
ECU-DIALOGUE



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That ALL May Have Life in Fullness

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches convenes in council

Will Browne, WMD Associate Director for Ecumenical Partnership and delegate to the 24th WARC General Council, July 30-August 12

Every seven years, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) gathers the amazingly diverse voices of its Reformed churches in a General Council. Given such vast diversity, the unity of 218 member churches' voices speaking together calls us to pay careful attention, however difficult, to the council's message around the theme, "That ALL May Have Life in Fullness" (based on John 10:10).

Looking at history and the present

The background for what we were to hear was set by all five hundred of us visiting the slave dungeons located on the coast of Ghana. Forty-five million Africans were brought to these dungeons, entering enslavement in which only a percentage even lived to reach the Americas.

For me the visit was a shattering experience of re-evaluation. During the preparatory service, I thought about how complicit North Americans and Europeans like myself are in our family histories; I was moved when an African speaker also owned complicity on behalf of Africans who captured and sold other Africans. I thought I was going on a pilgrimage into *history*. Then I visited the slave castles and saw there not only the enormity of the evil but the blatant Christian acceptance of that evil as Christians worshiped in chapels built atop the dungeons. And I came to realize that the evil is *still* alive. With cancerous efficiency it continues to damage Africa and Africans in Diaspora today.



Many of us found ourselves asking, How could God not have heard the cries of God's people who, for over 250-300 years, were routed through these dungeons? How could Christians — Reformed Christians — worship in the chapels there yet remain blind and deaf to the suffering they were inflicting?

I was deeply moved by the words of Mrs. Mary Winbush, mother of Associate Stated Clerk Robina Winbush. As she looked out the "door of no return" through which her forebears were sent into enslavement, she marveled at their survival and their strength. She saw those traits as gifts passed to their descendants. She said, "We are strong people. We are survivors." As never before I found myself honoring that truth and made doubly grateful for the enormous contributions of effort, intelligence, imagination, and love Africans in Diaspora have made in our country despite the horror of history and the continuing realities of racism.

Developing a common base

This was the longest meeting I have ever attended. Part of the reason for this was the care with which we were

educated, in nine plenaries, so that we all had a common base of knowledge. We also divided into issue groups, listening to each other's voices on a whole range of issues. Over the weekend, we disbursed to churches throughout Ghana and Togo, learning from and worshipping with local Christians. We worked in sections, dealing with 'Covenant,' 'Mission' and 'Spirituality.' Again we heard presentations, processed learnings, and moved toward consensus.

Inserted in the middle of all this were elections of a new WARC executive committee and the unanimous election of our Stated Clerk, Clifton Kirkpatrick, as president of WARC. We are proud of Cliff and understand the remarkable tribute paid him by churches with every reason to be suspicious of a leader from the U.S.A.

We divided into committees and subcommittees to do business and finalize reports with recommendations to the assembly. Finally, we met in plenary and agreed on what the General Council wished to say to Reformed Christians — 75 million of us — around the world. All of this was wrapped around and sustained by powerful worship, morning and evening, led by a team that included Kathy Reeves.

Discerning the message

Each of the General Council messages — Mission, Covenant, Spirituality — is important. The most urgent and challenging is the message entitled "Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth." While the message contains "neo-liberal" language familiar to economists and to many from Europe and the global South, it is not familiar to us. So, we will have to listen carefully and translate unfamiliar language. We will also have to process a message that is highly critical of the global economic system we currently promote and of our government's leadership in the imposition of that system on the economy of the world.

Our fellow Reformed Christians tell us in clear terms that they experience this as Empire. Several definitions were offered, including one considered descriptive of both previous empires and of the current reality:

Empire is the convergence of economic, political, cultural, and military interests that constitute an international system of dominance in which the balance of benefit is forced to flow to the enhancement of the powerful.

Such a system:

- unfairly protects business interests and leading Northern countries of our globe
- causes immense suffering to those least able to afford it
- damages many states' ability to protect the vulnerable
- reduces human lives to commodities and places the value of profit over that of people
- fails to respond to the massive pandemic of the

- diseases of poverty
- uses patents to capture knowledge and practices that have already been used freely for long periods of time
- asserts private ownership of property can come without social obligation
- believes unregulated or unrestricted privatized economic growth is the only way to achieve wealth for all

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We are all challenged to think about how our life styles make us complicit in this system. In an act of grace, all the participants at the WARC meeting acknowledged their own temptations to be complicit in such a system. We are challenged to think about what this means for mission and how we listen to one another so that all we do resists the powers that threaten fullness of life.

