



LIVING GOD
RENEW AND
TRANSFORM US

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

2016 Conference of the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany in Magdeburg: Word of greeting by the General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Rev. Chris Ferguson

It is my great pleasure to address the conference of the Union of Evangelical Churches at a time where the Protestant churches use the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his 95 theses to revisit their history and to discern anew what it means to be a church of the Reformation today. The World Communion of Reformed Churches will engage in this question at its General Council Meeting in Leipzig, Germany, in June 2017, which will take place under the theme: "Living God, renew and transform us."

For the Reformed tradition, 2017 is not the key historical year; Martin Luther is not the key theologian of reference; nor is Germany our main geographical focus. Our meeting in Leipzig gives us the opportunity to embrace our own roots and history, to add our distinctive voices, to consider our unique contribution with humility and repentance. Clearly our tradition must take responsibility for our part in divisions within the church, regardless of intentions, and for the exclusion and violence against those who did not follow our understanding of what faithfulness to God required of us.

The point of this critical reflection is to move forward in faith and in response to the God of Life. The Reformation commemoration is for us not about theological nostalgia. It is about putting the Reformation into the present tense. This means not just the here and now; it means bringing Reformed traditions, theology and the confessing faith stance into the tense present—into the tensions, conflicts, violence, suffering, beauty, wonder and promise of this historical moment.

Living God

We start by crying out of the depths of our contexts to the Living God. It is both a prayer and a confession. Our faith tradition calls us to turn to the God of Life. We engage and pray to God when confronted with brokenness and threats to life. The biblical tradition shows us that the Living God is invoked when the community is faced by false gods (Jeremiah 10:1-10): idols of war, of death, of domination; idols of prosperity and of "Mammon." In confessing the Living God we reject those systems, structures, values and teachings that foster racist, economic, ecological, social, religious and gender injustice. The first movement of the theme is to evoke and turn to the Living God. To turn to God is to embrace life. To embrace life is to love and serve God. It is to defend and protect the life of all people, especially the poor, marginalized, excluded and disposed.

Renew and Transform

The next movement of our theme invites us to embrace reformation in the present tense, "renew and transform." Here Romans 12:1-2 calls us "not to be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewal of our minds..." For the WCRC it is imperative to address this not only as individuals but as church and a Communion. Here we are called to embrace the renewal of the church for the transformation of the world. Here transformation is based on the Greek word *metamorphosis*—which means a total and radical change in thinking, acting and understanding, a transformation of form and substance. The biblical concept is more radical than any political or psychological concept of mere reform.

All around the world there is talk of transformation but often of a superficial kind. The United Nations has a framework for sustainable development that seeks to transform the world without changing the economic

or political systems or structures. The Romans passage calls us to a deeper transformation of all structures, systems, attitudes and actions that oppress or enslave. Many in civil society are joining the call found in the Accra Confession and in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* to understand the link between the current neoliberal market economy with its structures and institutions and climate change and ecological destruction.

Our context and our faith compel us to seek justice and resist evil. The WCRC in its General Council will be guided by the Accra Confession and bring the confession into the present tense in seeking to faithfully resist all that threatens life in God's creation and to follow Jesus in the mission of good news to the poor, liberation, freedom, healing and justice for the earth.

Us

Here our theme is inclusive of people, church and world—all of creation. The call to put God-Life at the centre of all we are and do will change the WCRC. It will change our churches. It will change our society. It will change relationships between men and women. It will respect all differences. The "us" includes the earth—all of creation.

Unity and overcoming human and church division is an unshakeable vocation for us. We as a WCRC family don't of course apologize for the Reformation and its world-changing contribution to humanity, but we do repent of the division, separation and violence that was an unintentional but real consequence. Calvin lamented the "dismembered body of Christ." He said he was so committed to unity he would cross ten seas for that cause. The WCRC in seeking renewal as a Reformed church always reforming must, in fact, renew its approach to the visible unity of the church and embrace such unity as an imperative of the highest order. Not only the *koinonia* amongst the WCRC family, not only communion with other communions but the true and deepest unity for the sake of God's kingdom.

In taking up this calling the General Council will visit Wittenberg on 5 July 2017 and will engage in a number of ecumenical activities:

1. This visit to Wittenberg emphasizes the Reformed conviction that the differences between Lutheran and Reformed churches have lost their church-dividing significance through the ecumenical efforts of the last decades. A complete church communion between the Lutherans and the Reformed is, from a Reformed point of view, a reality that can be realized in the spiritual and worshiping life of the churches, in the testimony in the world and in the service of the world.
2. These ecumenical dialogues form the basis of a joint statement that the Lutheran World Federation and the WCRC want to adopt at this day. The purpose of this document is the affirmation of the theological consensus and the public commitment to jointly develop the communion between Lutheran and Reformed churches on this basis.
3. The commitment to the Reformation does not isolate the Protestant churches from other Christian traditions, but turns out to be a lively stimulus in the ecumenical dialogue. In Wittenberg, the WCRC will join the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. In its Statement of Association, the WCRC uses the "differentiating consensus" method used in the Joint Declaration to incorporate important elements of the Reformed understanding of justification into the ecumenical discussion. A whole chapter deals with the context of justification and justice.

The ceremony will be led by the presidents of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Lutheran World Federation and World Communion of Reformed Churches. The WCRC welcomes the fact that more and more Christian communities are adding their voices to this differentiated consensus and has therefore invited the World Methodist Council to Wittenberg, which already joined the Joint Declaration in 2006.

Soli Deo Gloria! Glory to the God of Life!