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REPORT OF THE CARIBBEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN AREA COUNCIL (CANAAC) TO THE WORLD COMMUNION REFORM CHURCHES EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

CANAAC has, since its most recent General Assembly held in October 2018 in Guyana, moved forward with a renewed commitment under the General Assembly theme *“Living Faithfully, Building Relationships as a Communion.”*

The Steering Committee which arose from the General Assembly finds as:

Convener: Ms. Angela Martins (United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands)

Co-Convener: Mr. Colin Watson (Christian Reform Church in North America)

Treasurer: Dr. Gail Allan (United Church in Canada)

Secretary: Mrs. Simone-Asha Singh-Sagar (Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago)

Members at large:

Rev. Matthew Sams (Presbyterian Church of Canada)

Rev. Karl Heim buck (Presbyterian Church (USA))

Rev. Jesus Rodriguez (Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba)

Rev. Valeska Austin (Guyana Congregational Union)

Rev. Lisa Vander Wal (Reformed Church in America), *ex officio* WCRC VP for the region

We met virtually via Zoom in December 2018 with plans to meet virtually each quarter during the next two years as we seek to advance our regional expression of the WCRC priorities. One challenge in this is that Rev. Jesus Rodriguez is unable to join us due to internet challenges in Cuba. We continue to seek ways to include his voice in our deliberations.

To set the context for this report it is important to grasp a sense of the energy and space of the General Assembly. Following that, I will outline what we have engaged with already and the larger strategic thinking which pervades.

Our recent General Assembly

The General Assembly was a truly special time for all of us. Most of those present were new to CANAAC and a number of us were young adults. This was a time of life-giving worship, a time of listening and reflection. We had a time, too, of personal immersion into some raw spaces of Guyanese lived realities. Spaces which challenged us to gather again, seeking deeper immersion in the Word as we responded to the call to build relationships as churches strengthening our Communion across the Caribbean and North America in meaningful, lifegiving ways. Of importance as well was that we *must* engage with the voices of youth and young adults within our Communion.

In all these efforts we were mindful of our region's place within the global Communion to which we belong. In the spaces of our General Assembly there was much evidence of the lived emergence of its theme—*Living Faithfully, Building Relationships as a Communion*. What continues to live is the energy of those common spaces we occupied together. It is this which excites me and propels me forward as the Convener.

1. Encouraging positive relationships

The previous General Assembly was held in 2014 in Jamaica and due to a number of challenges, the next one was not held until October 2018. This means that only the 2014 Assembly gathering preceded the 2017 General Council when normally there should have been two. The 2018 Assembly did not receive a report on what was achieved during this period so reference to issues or impacts arising cannot be presented here or built upon. We propose to host our next General Assembly in 2021 with an expectation of the following one in 2023 immediately preceding the next General Council in 2024.

Arising from the General Assembly in October 2018, we sent out the Assembly Message in mid-November 2018. We were intentional in sending this out to all the Heads of Communions as well as all delegates to the General Assembly and also to those member churches who were not present at the Assembly. To the latter group, we invited those eight member churches who were not in attendance to name delegates to CANAAC to serve with us during the next two-year period. This is a work in progress and we will continue to reach out to all our member churches as opportunities present.

During the first five months since our General Assembly I feel that we have made some real gains. I was able to reach out on a more personal note to a number of our members, one of them was Robina Winbush. I invited Robina to serve as one of my mentors during this my first foray into leadership in this ecumenical space. She and I had extensive conversations around my curiosity of the historical back pages of CANAAC and what were some of the unwritten precedents which I needed to be aware of. She offered me helpful insights and shared a number of historical footnotes which I am grateful for. Among other things, she helped me appreciate the precedent role of ecumenical officers on the CANAAC Steering Committee. To hear of her passing as I sat in a Council for World Mission meeting in Guyana as CANAAC (its ecumenical partner) with two CANAAC member churches on 12 March 2019 was numbing. She and I had spoken just a week earlier while she was in Palestine. Robina is a huge loss to CANAAC, a regional ecumenical space she deeply loved and applied herself to. She was very involved in the planning and implementation of our most recent General Assembly, and we will remember the Bible studies and the several movements which made our Assembly so memorable. She shared much with me willingly, and I wanted more. More was not to come. God had other plans.

In preparing this report I reached out to some colleagues with whom Robina has journeyed in spaces, particularly CANAAC, far longer than I have known her. I looked for colleagues who knew her in different ways and all who come to raise thanks to Almighty God for all that Robina was as one of us from this region. This is what they had to say:

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan- Bisnauth, Guyana Presbyterian Church

You have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7)

It is with deep sadness and a profound sense of loss that we received the devastating news of the death of our sister, Rev. Robina Marie Winbush. Robina was a dedicated Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ both as a pastor and a Reformed ecumenist, whose passion for justice and righteousness engendered a remarkable and refreshing impact within the ecumenical movement and in particular, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Caribbean and North America Area Council.

