

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT OF REC

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Reflections on the Journey to Communion

This feels like an auspicious moment in the history of ecumenical relations. Just yesterday we voted to redirect the river of relationships within the global Reformed and Presbyterian family – and now today we close the book on two organizational entities that together have ministered for a combined total of more than 200 years. We must not pass by this moment too quickly. There is a lot of history associated with both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) – a history filled with evidence of commitment and good will – blessing and testing – stories of leaders, general secretaries, long and difficult meetings, conflicts and resolutions, debates and controversies – and in and through it all – evidence of God’s faithfulness to his people as they lived life and walked the ecumenical journey together.

In recounting some of that history I need to focus on REC since it was formed in 1946. Oh, how different times were then. Some might think that those were golden years and like the people of old some long “for the fleshpots of Egypt”. REC had its beginning in the ferment of ecumenical formation. Yes, it brought a small group of confessional Reformed churches into a unifying organization – but if we are fully honest about that period – such formation was also a way of differentiation – of drawing boundaries – of setting ourselves apart “from those other – more liberal – more free thinking – and maybe less confessional” churches that also considered themselves to be part of the Reformed and Presbyterian family. The early years of REC’s existence were based on the premise that unity and uniformity were high values – and the confessional-integrity requirement (as judged by the collective membership of REC) was the cornerstone of credibility.

For many years REC functioned in the model of a synod – holding discussion – defining positions – establishing theological boundaries – offering advice to the member churches. In more recent history the organizational model was altered from a synod to a council but its functioning remained essentially unchanged. As history has recorded, REC faced some significant challenges during its years of existence. It experienced the same challenges as did the other ecumenical organizations (e.g. the World Council of Churches (WCC) and WARC) in that the environment within which ecumenical relations were practiced was rapidly changing. The changes we can observe today took the better part of 50 years to emerge. Such changes will continue – and more challenges lie ahead – but we do have the benefit of lessons learned from mistakes made – new insights gained – and the blessings of fellowship received.

Perhaps the two most significant issues that the REC has faced – and which have impacted its direction – deserve further comment. The first dealt with the right of an ecumenical organization to demand theological compliance from its member denominations. While this is neither the time nor the place to consider the all of the details of that discussion, it was the position taken by the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN), a founding member of REC and now part of the union that formed the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), that caused REC to re-examine its basic assumptions about what it means to be an ecumenical organization. The GKN objected to the authoritarian ecumenical model and in doing so helped REC to change its manner of functioning from a (presumed) authority of a synod to an ecumenical council. This self-examination allowed REC to continue with broader boundaries and greater tolerance for the diversity of perspectives

within and among its membership. Internal to REC, this was perhaps the first step toward what we are now calling a communion.

The second significant issue is related to the way REC responded to the Apartheid discussion of the 1980s and beyond. It should be noted that REC – along with other ecumenical organizations including WARC – declared the biblical and/or confessional defence of apartheid to be a “theological heresy” and considered the rejection of “the forced separation of people on the basis of race” to be a matter of confessional integrity. Appropriate action was taken to call the South African Reformed members of REC to repudiate the theology that supported apartheid practice. REC’s actions were consistent with the positions taken by other ecumenical bodies. All of that discussion and action is part of the official record. But then there is more.

One South African denomination – a church under suspension by WARC because it has not officially rejected the theological defence of apartheid – applied for membership in REC in 2005. REC was assured that an action by the applicant’s synod to meet the conditions stated by WARC was forthcoming. The 2005 general assembly of REC approved the admission of this church into membership with the understanding that this church would soon meet the conditions placed upon it by WARC for suspension to be lifted. As you all know, the synod of that member-church failed to pass the recommendation to comply with WARC’s requirement for the suspension to be lifted. Not only did this create a difficult and awkward issue for WARC – but also for REC and its decision to admit this church into an ecumenical relationship.

Concern about this particular development has lingered for some as “the elephant in the room” and, for a time at least, threatened to overshadow the Uniting General Council meeting. For some it may be a lingering concern even now. So, allow me to speak to the issue directly one more time.

In retrospect REC erred in admitting a church to membership based on a promise for changed behaviour rather than on the evidence that that such changed in behaviour had actually been demonstrated. At a public meeting in Johannesburg last September I, as president of REC, acknowledged that error and offered an apology. In addition, two letters were sent to the churches in South Africa (and posted publicly) expressing REC’s regret and to assure everyone that the REC fully supports the position taken by WARC to suspend the membership of the church in question. REC also agreed that the suspension remain in force until such time that the synod of that church comply with the conditions imposed by WARC. As a consequence of this council’s actions taken yesterday, the stated conditions for the lifting of suspension are now those of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Together, as members of the WCRC, we speak with singular voice and with a heart-felt commitment to stand for what is right and true, just and obedient, biblical and Reformed. Let there be no doubt that together we will heed the message of the scriptures to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God”.

Of course, whatever concerns linger among us, not all of them are on only one side of the two traditions we have now forged into a singular stream. I’d be less than honest if I did not acknowledge that some REC member churches (and, I am told, some WARC member churches as well), are cautious about the future of WCRC and the capacity of the communion to hold in creative tension the emphases represented in both traditions. This cautious attitude is based, at least in part, on the fear that the sheer numbers of WARC member churches will overwhelm and marginalize the smaller number of REC member churches. Perhaps, an even more deeply-seated fear is that the values held dear by some of the WCRC member churches, values that are confessional in character and evangelical in fervour, or values that relate to the issues of justice and equity in the world, will be pushed aside in the eagerness to advance other agendas that will demand the attention of WCRC. In the best of the Reformed theological tradition, WCRC needs to be concerned about biblical/confessional proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, about church renewal, Reformed worship and raising its prophetic voice for the pursuit of justice in the world. For WCRC to have

the credibility to be an effective messenger of the Good News, these issues must be at the core of our values and the front edge of our witness.

We face a challenging future and a daunting task. Of one thing I am absolutely convinced, we can do more together than anyone of us can do alone. In the communion we have now formed we must find our balance and equilibrium to be confessionally Reformed and an advocate for justice in the economy and the earth. In the global village that is our reality, we need each other's trust, support, challenge and encouragement. WCRC offers us a platform and a family to enhance our witness. We must neither shrink from the challenge nor retreat in fear. The God of Jacob is our refuge and our strength, and it is Jesus Christ – the head of the church – we represent and serve. Yes, our struggle at times will be to combat the principalities and powers of this age (might we call that the real Empire?) but Christ gives us the victory because he is the Lord of heaven and earth. We commit our history and the work we have done to the Father – the Son – and the Holy Spirit.

Amen and Amen.