

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT OF WARC

Clifton Kirkpatrick

A Future for the Reformed Movement?

1. Serving as President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for the past six years has been one of the greatest experiences of my life! I give thanks to God, to our Executive Committee and dedicated staff, and to all of you for granting me this great blessing. I also give thanks for all you have done to make the witness of the Reformed movement vital in our time. And it is truly “icing on the cake” to have this time of blessing culminate with the birth of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.
2. It didn’t start out all that easy. A couple of weeks before the General Council in Accra, where I was elected President, I broke my ankle and that raised real questions as to whether I would be able to travel to Ghana as one of the delegates of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After promising my doctor and my wife that I would not climb any stairs but would only use elevators, I set off to Ghana only to find that there was not a single elevator on the whole campus at the University of Ghana, where we were meeting. To top it all off, just after arriving a snake came up through the drain in the shower and bit the other foot! I was sure that God either has something very special in store for me – or didn’t intend for me to be there! It was then that I was elected, to my surprise, as President of WARC – and I do count that as one of the *kairos* moments of my life, where God entrusted to me a great responsibility on behalf of this worldwide Reformed movement and gave me the blessing of seeing God at work in the world where, against great odds, Christians are making a remarkable witness to the reign of God in our time.
3. Along the way there were many questions and doubts about the strength of our movement and the power of our witness in the world. I remember well on a visit to Germany soon after the Accra General Council in 2004 when a young woman, who had little use for the church, asked me in some exasperation, “Do you really think there is any future for the Reformed movement worldwide?” While I instinctively said, “Of course,” her inquiry caused me to think much more deeply about our movement and its future. For surely she was not alone in questioning whether the Reformed tradition’s best years may have been in the past. I have spent the last six years, among other things, seeking to answer for myself at some depth her question. As most of you have seen, I have shared my reflections on this question with you in the advance papers for this meeting and want to use this President’s report to summarize those reflections and give you my perspective on the “state of the Reformed movement” in our time.
4. There are indeed good reasons to question whether we have a future. In our radically changing postmodern world, Reformed churches all over the world often seem strangely anachronistic. It took 1,500 years from the beginning of the Common Era to double the sum of human knowledge, but now we double the sum of human knowledge every year. But for way too many Reformed Christians, rather than embrace change, new technology, and new forms of cultural expression, we resist change. Our watchword is way too often, “We’ve always done it that way!”

5. Throughout the global north our movement is in decline numerically and far too many of our congregations are living on the edge of survival. In much of the global south our movement is still growing, but in place after place it is being eclipsed by rapidly growing Pentecostal movements, by mega-churches, and by communities that have gathered around the “prosperity gospel.” In other parts of the world churches of the Reformed tradition are being eclipsed by a renaissance of other religions or of secular society. Rarely are we seen as the dynamic, growing church of the future in any part of the world.
6. Among ourselves, we are the tradition that is most likely to divide. Whether it is because of doctrinal differences, questions of social and personal morality, mission heritage, language or culture, or just plain obstinacy in almost every nation the church tradition that is most likely to be divided into many different churches is the Reformed tradition. On a global basis we struggle to keep alive a World Alliance or a Reformed Ecumenical Council because having a united and effective common voice for our communion seems way down on the priority list of our churches.
7. There is reason to doubt the future of the Reformed movement, and we desperately need repentance and renewal, but we are not without resources or without hope. There is another side of this story! That is the side that has, at the end of the day, given me deep hope and a strong confidence in the future of our Reformed tradition – and that gives us a basis for our life together in the World Communion of Reformed Churches. These last six years have given me countless opportunities, as I have visited among you, to see “life in fullness” (John 10: 10) in the great strengths of our Reformed tradition, and I want to share those with you as well.
8. First, the Calvin Jubilee, which we celebrated last year was a time when the Reformed community reclaimed its core theological values and the vision of our common calling. Reformed churches around the world proclaimed three aspects of Calvin’s legacy:
 - The gift of communion.
 - A commitment to justice.
 - A passion for life and for the creation.