CANAAC is grateful to Robina for her dedicated leadership, especially in the turnaround of the Area Council to enable the strengthening of the Communion through a living and dynamic engagement of member churches in the Caribbean and North America and also with the global Reformed community.

Robina was a beautiful and deeply caring friend and mentor to many of us, counselling and sharing words of wisdom, strength and comfort. She taught us that sisterhood is essential to sustain us in the struggle for justice and peace.

Robina's commitment to gender justice was evident throughout her journey, impacting lives as well as institutions, calling on people to resist all that is evil and to turn around from this world's death dealing ways and to follow the way of Jesus Christ and to believe *"in the power of the resurrection today, right now in the face of death and destruction!... Resistance means committing ourselves to work for and building communities and systems that values and honors each human being as one in whom divine potential exists... Resistance is seeking out those who have been defiled, dismembered, and discarded on the dung heaps of this world and daring to speak words of life, restoring to them all that has been destroyed!"*¹

Rest in peace and power Rev. Robina Marie Winbush. Your legacy will continue to be a blessing onto us. We love you!

¹ Robina Marie Winbush, *Not A Mumbling Word*, page 100 in *Righting Her Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story*, edited by Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, May 2011.

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, United Church of Christ

Rev. Robina Winbush was a close colleague for the eight years that I held the role as ecumenical officer for the United Church of Christ. We held comparable roles in our denominations and typically saw each other multiple times per year, or were present on phone calls. My primary memory of Robina was that she was the first colleague to call when I started as ecumenical officer. She called, welcomed me to the role, and provided a few dates that I needed to be aware of and put on my calendar.

Robina held a role among her colleagues as being the one among us who had been around the ecumenical world for a while. We appreciated her wisdom, her passion for racial justice and her commitment to the ecumenical movement. Her presence will be missed among us. May she rest in eternal peace.

Rev. Michael W. Caine, Old First Reformed United Church of Christ, Philadelphia

I first met Robina at Union Seminary. She was a year ahead of me in school, but always much further ahead in life. I would tell her back then that she had the face of an angel. Truly her smile could light up a room, and it was just the promise of her compassion, grace and wisdom.

We stayed in touch sporadically, mostly because I have friends in a Harlem Presbyterian Church that she used to preach at. How excited I was when I was invited a couple of years ago to be part of the UCC's delegation to the World Communion of Reformed Churches. I realized that Robina was one of the organizers of the North American delegates. I got to spend time with her in Leipzig, Germany, and then in Georgetown, Guyana. She was still Robina, though now matured into a powerful church leader and justice fighter. But the compassion, grace and wisdom were the same. The angel face too. Some things death cannot even destroy. May she be organizing angels above...

These voices are just a mere few but by their inclusion here it is my hope that they offer a glimpse of what a significant loss Robina is to her church (PC(USA)) and not just to CANAAC but the global ecumenical space. May she rest in peace.

Beyond my engagements with Robina, I strategically reached out to a number of others seeking to open conversation spaces around new ideas, support for myself and/or gain movement with our various initiatives. In all these spaces, persons were receptive and helpful both then and now. One person who I must name is Phil Tanis, our support person from the WCRC Secretariat. He has been that and lots more. Phil has been invaluable in helping me grasp the context for several issues before me as well as a major help with our website and our communications efforts generally. Much gratitude to you, Phil, for your all-around support to our region.

As Convener for CANAAC's Steering Committee it is clear too, that there are a number of relationships which need to be fostered. Already identified as a priority, is building good relationships with our member churches and also with their ecumenical officers in particular. Beyond that, there are external relationships with ecumenical partners in the region such as CANACOM and CWM, as well as building good relationships with other WCRC regional councils. Engagement with CWM is already in train. I was invited as an ecumenical partner to the CWM Members Mission Forum which took place in Guyana, 9-14 March 2019. Dialogue is underway with CANACOM around opportunities for us to work together with one expression of that as a shared hosting of future Assemblies. I look forward to meeting with the Conveners from the other regions at this upcoming Executive Committee meeting.

2. Governance and engagement of membership

The Steering Committee has taken both a governance and robust communications focus going forward. A number of learnings emerged from the backdrop of the previous four years. The primary one is the critical importance of nurturing open communication and good relationships between and among our members. A second aspect is around managing equity, ensuring that all member churches have an equal voice in the space of CANAAC. This is particularly important as we have among us member churches that are very large while we have some quite small churches as we also have the complexities of the North – South issue facing us. Nurturing relationships is key. The final issue which became clear quite quickly, was the absent governance processes which were needed in the context to provide clarity and focus for CANAAC to engage its agenda.

One of the first things done was to agree a number of processes that would guide how we operate as a Steering Committee. These ranged from how its members treated communications they received to how the Steering Committee engaged with its wider membership thru working groups, etc. The work on updating our bylaws will incorporate a number of these processes to ensure that the future work of CANAAC is guided by good governance practice.

Our *Directions Document* (workplan) which was started during the General Assembly is a work in progress and not yet finalized as of the writing of this report. We feel that its cover will stretch beyond the two-year period before us as the focus is as such a longer-term plan than simply that which encircles a period between two General Assemblies if we are to properly engage the priority areas of WCRC. That, and the fact we have the issues mentioned earlier to be integrated allowing for a new type of culture to emerge within CANAAC for the longer term.

