



**LIVING GOD
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World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

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Information to the member churches on the WCRC's association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Dear sisters and brothers,

Greetings in the name of the Living God!

In preparation for our next General Council, to be held in Leipzig, Germany, 29 June-7 July 2017, there are several mandates from the 2010 Uniting General Council which will be coming to a completion. I would like to update you on one of these in this letter: **associating with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification**.

At its meeting in Havana, Cuba, in May 2016 the Executive Committee decided on a process which shall prepare the WCRC's association to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification during the General Council in Leipzig.

With this association the WCRC will become part of the widening ecumenical consensus on a fundamental doctrine, which already includes the Lutheran, the Roman Catholic¹ and the Methodist churches² and is affirmed in substance by the Anglican Church.³

With this letter we want:

- to share the **revised draft of the Statement of Association** with the WCRC member churches (this draft incorporates the different submissions of the first round of consultation and emphasizes particularly the theological link between justification and justice);
- to inform you about the process of decision making.

In Havana the Executive Committee reconsidered the procedure that will lead to the association. This letter repeals earlier communication about the process. We apologize for any confusion.

Please take note of the **new timeline**:

- **August – October 2016:** Consultation with member churches. **Please share your general feedback on the revised Statement of Association by 1 November 2016.**
- **December 2016:** Decision by the Executive Committee on association with the JDDJ.
- **July 2017:** Ceremony of association with the JDDJ during the General Council in Leipzig.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

In 1999, after many years of committed dialogue, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) was signed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

In the Joint Declaration **Catholics and Lutherans state that the churches now share “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ.”**⁴ They acknowledge that the condemnations relating to the doctrine of justification set forth by the Council of Trent and the Lutheran confessions do not apply to the Catholic and Lutheran teachings on justification set forth in the declaration.

The JDDJ establishes this “common understanding” by the **method of a differentiated consensus.**⁵ This method allows the expression of both differences and consensuses by placing the remaining differences within a still more far-reaching shared conviction. The JDDJ presents the different theological traditions but looks at them from the viewpoint of a common understanding as differences in emphasis and not in substance.

The method of differentiated consensus has a long history in ecumenical dialogue, e.g. in the Leuenberg Agreement between Lutheran and Reformed churches in 1973. The Roman Catholic Church accepted this method in the process that led to the JDDJ.

The process of association

The JDDJ praises this consensus on the understanding of justification by God’s grace as an important step on the way to Christian unity. **For this reason the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation invite other churches and ecumenical bodies to associate with the Joint Declaration.**

In the **process of association** the associating organization is invited to go through the following four steps. The associating body:

1. declares that on the basis of the JDDJ there is now a “common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ;”
2. adds its voice to the differentiated consensus and states that the different theological languages used to express the doctrine of justification in the light of this common understanding are not any longer church-dividing;
3. expresses its own emphasis on the understanding of justification as a contribution to further ecumenical dialogue;
4. and—in a common official statement also signed by the signing partners and associates of the JDDJ—affirms its commitment to strive together for the deepening of the common understanding of justification in theological study, teaching and preaching.

In 2006, the World Methodist Council and its member churches affirmed their fundamental doctrinal agreement with the teaching expressed in the document and associated with the Joint Declaration. In 2016 the Anglican Consultative Council “welcomed and affirmed the substance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.”

WCRC response

In response to this invitation, the Uniting General Council, meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, in 2010, recommended: “To have a consultation within WCRC to consider the possibility of **associating** with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” [emphasis added].

The issue was discussed at subsequent meetings of the Executive Committee of the WCRC. At its meeting in Havana, Cuba, in May 2016, the Executive Committee recommended to joyfully accept the invitation to associate with the JDDJ. In keeping with the Reformed principle, "*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum dei*" ("the church reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God"), the Executive Committee embraced the new ecumenical reality this shared agreement promises. At the same time the Committee resolved that the Statement of Association should emphasize the connection between justification and justice as a Reformed contribution to future ecumenical dialogue on the understanding of justification.

The revised draft of the WCRC's Statement of Association

A small group of theologians has since met and reworked the text based on responses received from some churches and the partners and has made more visible the Reformed contributions to the common understanding of justification. The headings that structure the document point to the particular Reformed emphasis that guides the WCRC's association with the JDDJ:

- "We hear the consensus and agree"
- "We particularly appreciate some of the distinctive insights in the JDDJ"
- "The Reformed have particular emphases and additional insights to bring"
- "We wish to underscore the integral relation between justification and justice"

The last two chapters on the special Reformed emphasis focuses on the Reformed understanding of law and gospel, the reliability of God's promises, the place of good works among the justified and especially on the relation between justification and justice. This last part refers to the confessions of Accra and Belhar and quotes Calvin's conviction that "believers truly worship God by the righteousness they maintain within their society".⁶

The decision-making process

As directed by the WCRC's Executive Committee, we now offer this revised Statement of Association for your feedback and comments by **1 November 2016**. In December the Executive Committee will review your responses and, if the way is clear, will take action to adopt the Statement.

The WCRC is not bound to formal decisions by its members in this case. The new timeline therefore does not set a quorum which must be reached before the final decision. At the same time member churches are not bound to this association, but are, in fact, invited to have ecumenical discussions on the JDDJ on regional level.

During the General Council a common celebration of Christian unity is proposed which will include a public signing of the Statement of Association and the common affirmation of consensus on the understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. Details of the plans for the celebration will be sent to the churches closer to the date of the event being planned.

The Executive Committee recognized that a first draft of the WCRC's response to the JDDJ was sent to some WCRC member churches, as well as to the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. This was a draft text only. Regretting any misunderstanding that this first draft gave rise to, the Executive Committee instructed the General Secretary to inform the member churches on the new timeline for the decision to associate.

I trust that the above information is both comprehensive and clear. If, however, you have any questions about the WCRC's planned association with the JDDJ, please do let me know.

In Christ,



Chris Ferguson (Rev.)
General Secretary

Attachments:

- revised draft of the WCRC's Statement of Association to the JDDJ [August 2016],
- the text of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

¹ The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church can be found at: wrc.ch/jddj.

² The World Methodist Council statement of association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification can be found at: wrc.ch/jddj.

³ Resolution 16.17 by the Anglican Consultative Council on its meeting 8-19 April 2016 in Lusaka can be found at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/234449/acc-16-resolutions-2016.pdf>.

⁴ JDDJ, §5.

⁵ JDDJ, §14.

⁶ Statement of Association, §19.