

Christian unity and ecumenical engagement

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Brief description of the theme

Celebrating our communion visible in the World Communion of Reformed Churches can be seen as a very important step in the history of Reformed churches worldwide. It is an essential sign of having overcome division. It shows the “Unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”. It affirms the long commitment of Reformed theologians and church leaders, women and men who have so inspired the ecumenical movement throughout the world. It strengthens Reformed Christians worldwide in their desire for unity among the churches. It is important to underline that unity does not mean “uniformity”. Unity is often and can be lived out in reconciled diversity.

We feel encouraged by reactions within the worldwide ecumenical movement that see the birth of WCRC as a clear sign of visible Reformed unity that can only further strengthen the Reformed commitment to Christian unity. It is inspirational for the whole of the ecumenical movement. Therefore we can affirm that the creation of WCRC is an intermediary step. It is part of a process that is at the heart of our ecumenical engagement wherein we work for the goal of a true full communion of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The basis for church unity and ecumenical engagement has both a biblical and a theological foundation. Foundational scriptural references include:

“I ask you Father... that they may all be one.” (*John 17.21*)

“Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (*Ephesians 4.3*)

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (*Psalms 133.1*)

Concerning the tradition of Reformed theology it is important to refer to John Calvin who wrote to Archbishop Cranmer that he would with pleasure cross ten seas to accomplish the objective of the unity of the church.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) has over the years been deeply involved in inter-confessional dialogues, the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) less so. Founded in 1946, its name was originally Reformed Ecumenical *Synod*. The use of the word “synod” was based on the idea, in the tradition of the member

churches of RES, of a worldwide Reformed Church based on the same Reformed confession and having a worldwide synod. So “ecumenical” hardly meant openness to churches not of the same confessional standard but rather, “worldwide”, with the idea of having one church which would also act as a barrier against any unorthodox ecumenism as perceived within the World Council of Churches.

After 1988 the name of the RES was changed to Reformed Ecumenical *Council*. The idea of becoming a worldwide church was left behind and even the often rigid confessional standard did not seem to work. In a situation of constant tension churches had left or were put to the test. Still, this history of REC demonstrates the tension between the desire for church unity and the desire for confessional truth that goes with ecumenical engagement. “Confessional” is understood here very widely: from the historic Reformed confessions to the Accra Confession.

Analysis of some of the issues

Relevance of the Ecumenical Dialogues

Within the Reformed community there is some criticism on the whole process of inter-confessional dialogues. Comments come mainly, but not only, from the global South that we are wasting our time with 16th century discussions. We are not focusing on today’s problems. Interfaith matters are far more pressing than inter-confessional disagreements. Within WARC and REC it is clear that the focus on matters of economic and ecological justice has become a very important factor. Theological concentration is for a substantial part also focused on these issues of justice. In light of this some see the dialogue process as obsolete. Therefore the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) should seek room to ask the relevant questions that churches struggle with in their context. There is after all the risk that an inter-confessional dialogue becomes a goal on its own.

It is important to take very seriously comments on the relevance of ecumenical dialogues. An outcome could be that WCRC will no longer participate in these dialogues. There are however some good reasons to stay involved:

- As has been said above, becoming a Communion of Reformed Churches is a process of church unity that is being regarded as an intermediary step.

- Involvement in ecumenical dialogues is a self-critical process with a growing awareness of what Reformed identity means.
- The above-mentioned tension between the desire for unity and the desire for truth has a creative impact.
- Involvement in dialogues has positive consequences for developing contextual theological understanding.
- WCRC's commitment to justice asks for sharing and cooperation with the wider community of churches.
- The global situation requires global and ecumenical Christian understanding.

It goes without saying that in the composition of dialogue teams and the choice of themes for discussion every effort should be made to strengthen "ownership" in a real global sense.

Reception of Dialogues

Notwithstanding what has been said above, it could be worth considering the idea of focusing more in the coming years on the reception of the results of the dialogues on a local and regional level. The dialogues have gone on for quite a few decades and have resulted in many agreements. These results however are often in a sort of global vacuum. Member churches have often not seen much of a change within their context of living together. That may be a reason why there is a critical approach towards the continuation of the dialogues. On the other hand it is also true that many feel dialogues to be at a standstill. The same subjects are being discussed yet not many great steps forward are being made. In view of this an idea might be to organise local or regional dialogue consultations that work as a reception process for harvesting the results. WCRC's regional councils could be very much involved in the set-up of these consultations.

The understanding of the Church

It is important within ecumenical dialogues to be aware of the ecclesiological basis of a Reformed Church and also of a Communion of Reformed Churches. This starts from what Calvin saw as the true marks of the church. The church is there where the Word of God is preached and heard *and* where the sacraments are being rightly ad-

ministered. Out of this emerges the church. In this respect it answers fully the questions of where is the church and what is the church. WCRC is based on this ecclesiological principle and shares the true marks of the church. This is the fundamental principle for what is being stated in article III of the Constitution of WCRC: “the gifts of unity in Christ are being affirmed through the mutual recognition of baptism and membership, pulpit and table fellowship, ministry and witness.” Clarity about this is precisely the reason why in the ecumenical world there is such encouragement for the birth of WCRC.

The ecumenical dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches have very much contributed to further self-understanding of being the church. For the ongoing process of ecumenical engagement it is now required to strengthen within the Reformed community the sense of being a Communion and how we truly work that out as stated in the WCRC Constitution.

