

WCRC General Council
Address to Mission Plenary
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From Wittenberg to Finkenwalde

Mission means confronting barriers and crossing boundaries, in word and deed, with the liberating love of God known in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Participating in God's mission—“*Missio Dei*”—is intended to be at the heart of the church's life and identity. Thus, mission is no program or Christian enterprise conducted as another activity which the church, or its multiple para-church organizations, fits into its agenda. Rather, it lies at the core of the church, defining its presence in the world, grounding its witness, and framing its discipleship.

God's mission is incarnational, rooted in the sending of God's Son into the world. It takes on flesh and blood, the real stuff of life, engaging and confronting the fresh realities of the world with the intent of renewal and transformation. Therefore, *Missio Dei* is always intensely contextual. The work of the Gospel, empowered by the many tongues of the Spirit present at Pentecost, constantly crosses boundaries of language, race, class, gender, nation and culture, creating communities that embody the promise of a new humanity.

This day at the General Council is focused on God's mission in the world today, in light of our theme (“Living God, Renew and Transform Us”). You have seen the concept paper titled “Communion in Mission” which provides a compelling picture of the forces shaping, and misshaping, the world today. These are identified as chauvinistic nationalism, growing economic inequality, destabilizing climate change, unprecedented forced migration, and increasing militarization and violence. This paints a picture, at least in part, of the grim economic, social, and political landscape of today's world. Within these realities the gospel of Jesus Christ is announced, in flesh and blood, through the ongoing movement of God's mission.

Crucial to all this, however, is a fundamental question. Are we confronted today simply by another set of vexing economic and social developments which require our attention? Or is something deeper at stake? Are we facing forces which constitute a spiritual assault on the integrity and truth of Christian faith in today's world? Is this a time when our response, however well intended, will be inept unless it is grounded in a spiritual resilience that confesses faith in Jesus Christ, through the power of

the Spirit, which unmask and defies powers that would subdue and crush the public integrity of the gospel in the world?

This is, in truth, the crucial question for us to discern as a Communion. And it is deeply serious. I'd pose it this way. When rising forces of nationalistic exclusivism are fueled by racial bigotry, when a naked global struggle for money and power shreds bonds of human solidarity, and when unbridled greed threatens planetary survival, is the truth and integrity of our faith at stake? Is the only response capable of addressing the roots of this crisis one of spiritual resistance and renewal rooted in what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord? In other words, is it a *kairos* moment calling us to a clear discernment of what it means, in this present context, to confess our faith? And must such a confession then shape the communities of those who believe the gospel? In my view, the answer is yes.

We of the Reformed tradition should understand this. One of our unique contributions to Christian history is the conviction that our confession of faith is never over. It does not end, and is not complete, with any specific historic expression or creed, however significant and enduring that may be. Rather, this process of confession, and its reforming impulse, is continuous. This is one of the keys to how, in the words of our theme, the Living God Renews and Transforms Us.

We've experienced this in the journey of our Communion in a dramatic fashion with the Belhar Confession. In the struggle against apartheid, the response of much of the Reformed community and others became rooted in this confession of our faith, centered on unity, reconciliation, and justice. That confession has grown globally, out of its immediate context, framing the confession of faith by Reformed communities around the world, including my own, the Reformed Church in America.

The Accra Confession presents a similar challenge, proposing that global economic inequalities, and the deepening injustice imposed by the prevailing systems of imperial-like power, present realities requiring a fresh confession of our faith. For the past dozen years this proposed Confession has circulated in the life of our Communion in consultations, debate, and reflection. The realities which it named in 2004 have now been compounded with politically potent expressions of aggressive chauvinism, racial bigotry, and a creed of national selfishness that dismisses even the pretense of moral obligation for humanity's common good. The election and policies of Donald Trump most recently and alarmingly epitomize this trend, but it reverberates globally.

The most cogent historical lessons, however, for framing our Communion's mission and witness in this time might be found in the soil and history of the land that is the gracious host for our 26th General Council. We are gathered here in Germany to refresh our memory and our hearts with the passion, faith, and truth which propelled the Protestant Reformation. For this reason, we will travel to

Wittenberg, and recall the courage which it took to confess God's Word and Truth in the face of a prevailing system whose corruption seemed matched only by its unassailable power.