We are challenged to find new depths of spirituality through which we both discern what God is calling us to do and in which we find strength and courage for a life of faithful response. In the Report of the Message Committee, “Letter from Accra,” we are asked, “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 in life to the world?”

Choosing life

Our own church has struggled with these issues for some time. The policy paper, “Hope for a Global Future,” of our 208th General Assembly (1996) includes very similar analyses and conclusions.

We are called to stand with our Reformed sisters and brothers around the world in opposing the dehumanizing and life-denying impact of this pervasive economic system. More than that, we are called to study how this system of economic empire violates the values and theology of our Reformed faith. We are invited to see that this is an issue of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in which we are being given a choice for life or death.

We are challenged to join the rest of the Reformed family of faith in saying, in the words of the final General Council service, “Therefore we choose life so that we and our descendants might live in a just world.”

To Do: Use “Hope for a Global Future: Just and Sustainable Human Development” and its study guide [# OGA 96013, \$2.50; phone (1-800)524-2612]. ■

A theme concerned with life challenges us to take a critical look at our theology, spirituality, and faith-mandated social engagement.

— Dr Setri Nyomi, WARC General Secretary

Background on WARC

Who Was There?

Information from WARC report from Accra

- Eleven PC(USA) members, selected by our General Assembly, were among the official delegates to the WARC General Council.
- In total, nearly 400 official delegates came to Ghana from about 90 countries, representing 163 of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ 218 member churches.
- Twelve percent of the delegates were youth 30 years old or younger. Forty-three percent were women.
- Over 70% of the men in attendance were ordained ministers, among them six bishops.
- A third or more of women delegates were ordained ministers.
- WARC subsidizes the expenses of one delegate from churches unable to afford the costs of sending even a single person.

What Did They Say?

Excerpted from the “Letter from Accra”

“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 . . . 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.”

From the General Council's Mission report:

- [W]e have begun to rediscover the evangelical significance of the Biblical teaching about Empire. This is related to the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity, and the Macedonian and Roman occupation of Palestine (Exodus 3-12; Psalm 137; Daniel 2; Hosea 7; Habakkuk 5; Luke 13; Ephesians 3; Revelation 12 -13). . . .
- Empire crosses all boundaries, reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, overcomes nation states, and challenges religious communities. . . .
- In many countries in the world, churches and individual Christians are being attacked. Many of our sisters and brothers are suffering for their faith, and we are in solidarity with them. In some instances, they are suffering because of the seeming identification of globalization, Empire and Christian mission. . . . We need to draw a clear distinction between Christian mission and the forces of domination, patriarchy, racism and institutional injustice that are associated with Empire. This will involve a new Christian vision, rooted in apostolic faith, that stands for the fullness of life . . .

What Can We Do Locally?

Visit <www.warc.ch> on the web to download Accra documents and news reports. (For a free *AcrobatReader* needed to read documents in *PDF* format, go to <www.adobe.com/products> and download the software.)

- Consider using the *PowerPoint* presentation, “Shocking Figures,” with illustrations and data charts, as a base for group discussion. Add your own titles at designated places. (Also available in *PDF* format; be patient if the download takes time.)
- Provide documents for reading by those who want to think seriously:
 - Letter from Accra message
 - Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth
 - Spirituality report
 - Mission report
 - Covenanting for Justice report ■

Our Own Eye-Opening Conference

A steward's viewpoint

Nena do Nascimento, Hartford, Ct

Being a steward from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at the WARC General Council in Accra, Ghana, was an eye-opening experience! Although the words may sound like a cliché, they capture the reality of observing, working, and being part of a fascinating community within Ghana for close to four weeks. There were 55 stewards, roughly half from Ghana and half international. I was honored to be one of five stewards from North America.

