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To the delegates of the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

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Our message and contribution to the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

Dear Sisters and Brothers

To you, the delegates of the world community of reformed churches at the Uniting General Council of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), we send our warmest greetings from Berne in Switzerland! We are very pleased and grateful that this event of the Uniting General Council – which is of such historical significance to us in the reformed church – can take place in Grand Rapids, from June 18th to 27th, 2010. The establishment of the Uniting General Council imposes upon us a duty to play our part in making the community of reformed churches a worldwide success. We pray that the new World Communion will be more than a mere amalgamation of reformed churches and will do our part to make sure this is so. It should provide a platform for a collective process in which the reformed churches can account to each other for their faith, their efforts to achieve ecumenical understanding and their responsibility to help create a more just world. Our message to you all is: We need the World Communion of Reformed Churches as the expression and voice of our community of faith in Jesus Christ, rooted in our shared protestant tradition. In the WCRC, we want to pursue the path set by Accra and work together to find ways of defining and creating both an economy in which there is “enough for all” and a theology of mutual compassion.

We send you greetings from what is probably one of the few reformed churches in the world of which the majority of the local population are members; 650,000 women, men and children belong to our church, which is part of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches along with the other Swiss reformed churches. We live in the very place where the Reformation has its some of its earliest roots. We share Zwingli's belief that human justice also comes from God and its purpose is to be found in His justice. We studied Calvin's teachings closely during his anniversary year last year and discovered anew: Economic life must serve the people; with material

wealth comes a responsibility towards society, implying that strict limits should be set on capital gains.

We are pleased that we have been able to enjoy a close dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and some of you over the past few years, both through personal contact and via the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, which represents the Swiss churches towards the WARC. In October 2008 we welcomed the President, Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, and the General Secretary, Rev. Setri Nyomi, as our guests in Berne. They encouraged our church to maintain a clear ecumenical stance. They both asked and challenged us to reflect on and account for the ecumenical path which we took at the WARC General Assembly in 2004 in Accra. This letter is a response to their request.

The Synod Council of the Reformed Churches of Berne-Jura-Solothurn wrote to the WARC on August 13th, 2009, welcoming the new World Communion of Reformed Churches' chosen path, as stated in the draft constitution. In these times of deep crisis, as reformed churches we need more than ever to be clearly united in our confessional family. Only in community can we make a substantial contribution to the all-embracing ecumenical unity of churches and be a reliable partner to other Christians. Only in community can we contribute to change in the world according to our reformed tradition by "promoting economic and ecological justice, global peace, and reconciliation in the world" (Art. 5) on the foundation of "the Word of the triune God, incarnate in Jesus Christ and revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Art. 2, draft constitution). The fact of the church community as a triune community of solidarity, reconciliation and justice was particularly helpfully elaborated by Prof. Nico Koopman from South Africa at a recent WARC conference.

We join with all of you in the General Assembly's guiding principle, based on Ephesians 4: "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace". Martin Hirzel of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches described the great task facing us at the WARC consultation "Community and Justice" in March 2009 in Rüdlingen/Switzerland: "Professing and spreading our faith must go hand in hand with a commitment to a world with greater justice and hope. (...) I would place the concerns for economic and ecological justice expressed in the Accra Confession and by the Alliance in this very close relationship between faith and commitment. "Communion"/"koinonia" is solidarity in our daily lives, it is empathy for the needs of the people and the world around us. 'Speaking from our reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians'".

The Accra covenant presented us with a challenge. The clarity of the language in this historical document produced by the world community of reformed churches was not to the taste of everyone, but it moved and encouraged many of us: "We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation. God has brought into being an earthly 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." The great significance of Accra lies in the fact that it turned our debate about the prevailing economic system into a question of faith. In December 2008, our Synod proposed, by a large majority, that the church leadership, the Synod Council, should be "encouraged by the Synod to draw conclusions from its previous commitments and assumed obligations and to publicly endorse the Accra Confession of WARC both publicly and in the context of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches".

In 2004 we drew up a 'policy' entitled "Globalization and Justice", the result of heated debate within our church, which we contributed to the discussions at the WARC General Assembly of 2004. In this, we stressed that the Reformed Churches Berne-Jura-Solothurn form a part of the worldwide church and ecumenical movement. "We therefore seek to fulfill a global responsibility. We commit ourselves to include in our analysis the viewpoint of those affected by globalization, the victims and the losers." The reformed church's biblical and protestant tradition makes its task a particularly radical one: "As churches we insist that we can have a part to play in shaping globalization, and that it can be changed to make it more just." These principles, formulated seven years ago, have retained their validity – indeed, they have become even more pertinent and authoritative in view of the global crises.

