintain a certain balance - peace - in a given setting. The parables of the workers hired at different times (Matt 20.1-15) and of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32) are good illustrations. Each of those parables presents an individual who makes decisions that affect two other individuals, one whom the justice of the decision benefits and the other who feels wronged by it.

As a communion of Reformed churches, “We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9.8-12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalised are preferential partners,

⁴ The position of certain churches on apartheid, the ordination of women and of differently abled people are illustrations of this.

⁵ Douwe Visser, *Moving towards Communion: the World Communion of Reformed Churches*.

and calls us to put justice for the “least of these” (Matt 25.40) at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2.18-23).⁶

The Accra consultation participants were given an overview of the present world situation: in fact, a powerful threat, produced by men and women who have chosen Mammon, hangs over God’s creation. There is the economic chaos, the shock waves of which struck in September 2008, and which have resulted in job losses, divorce, people abandoning children and parents, and suicides. There is the nuclear threat posed by certain states against defenceless populations. There are the consequences of global warming on fragile and powerless populations who are themselves unable to ensure that they will survive.

In our review we acknowledged the historic commitment of the Reformed churches. In fact, each church in its own context is witnessing to the gospel by its commitment in various spiritual areas, development, promotion of human rights and freedoms, economic justice and justice towards the created world. The celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin, the pillar of the Genevan Reformation, has reminded us of the contribution made by the Reformation to social and economic justice in Geneva, in Europe and throughout the world.

This commitment is also evident at world level. WARC and REC member churches, inspired by Christ and the 16th century reformers, have risen up against injustices that have appeared from time to time in one part of the world or another. Particularly noteworthy has been the commitment against apartheid, the commitment against the nuclear arms race and the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, and the commitment against war and economic injustice.⁷

However, while injustice reigns in the world, it is no less present in the churches and their institutions. We can see injustice in admission to the ministry, in the treatment given to church staff as regards appointments to leadership positions (in the case of women, young people, minority ethnic groups, differently abled people, etc.).

The member churches are thus invited to remove the beam that is in their own eyes (Matt 7.5).

The member churches have recognised the need to be more committed to justice. However, some basic questions remain:

- What is justice? Is it enough simply to condemn injustice, or should counter-proposals be offered?

⁶ WARC, *Proceedings of the 24th General Council*, p.157, ‘The Accra Confession’, section 20.

⁷ Cf. the statements from Kitwe 1995, Debrecen 1997 and Accra 2004.

- What sort of theology and public witness is appropriate?
- How can we provide members and communities with resources to act in the field of justice?
- How is justice embodied in local contexts?
- What impact does unity in mission have on justice issues?
- Do we practise what we preach?

We are looking to the delegates to the Uniting General Council to produce answers to those questions.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is a gift from God. As a communion of faith we are called to live out our faith, inwardly and outwardly, as witnesses to the grace of God, who has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that we are messengers of the God of love, peace and justice. We humbly acknowledge that at certain times we have been unintentional and complicit agents and passive witnesses of injustice against the creation. Whatever the origin of that injustice, we all suffer from it. United in our faith in Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we receive with hope our Lord's words, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt 5.6).

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