However, I'd suggest that the 26th General Council be a "tale of two cities"—Wittenberg, on the one hand, and the other being Finkenwalde. This city lies on the east side of the Oder River, 365 kilometers north and east of where we meet. Today it's in Poland, and named Zdroje. But before 1945 this was part of Germany, and Finkenwalde was a suburb of Stettin. It was here, in 1935, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer founded an underground seminary of the Confessing Church.

An heir of the Reformation, Bonhoeffer struggled to discern the shape and character of the church's mission and witness in the context where he found himself, during the rise of the Third Reich in Germany. He witnessed a nationalism which was becoming chauvinistic and exclusive, contaminated by racial pride and exploiting economic grievances through bigotry and rejection of those who were different. Political and economic power were married and harnessed to obstruct dissent and reinforce a mindset of cultural superiority in the name of rectifying national grievances.

In all this Bonhoeffer and others saw the established church as deeply complicit, functioning with inexplicable comfort toward this emerging order, whose values so clearly violated the message of the gospel. The conflict intensified as the National Socialist government moved to establish direct control over the "German church." This led to the Barmen Declaration, drafted primarily by Karl Barth and adopted in 1934, laying the theological foundation for establishing the Confessing Church, with the leadership of Martin Niemoller and other German pastors.

Bonhoeffer went to Finkenwalde in 1935 to start an underground seminary that would train pastors to serve in the Confessing Church. He perceived that established Christianity in Germany was failing in the test of that time. It did not produce the depth of discipleship, the strength of commitment, nor the spiritual foundation deep and resilient enough to offer the witness that was required to face the fearsome idolatries propagated by an emerging evil empire.

In response, life together at Finkenwalde focused on building a Christian community capable of nurturing Christian faith that understood the cost of discipleship, and nurtured the means for its practice. Students were encouraged to dwell in the Word, rest in prayer, support one another, and turn in solidarity to those most vulnerable in society. Bonhoeffer sought to create a Christian community capable of instilling and forming a depth of faith capable of resisting the onslaught of evil he saw arising in his country's life.

In 1937 the Gestapo shut down the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, and arrested many of its students. Apparently, the authorities recognized the threat posed by those who simply read the

Bible and prayed about the nature of God's mission in the specific context of their time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer continually asked this question: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" That question, asked in any time, and accompanied by a clear discernment of the times, will undermine the power and authority of any regimes intent on imposing a reign based on the prerogatives of privilege, race, wealth, and might.

It is also our question at this *kairos* moment as our Communion discerns the shape of God's unfolding mission in today's world, and our participation in this work of the Spirit. Asking this question drives us, like those at Finkenwalde, to seek those practices and form those communities whose life and work embody a faith with the power to confront and overturn the idolatries of this era. That rests on a resonant and fresh confession of our faith, and propels us to embrace those ways of discipleship that can sustain our witness in the long run.

This requires far more than the right words. Let's be honest. Getting the words right is both one of the strengths and weakness of the Reformed tradition. We know how important it is to say what we believe, and what we mean. Whether in drafting 95 Theses, or meeting 1,163 times in Westminster Abbey to write a Confession, or memorizing the Heidelberg, or adopting the Belhar, we know that words matter. But the danger is to believe that once we say it correctly, and get the words planted in our heads, then our hearts will automatically follow, shaping our lives.

We face this temptation as well at ecumenical gatherings, like this General Council. It's been my privilege to participate in scores of ecumenical meetings over the past decades. And with English as my mother tongue, I've frequently been placed on drafting committees. Countless sleepless nights have been spent with others struggling over finding agreement on what to say, drafting phrases that would matter to shared memory, and seeking words with the capacity to inspire. Sometimes parts of those statements and reports make a difference, clarifying truth and prompting commitment. But many other times they are adopted after tedious debate parsing phrases in plenary sessions, and then neglected and forgotten.