Episkope

In February 2010 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity invited four dialogue partners – Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans and Methodists – for a symposium about the “fruits” of forty years of dialogue. The Reformed felt themselves to be a bit special in the group, not least because, except for a few, unlike the other three partners Reformed Churches have no bishops. This would not be so relevant if ecumenical dialogue has not in practice become more and more a question of bishops talking to bishops. This is not only a “format” for talking to each other. It also means a change in themes for discussion in the inter-confessional dialogues. They have become more “bishop” related. This is a challenge for the Reformed family to think about the aspect of “episkope” as in relation to Reformed understanding and tradition. Relevant questions are:

- Is there any sense of binding teaching authority within a Reformed Church or within the Communion of Reformed churches?
- What is the relation between ordained and non-ordained leadership within the church and the communion of churches?
- What is the relation between personal episkope and collegial episkope (presbytery, synod)?

- In what sense is the service of episcopate within Reformed churches a service of the Word for the unity of the church?

It goes without saying that these questions are relevant for ecumenical relations but also for the self-understanding of a Reformed Church and the Communion of Reformed Churches.

Justification and Justice

WCRC will try to be fully obedient to the call to justice. It is important to be aware of this also on the level of ecumenical engagement of the Communion. It is also important to show time and again that this obedience is fully embedded in the theological understanding of our biblical and confessional foundation. In Jesus Christ God has justified us. God who is justice sanctifies us and calls us to do justice. In the commitment to justice we are being called to act faithfully with what God has entrusted to us. Working for justice we see the world through the prism of God's grace making manifest God's love. Covenanting for justice is being part of God's work in the whole creation. Therefore we can only see that serious considerations of communion go hand in hand with a commitment to an in-depth engagement with justice. Both WARC and REC have become aware of this in the history of the organisations. The call for justice requires a commitment to listen deeply to those who suffer and to act in solidarity with them, even when it is costly to us. In responding to this call we experience God's gift of communion to us. This gift is very clearly represented in the act of Holy Communion because it reminds us that our communion is initiated by God who sustains and transforms us in a reconciling fellowship, which itself flows from the triune life of God.

The theme proposed for a new round of Catholic-Reformed dialogue has precisely been developed against this background. The theme proposal is: "Justification and Sacramentality – Christian communities as agents for justice". Within the framework of this theme it can be asked whether there is still a possibility for Reformed affiliation to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, on the basis of the above-mentioned theological foundation of the commitment to justice.

A selective overview of work done

Lutheran – Reformed

Only WARC was involved in the meetings of the Lutheran–Reformed Joint Commission. After the General Council in 2004 this Commission met four times: Utrecht (2006), Windhoek (2007), Buenos Aires (2008) and Bratislava (2010). The theme was: “Communion – On being the Church.” At the last meeting in Bratislava a report came out. This report is one of the documents for the Uniting General Council.

Catholic – Reformed

REC was not involved in the Catholic–Reformed Dialogue. Only WARC was a partner in that. In 2006 the final report was published on the dialogue in the period 1998–2004. The theme was: “The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God”. Reactions have been received on this report. A special edition of *Reformed World* (57/2&3) was dedicated to the report of this third phase.

In December 2009 there were discussions for a theme for a round of dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and WCRC. The theme proposal is: “Justification and Sacramentality – Christian communities as agents for justice”. In light of this theme (as mentioned above) it has been asked again whether WCRC can become affiliated to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justice.

In February 2010 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity organised a symposium “Harvesting the Fruits”, looking at the results of forty years of dialogue with the Lutherans, the Reformed, the Anglicans and the Methodists. WARC was there with a delegation of five.

Pentecostal – Reformed

In the Pentecostal–Reformed dialogue both REC and WARC have a presence. The present round of dialogue started in 2002 with the theme: “Experience in Christian Faith and Life”. Meetings were held between 2002–2008 (with the exception of WARC’s General Council year 2004). A final consultation still has to be organised before writing a report.

Orthodox – Reformed

The dialogue with the Orthodox Church was with WARC only. The general themes of this dialogue, officially started in 1988, follow the articles of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and are approached in the light of the teachings of the Fathers of the Church as well as the historic Confessions of the Reformed Churches.

Since 2004 there have been two meetings. In 2005 the theme was: “The Catholicity and Mission of the Church”. The second meeting was in 2007. The theme of this meeting was eschatology in accordance with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “... I wait the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come”. Since then this dialogue is at a standstill and it can be asked whether and how to continue with it.

Prague Consultations

In 2009 WARC published: “Prophetic and Renewal Movements, Proceedings of the VI and VII Prague Consultations”. The Prague Consultations offered for the first time a platform for voices from the First and Radical Reformation traditions to be heard within the symphony of ecumenical conversation. It resulted in an enriched vision of Christian unity, expressed in academic reflection, shared testimonies from separate histories, spiritual fellowship and deepened friendship.

Assembly Discernment Committee

Through the Executive Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Engagement WARC was involved in two WCC meetings about the Assembly Discernment process. An objective of this process is to have in future a more expanded ecumenical gathering. WARC pleaded for courageous steps to be taken and that in future we have a global ecumenical gathering of churches in a very broad sense (including, for example, Pentecostals). A Christian World Communion like WCRC needs to have a strong commitment for this.

Questions to be discussed

- Should WCRC continue with the dialogues or is it better to go for a process as mentioned above under reception?
- How can there be for the Communion a dynamic interaction between being aware of Reformed identity and the need for ecumenical engagement?
- Given the fact of limited financial and personnel resources, what part of the Christian world should the World Communion of Reformed Churches concentrate on?