Our work began when we arrived several days prior to the opening ceremonies to familiarize ourselves with one another and make pre-conference preparations. From then on, we did all types of tasks — stuffing conference bags, arranging chairs, carrying blocks of ice to keep drinks cool, being ushers at the opening ceremony, translating into various languages for the delegates, preparing documents, and handling luggage. We were all eager to do what we could, and most tasks became one big cohesive (and often chaotic) effort.

I believe that the stewards program is unique in that all of us were working toward a common, immediate goal — to ensure that the conference ran smoothly and that the delegates were happy. We noticed that delegates sometimes separated themselves according to their region or language. As stewards, we could not do this, since work always needed to be done together. This made for a very intense, rich experience that highlighted our different cultural reactions to issues of authority, work ethics, and concepts of group work.

I have never learned more about different ways of life and understandings of the world in such a short period of time. My friendships put a human face on many issues that otherwise seemed far away and foreign. I learned a great deal from conversations with the other stewards about what they deal with in their home countries. A Sri Lankan friend told me about problems in her country as she saw them as a Christian; a Nigerian friend from Jos complained about how conservative her country is; and another friend, from Colombia, told us about what he and his church are doing to fight against human rights abuses there.

Of course I also learned a lot from the fascinating speakers — at the opening ceremony and in the speeches and discussions among the delegates in the plenary hall. Many of the debates and subjects of interest in the world today were addressed, as were concerns of individual countries. The lessons and perspectives from these I have brought back with me to my university studies and my religious understanding.

Through my tasks, I not only had the opportunity to meet and interact with interesting leaders and policy makers from around the world but also to see first-hand, and behind the scenes, what being part of such an incredible international conference is like and how it is run. I appreciated the priority placed upon youth and youth leadership and the support given to youth, a contrast with the past when there was not enough emphasis given to this.

One incident epitomizes the steward's experience for me. It was one of our last stewards' meetings, and I realized that we had become a microcosm of the conference! We were using the discernment model adopted at the conference for decision making and, looking around, it was clear that we were generally acting like the delegates in the plenary hall. We began discussing ways to improve certain aspects of the conference and speaking our minds on the issues discussed among the delegates. We had become the delegates of our own international and interreligious conference!

To Do: If you know a young adult PC(USA) member who should receive information about ecumenical steward opportunities, contact Kathy Reeves at <kreeves@ctr.pcusa.org>. ■

An Urgent Need for Study and Dialogue *Jews and Christians*

Many Presbyterians who live amidst Jewish neighbors have discovered new dynamics in their communities' relationships following this year's PC(USA) General Assembly. Several decisions of the 216th General Assembly raised deep concerns in the Jewish community that have been broadly publicized; these have been further exacerbated by later events. The decisions relate to:

- planning for selective divestment from companies whose operations in Israel harm innocent people
- advocacy against the Israeli security fence
- a theological assessment that Christian Zionism is inconsistent with Reformed theology
- a call for study of evangelism and new church development as these relate to a “messianic” congregation (but no cut in funding was voted)

On September 28, a Presbyterian delegation met with Jewish leaders in New York. The conversations were described by Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick in a letter to synod and presbytery leaders. He reported unanimous agreement that “we want to continue to be in dialogue and to build constructive relationships between our two communities.”

Further, “while we have deep disagreements on many specific issues related to Israel and Palestine,” Jews and Presbyterians share a commitment we both can advocate for “a two-state solution where both Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and with secure borders.”

Very importantly, the group agreed to encourage dialogue at a local level. Specifically, they encourage congregations to use the *Open Doors, Open Minds* material developed by the Union for Reform Judaism and the *Presbyterian Supplement* to that material, intended to bring additional Christian perspectives into the discussion.

We pledge, God helping us, never again to participate in, to contribute to, or (insofar as we are able) to allow the persecution or denigration of Jews or the belittling of Judaism. — A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews (1987)

Wherever possible, Presbyterians are urged to participate in study opportunities with Reform Jewish neighbors. The time for very serious dialogue has arrived. Several guidelines are suggested:

- Congregational study/dialogue is particularly valuable because it brings worshiping communities of faith together.
- Good group study/dialogue is based upon advance personal study by everyone.
- Authentic dialogue requires mutual planning. The *Presbyterian Supplement* to the study guide will help Presbyterians be equal partners in such planning.
- Discussion of our Assembly's actions best follows an exploration of more fundamental issues through use of the material on Israel in *Open Doors, Open Minds* and the *Supplement*. Any group wanting to explore the PC(USA) actions should download materials available at <www.pcusa.org/israelandjewishrelations> in order to avoid debate based on ill-informed assumptions about what the Assembly did.

