

# Letter from Accra

## Report of the message committee

**From the delegates gathered from throughout the world in Accra, Ghana, at the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the congregations of all those churches belonging to this fellowship, greetings. We have met as 400 delegates in this council from July 30 to August 12 2004, worshipping, studying the Bible, deliberating on urgent issues facing God's world, and participating in the rich life of local churches in Ghana. We write to share with you what, on your behalf, we have discerned and experienced. Grace and peace to you from our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Our most moving and memorable moments came from our visit to Elmina and Cape Coast, two "castles" on the Coast of Ghana that held those who had been captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over brutal centuries, 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died. On this trade in humans as commodities, wealth in Europe was built. Through their labour, sweat, suffering, intelligence and creativity, the wealth of the Americas was developed.

At the Elmina Castle, the Dutch merchants, soldiers, and Governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door ("For the Lord has chosen Zion..."). And we imagined Reformed Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and horror of those dungeons. For more than two centuries in that place this went on.

In angry bewilderment we thought, "How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?"

Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of the those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation. Those who are Reformed Christians have always declared God's sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forbears of Reformed faith deny so blatantly what they believed so clearly?

Yet, as we listened to the voices today from our global fellowship, we discovered the mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those whose blindness we decried. For today's world is divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice and ecological destruction who still suffer and die.

We perceive that the world today lives under the shadow of an oppressive empire. By this we mean the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces throughout the globe that reinforce the division between the rich and the poor. Millions of those in our congregations live daily in the midst of these realities. The economies of many of our countries are trapped in international debt and imposed

financial demands that worsen the lives of the poorest. So many suffer! Each day, 24,000 people die because of hunger and malnutrition, and global trends show that wealth grows for the few while poverty increases for the many. Meanwhile, millions of others in our congregations live lives as inattentive to this suffering as those who worshipped God on the floor above slave dungeons.

In our discussions in Accra – indeed in the past seven years of reflection since we last met in General Council at Debrecen, Hungary – we have come to realize that this is not just another “issue” to be “addressed”. Rather, it goes to the heart of our confession of faith. How can we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord over all life, and not stand against all that denies the promise of fullness of life to the world?

If Jesus Christ is not Lord over all, he is not Lord at all. That is why we find in the Bible a constant criticism of idolatry, emphasized in our Reformed tradition. To declare faith in the one true God is to reject divided loyalties between God and Mammon, dethrone the false gods of wealth and power, and turn from false promises to the true God of life.

We know that this does not come easily for any of us. Yet our hope lies in confessing that the power of the resurrected Christ can overturn the idols and the modern gods that hold the world captive to injustice and ecological destruction.

Therefore, we invite you, in Reformed churches throughout the world, to take this stance of faith, standing against all that denies life and hope for millions, as a concrete expression of our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, this is a grave and serious invitation. As those who have met on your behalf in Accra, we declare to you that the integrity of our Christian faith is now at stake, just as it was for those worshipping in the Elmina castle. Confessing our faith and giving our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ requires our opposition to all that denies the fullness of life to all those in our world so loved by God.

Such a confession also sends us forth with new eyes of faith into the world. Mission, it can be said, is embodied in the life of the church in the world. In Accra we recognized that living according to what we say we believe changes our understanding of mission today. We recalled that the church was born in a time of empire. God’s Spirit called forth the church, in response to God’s work in the world, as a new community bearing witness to a new global reality and opposing the false claims of earthly gods.

God’s mission involves your congregation and each of ours in fresh and challenging ways today. How can we share the message and liberating love of Christ’s life in those places where suffering and death seem to reign? This much we discovered for certain in Accra: more than ever, faithful mission today requires our connection – really it demands bonds of belonging – between one another as churches. The challenges we now face in proclaiming the Good News will simply overwhelm us if we confront them as individual churches alone.

In today’s world the divisions between the North and the South, the rich and the poor, and the powerful and the powerless, grow sharper and seek to isolate us from one another. That’s why mission requires us as churches to belong more deeply to one another, overcoming those divisions through the work of God’s Spirit as an

evidence of the hope that is offered to the world. In our inclusive fellowship here in Accra, we have experienced a taste of this hope and seek to share it with you. In this council we have focused on current threats to life, especially economic neoliberalism and the arrogance of imperial power. Our churches in central and eastern Europe remind us that for long decades they suffered under the tyranny of another empire. The wounds of this past are not yet healed. We recognize the need for all of us – East and West – to work through this bleak chapter of our history, and to ask whether Reformed churches in the West heard sufficiently the cry of their sisters and brothers in the East.

Being truly mutual and accountable is hard and even painful, testing the depth of our trust. It requires the vulnerability demonstrated in Jesus. But there is no other way for us to follow God's mission, and building unity for this purpose is one of the practical things the World Alliance of Reformed Churches can make possible.

But we discovered one more truth in Accra that we want to share. If confessing what we believe as Christians requires our spiritual and practical resistance to economic injustice as well as environmental destruction, then we need new depths of spirituality. This isn't mere political activism; we're being called to a spiritual engagement against evil, and for that we need our lives to be deeply rooted in the power of God's Spirit. To put it simply, we need, as never before, the transformation of our lives promised through Jesus Christ.

This spiritual challenge flows from the words found in John 10:10, where Jesus declares the promise "that all may have life in fullness". That biblical theme, in fact, wove itself through the work of the council during these days. Our Christian spirituality opens us to the presence and power of God in all the creation. Further, it draws us into ever-deeper community with one another. Deepening our spirituality can connect us with God's power for the healing of personal wounds, social scars, and political divisions.

We also realized more clearly than ever that such spiritual transformation and the community that it creates are only possible as the gifts of women and young people are freely exercised and liberated in our life together. We experienced a glimpse of this in our gathering, as both women and youth shared so richly in worship, Bible study, presentations to the council, and leadership roles, and we long for the spirituality that makes this possible in every one of our congregations.

Because we were in Accra, Ghana, we were blessed constantly with the spiritual vitality and power of the local churches that hosted and received us. The drums and songs that saturate the soul of the African church permeated our worship. We marvelled at offerings given with such dancing and joy from hearts so full of gratitude. Here we tasted a spirituality that seemed so whole, so worshipful, so connected in community, and so embracing of God's creation. It draws from the gifts of the culture and sings not only in these enchanting songs, but also in their daily lives, as their witness to the fullness of life in Christ.

As we entered the homes of our hosts on a weekend of visits to churches throughout Ghana and then were carried away by the power of their worship, our hearts were filled with hope and gratitude. We experienced the warmth of their hospitality and the power of God's Spirit to bring new life and community. And we knew this is the sign of the only power that can sustain us as we confess our faith in Christ, stand against the powers of evil that threaten life, and live in mission with the hope of

fullness of life for all promised by our Lord.

We want you to join in the confession and covenant with one another we have made in Accra. As part of the fellowship of those churches throughout the globe that share in common the Reformed tradition of Christian faith, we long for our experience here to enrich and encourage your mission and ministry.

We've included a liturgy that could enable you to share in worship the same confession, commitments, and promises that we have made here at this council. And we've also included an appendix that gives a summary of the many other urgent issues and concerns from around the globe that received our attention.

Our prayer for you is that God may reveal to you in fresh ways how our faith is deeply connected to all of life. May none of us ever live our faith insensitive to brutal suffering and indifferent to urgent cries from our world. May all of us know the power of God at work in our Lord Jesus Christ to overcome evil and offer to all the world life in the fullness intended by God.

And may the grace of God, the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you now and forever more.

Accra, Ghana  
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