One critical issue which emerged after our General Assembly is that while the WCRC Constitution was updated in 2017 at the General Council, the Bylaws for CANAAC were not updated to reflect some key changes at the regional level. The chair of our Nominations Committee has already taken up this piece of work to update our Bylaws. Additionally, our Nominations Committee at our General Assembly raised a number of recommendations arising from their work which will now be reviewed in the light of the updated CANAAC Bylaws.

Producing a skills profile instrument was agreed as a way to allow the Steering Committee to be able to draw on the skills of membership in helpful ways for the implementation of its various initiatives; this is in progress. As well, the Steering Committee has agreed as an intentional effort to keep the full membership engaged on an ongoing basis. Our approach to this is via a WhatsApp group set up immediately following the Assembly, and a follow on is that we produce a newsletter to capture the ongoing work being carried out.

3. Financial Management

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson has been the Treasurer for CANAAC since 2011. As such, our funds were managed by her church and subject to its regular auditing process. At the recent Assembly, Dr. Gail Allan (was elected Treasurer and the transfer of our funds to the United Church of Canada is in train.

We have had some discussion around a funding model for CANAAC. Phil Tanis has been asked to investigate and advise the Steering Committee at its next meeting how other regions handle the issue of funding to continue this conversation. Here again, I recognize the need for a governance process which requires a workplan and an annual budget. We need these as helpful inputs to determine the funds needed annually and how they would be used in the furtherance of our Communion's larger efforts.

4. Social media

During the period under report, improving our communications has been a big priority. Thanks to our colleagues at the Christian Reform Church of North America (CRCNA) we have been able to have our website redesigned and it is now being updated regularly, thanks to Phil et al. CRCNA has kindly offered to cover the nominal ongoing cost for the site for us.

A new feature of our website is a page dedicated to *News* about our member churches as well as a page called *Resources* which contains documents helpful to our member churches. We are now finalizing some criteria for our membership to share information with us for our News page. One

feature which will be among the criteria is news items which feature member churches in partnership. This feature is lived out by a post now on our site about the February 2019 meeting of PC(USA) mission partners in Latin America and the Caribbean meeting in Colombia at which Rev. Dr. Yvette Noble- Bloomfield (UCJCI) was the keynote Bible study presenter. We will continue to reach out to our member churches for information of this nature which we can share on our site. As well, we will seek to keep faith with using both English and Spanish on our website as the languages of our region. It keeps faith with a primary feature of our General Assembly's theme "*Living Faithfully, Building Relationships as a Communion.*"

The Resources page started with us posting the useful background documents we received in preparation for the recent General Assembly and this page will continue to be updated as useful reference material becomes available to us. An up-and-coming feature of our Resources page will be Bible studies and reflections produced by our member churches. These we hope to receive in sufficient enough quantity that we can bank them, developing a regular schedule for posting. We believe that all these can be helpful resources which our member churches can access as and when they need them. Feedback from our member churches will guide the evolution of this and other pages on our website. One aspect not yet embarked on is the inclusion of the voice of our youth on our website. In tandem with efforts on our website, our Facebook page is also regularly updated as well.

5. Programmatic areas of focus

Our Directions Document for CANAAC (2019-2021) at the time of writing this report is still a work in progress. What I can share here are highlights from this body of work which aligns itself with the WCRC strategic plan, focusing primarily on those region-specific areas raised by membership at the General Assembly with the addition of one new objective regarding Indigenous peoples.

The Working Group chaired by Rev. Matthew Sams (Presbyterian Church of Canada) has developed a contextual reading of our region to ground this programmatic focus. Arising from the General Assembly the following are the priorities for this region:

1. CANAAC empowering its Communion (full and just participation by all)
2. CANAAC and its Theological Education needs
3. CANAAC and Justice
 - a. Economic Justice
 - b. Social Justice
 - c. Gender justice
 - d. Environmental justice
4. CANAAC as an ecumenical partner in our region

The Steering Committee in its direction to the Working Group was mindful that it wanted a meaningful document with intentionality for the region rather than a shopping list of items. It is anticipated that the document should be ready for submission to the Steering Committee by end of March 2019. Once this is received the members will be invited to offer feedback so that it can be finalized.

5. Venue for 2021 General Assembly

Whilst we have not yet confirmed a host venue for the next General Assembly a marker has been put down. It has been noted that 2021 is a year in which a number of significant ecumenical movements (WCC, etc.) are scheduled to take place so we intend to canvass our members to see

when is the best date for us to plan for our General Assembly. It was agreed that this item needs to be kept on our agenda going forward.

In the overall, I feel very positive about our future as a regional expression of WCRC, very grateful for the support from both the WCRC Secretariat and all our members. There is much to be done as we seek to engage "*Living Faithfully, building Relationships as a Communion.*"

Angela Martins
Convener CANAAC
18 March 2019