To Do: Presbyterians should obtain a copy of the *Presbyterian Supplement to Open Doors, Open Minds*, available for download from <www.pcusa.org/interfaith> and the *Open Doors, Open Minds* study guide from <<http://urj.org>>. (See the recommended video as well.) ■

As we dialogue, we remember God's call to love our neighbor, and we recognize that God has created us all in God's image. Therefore, participants should be committed to practicing "respectful presence" . . .

- fully attentive to others in the group
 - respectful of the integrity of each person in the group
 - ready to recognize others' commitments and values
 - ready to express their own faith in humility, honesty, and openness
 - able to examine themselves to avoid any hint of manipulation or coercion of others
- from the *Presbyterian Supplement to Open Doors, Open Minds* (2004)

Are We Listening? *Christians and Muslims Meet*

The 2004 Interfaith Listening Project completed its program with a debriefing on October 7-9. Nine teams, each consisting of a Christian and a Muslim from the same country, reported on their itinerations, and one Muslim — whose Christian partner was turned away by immigration authorities after reaching the Atlanta airport — had made visits alone. Many of the teams consisted of a man and a woman, and several included young adults, the youngest being a 25-year-old. They were an extraordinarily gifted group of people who came from Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, India, Indonesia, Niger, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa, and Syria to share themselves with the people of the U.S.

Listening, as they described it, was a multidirectional experience. Not only did Americans listen to the travelers, but the teams also listened to those they visited and to one another; they met local Christians but also local Muslims — and those of still other religions, in some instances. They talked to local folks and to one another about politics, human rights activities, the beliefs of their traditions and of themselves, and their religious communities' interactions in their societies.



The participating teams noted the enormous diversity among themselves, seeing anew or perhaps for the first time the great variety among Muslims in particular but also among Christians.

Some of the Arab Muslim and Christian partners had spoken about their shared common language, common culture, and common rights of citizenship; now they commented on the variety of cultures and languages in the U.S. that complicates our interreligious relationships. The South Africans, Filipinos, and Indians pointed to positive work they do together in their countries to alleviate human needs and to counter inequities in their societies. One pair had spent considerable time in Niger considering relationships as a result of their selection to participate in our Interfaith Listening program. All of these urged American Christians and Muslims to move beyond talk to common action.

There was unanimous agreement that the work of interfaith listening in the U.S. has only begun. The Listening teams urged important next steps by American Presbyterians:

- Visits from the U.S. to the countries from which the teams came, to see Muslim-Christian relationships in action and to experience their societies
- Continued local contacts between local Christians and Muslims, especially but not exclusively building on visits made during the team itineration
- Intentional involvement of youth in continuing relationships, to follow up on good opportunities to be with youth during the current visits
- Development of mutual projects where people do things together — for example, Habitat for Humanity home building or food distribution

- Maintenance of relationships between an Interfaith Listening Team and the groups who hosted them in the U.S.
- Continuing contact with the Office of Interfaith Relations in Louisville

Finally, the Interfaith Listening teams strongly urged that the PC(USA) Interfaith Listening Project be continued, also expressing hope that it might be more broadly ecumenical in its outreach.

To Do:

- Determine what steps you can take locally, whether or not your area was visited by a team. Ask the Interfaith office for assistance, as appropriate.
- Contribute to the special account set up to provide funding for the future, EO #51688. ■

Coming Ecumenical Events

2005 Midwest Academy for Ecumenical Leadership

Rev. David A. Anderson, Executive Director, Illinois Conference of Churches

The Illinois Conference of Churches is laying the foundation for the Midwest Academy for Ecumenical Leadership to be inaugurated in 2005 in Chicago on the occasion of the council's 75th Anniversary. The purpose of the Academy is to cultivate and educate a new generation of clergy and laity for ecumenical ministry leadership in their churches. It will be anchored by an annual Summer Seminar in Chicago and hosted by various theological institutions of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools.