It requires more than the persuasion of well-crafted words analyzing our present context and commending action, to prompt participation in God's mission in such a time as this. This takes the unfettered allegiance of people's hearts, and the formation of their lives of discipleship. Countless pernicious forces press in the opposite direction, lulling the church back into complicit comfort, condoning narrow, nationalistic loyalties, offering the subtle idols of personal success and material reward, and promoting forms of spiritual escapism. It takes spiritual resistance, nurtured in

communities of faithful disciples, to confront and overcome those forces. That was Bonhoeffer's lesson at Finkenwalde, and should be our own today.

I am not maintaining a simplistic parallel between the rise of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler's attempts to directly suppress and subvert the church, with political realities faced today in the world. Times and contexts are different. But the similarities of forceful appeals to nationalistic chauvinism, racial bigotry, and cultural exclusivism as manipulative reactions to economic anxieties, particularly in the United States and Europe, are chilling. What is parallel to that time and this, for all of world Christianity, is the call to freshly confess faith in ways that shape the church and form disciples with enduring capacity for the spiritual resistance, renewal, and transformation required for this moment in the world's history.

Mission rests on the faith we confess, understood incarnationally in the context of our time. That confession shapes communities of discipleship. Our response to God's mission has its roots in these communities, expressions of the body of Christ in local congregations. It is here, in the congregations where you and I worship, nurtured by Word and Sacrament, that the shape of the Gospel is to be seen and understood, in flesh and blood, by others. That's why it is said that "the local congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel."

People don't just want to hear about faith. They want to see what it looks like in the communities of men and women who claim and are claimed by this faith. When participation in God's mission is placed at the heart of a congregation's life, the Living God Renews and Transforms us. Yet, God's mission is never something which the church confines and controls. Leslie Newbigin said this best:

"Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church its missionary journey."

The World Communion of Reformed Churches, as it plans its work following Leipzig, would do well to focus on how congregations are formed and nurtured which instill faith formation and discipleship that spiritually confront the idolatries of our time. In other words, what does it take for congregations to be shaped by their confession of faith today? How can the Communion gather, connect and strengthen such communities of faith as a means for participating in God's mission?

Such work would be different than in the past. Instead of working primarily on crafting words, we'd focus on shaping lives. Thousands of congregations in the Communion are struggling with the call to respond faithfully, in mission, to the pernicious forces shaping so much of our world. But that can't

be done in isolation. Just as individual members cannot live independently from others in a local church, congregations cannot thrive in their witness if they are isolated from others. That's why we have named ourselves a "Communion."

Could we imagine ways that take seriously congregational journeys in vastly different regions and situations which all strive for costly and faithful engagement in God's mission? Could we connect such congregations in a virtual electronic community, sharing and networking together pilgrimages, and answering from their own contexts the question, "Who is Jesus Christ *for us today*?" Instead of simply Facebook, what if the Communion created "**FaithBook**"? What better way to build avenues for future emerging leaders in the Communion to find their voice, and their allies?

The missional call to confess faith in today's context also points us beyond WCRC to the wider ecumenical community. This prompts us to reflect on who we mean by "Us" when our theme proclaims "Living God, Renew and Transform Us." Today, understanding the radical changes in world Christianity is essential to discerning our context for confession and mission in this time. The geographical shift in Christianity's presence in the world, now firmly placing the dominant future of Christian faith in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, is the most dramatic change of its kind in Christian history. But this is about far more than geography. Most of the Christian world is now developing its faith and witness outside the modern Western culture, and the framework of the Enlightenment, which has been Christianity's predominant home for four centuries. World Christianity is now emerging as a non-Western religion.

With this has come the rapid growth of Pentecostalism throughout the globe. One of our four Christians in the world today now identifies as a Pentecostal or charismatic believer. Similarly, other highly contextualized expressions of Christianity now are emerging in the "global South." Global evangelical bodies shaped by these changes have stances toward human rights, economic justice, and climate change that overlap with the well-established ecumenical agenda. Growth in the Catholic church is being driven primarily by those from these regions, led for the first time in over 1,000 years by a Pope from the "global South."