The core elements of Calvin’s legacy are at the heart of our Reformed theology, which is life giving, is the source of our strength, and serves as the basis for faithful mission in our time. This is a great strength for us all.

9. Second, everywhere I have visited, I have found our member churches actively engaged in the struggle for justice, often at the risk of their own lives. I give thanks to God for the witness for justice, peace, and human rights through our churches in Colombia, in the Philippines, in Taiwan, in Romania, in the Sudan, in South Africa, in Madagascar, in the Middle East, and in so many other parts of the world. On a global level, we have made a major contribution to the future of the world and to the church ecumenical by our joining together in Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth. This call to challenge the empires of our time to build an economic system that lessens rather than increases the gap between the rich and the poor, that ends grinding poverty for billions of people, and that creates a more just and sustainable world – is at the heart of the gospel for our time. This is the urgent ethical challenge of our time, and Reformed Christians are uniquely positioned to be God’s agents of justice in our time.
10. Third, we have had a sea change in the reality of women being recognized for ordained leadership in our churches. While we still have a few churches that do not yet ordain women and many that do not yet have ordained women in equal numbers to men, the vast majority of our churches welcome both women and men to all ministries of the church. This is a major step forward and an important witness to the church ecumenical, embodying the promise of

Galatians 3.28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Following Calvin’s example, Reformed churches in many of our countries have also sought to show signs of being an inclusive community in many other ways.

11. Fourth, we know at the core of our being that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. We are a community of churches that has naturally entered into union with other churches, and today we count among our members a good number of national churches that are actually union churches. It is no accident that so many of the great ecumenical leaders have arisen from the Reformed tradition. We live in a time in which unity and reconciliation with other religious communities (both Christian and of other faith) is urgent for the peace of the world, which makes our propensity to be ecumenical all the more important.
12. Fifth and most important, our churches are alive with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is our greatest strength. It is amazing how different our congregations are from one another yet how, even in their diversity, they show the strengths of the Reformed tradition in their life and witness. Churches as different as the Yolo Church in Kinshasa, Congo; the Presbyterian Church in Lar in the Sudan; the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea; the women’s church among the Maya Quiche Indians in Guatemala; the First Presbyterian Church in Havana; the Great Church in Debrecen, Hungary; and my local congregation, Springdale Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky—all seem, on the surface, to have hardly anything in common. But if you probe a little more deeply, you will find that they all share a love for Christ and neighbour, a vision of the best dreams of Calvin, a commitment to justice, a sense of being an inclusive and welcoming community, an ecumenical spirit, and a sense of the Holy Spirit at work among the people.
13. We are at a defining moment for the Reformed tradition. We are launching a new chapter in our life together as we become the World Communion of Reformed Churches. At the same time, we have reached an important historical milestone, the 500th anniversary of our movement. This is the time for us to no longer be an “alliance” or a “council” but to truly be a communion, to claim the best of our heritage, and to be open to the radical new things that God may have in store for us in the years ahead. There is a future—a vital and exciting future—for the Reformed movement in the twenty-first century. However, we cannot overlook that there are serious problems in our common life that we must address with repentance and commitment to change. God does intend for us to master the technology, culture, and ethos of our time as we reach out to a new generation. God intends for our churches to be vital and growing churches. And God surely intends for us to give up our divisive and fragmenting ways and join the movement for unity and reconciliation in the church and the world.
14. As we do that, we have major strengths and resources in our life together that we need to reclaim to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17.6) for the gospel in our time:
 - A theological vision, growing out of Calvin’s legacy, that is second to none.
 - A passion for God’s justice in the world as part of our Reformed DNA.
 - A desire to be a truly inclusive and welcoming community of all of God’s people.
 - An ecumenical spirit that seeks reconciliation with all people of faith, and
 - Thousands of vital congregations where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered.
15. We have challenges to face, but God has given us incredible gifts and strengths in the World Communion of Reformed Churches on which to build, and we need to be doing just that—building on these great gifts of our Reformed tradition to shape our churches for the twenty first century as communities truly “reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.”