In this policy we committed ourselves to linking "current global and regional issues" with biblical and theological reflection. In a series of ecumenical seminars with guests from both the northern and southern hemispheres, we analyzed the economic situation and discussed this in the light of key messages from the Bible. The Accra Confession guided us in our analyses, which were based on the well-known three steps of liberation theology: "see, judge, act". We were particularly challenged by a contribution by Prof. René Krüger from Argentina, who used the Letter of James to question our relationship with Mammon. Taking James' letter, we asked ourselves fundamental questions about the current globalized neoliberal economy and its consequences for marginalized people. We reflected on our relationship to wealth in a rich country and considered the fine line between meeting our personal needs for material security and a desire to accumulate capital, from which even we as Christians are not immune.

The biblical message led us to realize that an economy of "enough for all" must be the starting point of any economy. Its main motivation is not profit maximization for the few, but the survival of all. It is the option for the poor. In adopting this position for and with the marginalized, the wealthy have a clear responsibility of care for the poor, as the prophet Isaiah declared (Isaiah 58, 6-7). This duty of care, which is not expressed as hierarchical welfare but rather as a mutual and equal relationship of love among fellow men, is called compassion in the New Testament. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10, 25-37), the sufferer and the helper become each other's neighbor – through real compassion. In his letter, James also sees this compassion as the key to the relationship between rich and poor; compassion is the only means by which the rich can avoid judgment (James 2, 13): "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. These reflections lead us to search together – and with you also – for ways in which we, both as a church community and as individuals, can create the "economy of enough for all" and exercise compassion in small-scale economic alternatives to the global economy. Following on from these seminars, we would like to propose to the Uniting General Council at Grand Rapids that we begin a process whose central theme is the issue of compassion on an equal footing between our churches in both north and south. How can such "symmetrical" compassion within the new reformed community gain authority, allowing the association between unity and justice to develop and thrive?

The global reformed family's statement of faith regarding economic and ecological destruction has gained in validity and effect in the light of the severe crises in which our world currently finds itself and the evident collapse of the hitherto existing development model and economic system. This finds expression in the climate catastrophe, to which the world community in Copenhagen was unable to find the necessary answers. Here in Switzerland, a centre of the banking world, we share a particular responsibility for the fact that the completely free market forces of the virtual financial economy threaten the right of many people to a life lived in dignity. It has become very clear in our own society as well that economic globalization has got out of control. We can no longer continue in this way.

However, it is as yet unclear as to how the economy will develop both globally and on a local and regional level. We do not know what political and societal structures will result from the current upheavals and new balances of power. We, in the reformed community, would like to find modest but helpful answers, inspired by faith, to these important questions.

Our church communities serve loyally in professing and spreading their faith, and in their ministry. But we can in no way claim that the issue of justice is central to the declaration of faith and actions in the name of Jesus Christ in all our parishes. We are a very normal church in the northern hemisphere; we experience many contradictions, very often we find that we are most concerned about issues regarding our own structures, our own money and our own future – and in this, neglect their ecumenical dimension. Every day we forget and neglect the huge challenge posed by Accra – “that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness.” (John 10.10) Many of our questions can only be answered with your help. How can we live prophetically in a wealthy country? What is our relationship to money, here in the churches of the west? At our last conference on church development work, was the Brazilian theologian Paulo Suess right when he posited that help for the poor and marginalized is only credible when accompanied by criticism of the capital system itself? Can we comprehend the perspective of the victims at the same time as nurturing our relationship with the powerful? Do we really believe that the world can be changed?

We join you in looking forward to the General Uniting Council in Grand Rapids! It is fortunate that the United States has been chosen as the place where the reformed family can grow together in the way it should. From Grand Rapids we expect a clear commitment to unity, justice and mutual compassion which is evident to us all. The place in which the Council takes place is not without significance. The General Assembly in Accra made possible the painful confrontation with the history of slavery and racism in which our church is also involved; the General Assembly is confronting us this year with the next stage, that is to say, with slavery and its abolition, with continuing western imperial dominance, and with the fate of the First Nations. We do not wish to point our finger at others; the USA are a part of our own history. Many people from our region emigrated to America, many of them from conditions of extreme poverty or because of religious persecution. Not only our value system, or more specifically our climate policy or financial capitalism, but also our church traditions are closely linked to the situation in the United States; in Grand Rapids we will encounter our own history and identity.

We are pleased that many different women and men from our church can take part in the Unit-
ing General Council in Grand Rapids as part of the official Swiss delegation or as independent
participants. We are particularly pleased that several young people from our church will be in
Grand Rapids as participants in the “Global Institute of Theology” study program or as stewards,
among other things. We wish you all a blessed and productive General Uniting Council!

With our very warmest wishes

IN THE NAME OF THE SYNOD COUNCIL

The President:

The Secretary:

Andreas Zeller

Anton Genna