All this should reshape the WCRC's understanding of who constitutes "Us." Solidarity with the wider church is more essential than ever in the face of growing global threats to life. This stretches our boundaries and past categories of ecumenical partners. The Communion's future outreach should be structured not as much by attention to divisions created by historic church traditions, such as Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, etc. Rather, we should address the growing cleavage between churches rooted in the "global North," with their identity as older, historic churches with a long continuity of faithful witness, and those rooted in the "global South," with their identity mostly as younger, emerging

churches, with thriving vitality but often a more narrow, sectarian mindset. That division is reflected within WCRC as well as in the whole of world Christianity.

The dominant growth of Christianity in non-Western settings also presents a new agenda of theological challenges. WCRC, with its history of formative theological reflection in the wider ecumenical community, can contribute here as well. In the most general terms, these cultures and the churches nurtured within them begin with a different starting point from Western modernity in understanding the relationship of community to the individual. Further, their assumptions for how the spiritual and material dimensions of life relate are sharply different from those spawned by the Enlightenment. And the place of reason and rationality in understanding truth also presents a different paradigm. Despite some attempts, these differing theological and cultural frameworks are not being adequately addressed as core issues determining how faith will be fashioned in the future.

The participation of WCRC in God's ongoing mission, then requires: 1) that the Communion network and nurture communities of missional discipleship; 2) that we expand the breadth of our ecumenical partners; and 3) that we engage a fresh theological agenda and lived Christian experience emerging from the non-Western world. Such mission finds expression in solidarity with the marginalized and most vulnerable, and in fact emerges from those communities. The crisis of global refugees and migration, for instance, not only makes welcoming the stranger a daily existential reality for many in our Communion. We also discover that world-wide, about half of those moving from one country to another today are Christian. An emerging, powerful migrant church is on the move as part of the unexpected expression of God's mission today. As Jehu Hanciles from Sierra Leone says, "Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary."

Moreover, when we follow the trajectory of God's Spirit leading us in mission, we are joined in God's work of redeeming the creation, so imperiled by the willful and wanton destruction of its sacred, life-sustaining capacities. Participating in mission means we are sent as God's people, crossing comfortable and constraining boundaries, and expecting God's liberating love to renew and transform individual lives, communities of discipleship, social structures, and the gift of the created world.

Reflecting on our participation in *Missio Dei* today also urgently raises the challenge our relationship to those of other living faiths, outside of Christianity. How we understand and practice evangelism, our grasp of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world ahead of and beyond the church, and a calling to build bonds of inter-religious fellowship and trust in resisting life-threatening forces, all are now challenges inescapably on our agenda. We are assisted here by ecumenical wisdom, and particularly the recent document by the WCC's Commission on Mission and Evangelism, titled "Together

Toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes.” Perhaps its most important contribution is to place an illuminating theology of the Holy Spirit at the center of our understanding of God’s mission, which opens promising avenues for the WCRC’s future work.

(Our esteemed colleague Dr. Farid Esack will assist us shortly in exploring the inter-religious dimensions of our calling.)

In conclusion, as we meet on this religiously historic landscape, I’m inviting our Communion to embark on a pilgrimage from Wittenberg to Filkenwalde. It’s a journey from the necessity of words to the formation of lives, from the announcement of our declarations to the pronouncement of our discipleship, and from the frenzy of our activity to the building of Christian community. This pilgrimage poses these questions along the way: Are we ready to live into our identity as a *communion*, expecting that we are covenanted together as communities of faithful discipleship obedient to the *kairos* nature of this time? Can we truly place our commitment as WCRC to join in the movement of God’s mission, at the center of our Communion’s life and identity? Are we willing to direct our Communion’s material and spiritual resources toward learning from the practices at Finkenwalde, and all the places like that today, from Belhar to Bethlehem, and from Matanzas to Manado? Can we nurture the formation of Christian faith in communities of missional discipleship that can respond to the test of this time? And will this compel us to participate courageously and joyfully in God’s reconciling and redeeming mission in the world? That is the pathway for the Living God to Renew and Transform Us.