“Panorama of Ecumenical Witness: Called to Christ’s Ministry of Reconciliation” is the theme of the Summer Seminar to be held from July 18-22, 2005 at Mundelein Seminary of the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, a northwest suburb of Chicago. An opportunity for a residential learning experience on a beautiful campus awaits clergy and laity, who will get a snapshot panorama of the ecumenical movement and its significance for the churches’ mission today.

The program will offer foundational knowledge of the history of the ecumenical movement with a focus on its biblical and theological principles and practices as viewed from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives; there will also be a look at interreligious dialogue and at ecumenism from global, U.S., and local perspectives. The week will invite participants into a rhythm of prayer, presentations, dialogue, and fellowship as brothers and sisters in Christ. Registration is open and is limited to the first 40 applicants. Cost, including room, seven meals, and refreshments, is \$500.00.

Invited or confirmed 2005 faculty include:

- Fr. Gosbert Byangu, professor of biblical studies and theology, Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Switzerland
- The Rev. Thomas A. Baima, S.T.D., associate professor of systematic theology, Mundelein Seminary
- The Rev. Gary E. Peluso-Verdend, Ph.D., associate professor of practical theology, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary
- The Rev. Thomas C. Ferguson, Ph.D., associate director for ecumenical and interfaith relations, Episcopal Church
- The Rev. Larry D. Pickens, D.Min., J.D., general secretary, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, United Methodist Church
- A Greek Orthodox to be announced.

Co-sponsors in addition to the Illinois Council include Mundelein Seminary and the ecumenical/ interfaith offices of the Episcopal and United Methodist Churches.

To Do: For further information, available later this year, go to the website <www.ilconfchurches.org>. ■

2005 Ecumenical Institute at Bossey

The Ecumenical Institute at Bossey — located close to the village of Céligny, 9 miles away from Geneva, Switzerland — has hosted women and men from all over the world, representing every Christian confession and culture, since it began its program in 1946. Its objective is to educate and form ecumenical leaders, both clergy and lay, for service in parishes, classrooms, and ecumenical centers around the world. It enables participants to shape their ecumenical thought through intercultural and interconfessional encounter, study and residential programs, and common worship and life in community.

Offerings for 2005 are:

- *Building an Interfaith Community*, July 4 – 31 (for 30 participants, age 25-35 years, from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities in different parts of the world)
- *Science, Faith and Convergent Technologies*, April 23 – 29
- *Orthodox Theology and Spirituality*, April 25 – May 4, 2005 (to be held in Tirana, Albania)
- *Ecumenical Leadership Workshop*, May 22 – 27
- *The Bible and Human Transformation: A Milieu of Spiritual Ecumenism?* July 13 – 16
- *Ecumenical Renewal of Worship and Music*, July 31 – August 6
- *The 57th Session of the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies*, October 1, 2005-February 25, 2006 (theme: Grace, Healing, Transformation: Exploring the Theme of the WCC Ninth Assembly)
- Master of Ecumenical Studies and Ph.D programs offered in cooperation with the University of Geneva.

To Do: For information and applications, call Kathy Reeves at (1-888)728-7228, x5303 or e-mail kreeves@ctr.pcusa.org. See information on the web at www.wcc-coe.org/bossey.

National Workshop on Christian Unity

The 2005 National Workshop on Christian Unity will gather in New Orleans, at the Sheraton Hotel, on April 2-7. Leaders include preacher Delores Carpenter, Disciples of Christ minister; keynoter Richard Sklba, auxiliary bishop, Milwaukee; Bible study leader Paul Anderson, George Fox University, Oregon, and closing speaker Carol Gallagher, first female Native American bishop in the Episcopal Church.

The Workshop began when a group of Roman Catholics invited other communions to join them in equipping local leadership for the task of ecumenical ministry. There are ecumenical and denominational sessions; a range of seminars address both beginners and professionals.

To Do: See information at www.nwcu.us. E-mail Kathy Reeves at kreeves@ctr.pcusa.org for brochures; register through her office if you are a member of the PC(USA).

Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Athens, May 9-16, 2005. Theme: “Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to Be Reconciling and Healing Communities.” About 500 official delegates. A first for an Orthodox-majority country as host.

Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches

Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006. Theme: “God, in your grace, transform the world.” About 700 official delegates. Will seek to reflect the dynamic of the wider ecumenical movement.

