

Report of the General Secretary

1. Before all else I want to give thanks to the God of Life for this opportunity for the WCRC Executive Committee to meet virtually in the midst of global challenges and crises of truly historical dimensions after such a long delay.
2. It has been two years since our last full and formal meeting of the Executive in Kappel am Albis, Switzerland. We gather now under the theme “At such a time as this” (Esther 4:14) to carry forward the goals and objectives of 2018-2024 Strategic Plan, *Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen Among Thieves*, and to make crucial decisions related to the leadership and sustainability of the WCRC as a global *koinonia* “called to communion and committed to justice.”
3. This will be my last report to and my last meeting with the Executive as WCRC General Secretary. My seven-year term ends on 31 August 31 2021.
4. The theme, “At such a time as this,” comes from a complex, entangled and highly problematic text emerging from a complex and problematic context that seeks to affirm that we are called to resolute faith and action in the defense of life no matter where we find ourselves in a complex and life-threatening historical circumstance.
5. The text is therefore apt for our theme. There is no doubt as to the depth, breadth, and gravity of the crises facing the *oikoumene* (the whole inhabited earth: peoples, planet, creation). The ecological, economic, racial, gender, and social injustices which are the product of the ravages of militarized empire defended and protected by systems and ideologies of white supremacy, toxic authoritarian nationalisms, patriarchy, and colonialism bringing us to the stark reality of world living under the oppression of global apartheid.
6. As the Earth community was stirring and grasping to understand the immensity of the threats to life we were faced we were struck with the COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic deepened and worsened the “pre-existing,” death-dealing global crises. The pandemic continues to bring unprecedented tolls of disease and death. Moreover, the pandemic is apocalyptic in biblical terms; it has unveiled, unmasked, revealed, and made plain the reality of global apartheid; it has made us confront global injustice; it has revealed the fault lines of our civilizational crisis; exposed the limits of Eurocentric modern ideologies; and laid bare the truths about the inability and lack of will of the current world (dis)order to serve an economy of life. The limits and contradictions of current unjust approach to multilateralism was plain to see in response to COVID-19 and continues with what seems to be the refusal to overcome what many in the global south call vaccine-apartheid.
7. Achille Mbembe calls our present reality “necropolitics” where the few and powerful through systems, structures, culture and ideologies not only oppress, socially control, and exploit the lives of others but decide who lives and who dies.

8. In trying to name well this current time it is clearly as we have discovered a time of crisis at the “civilizational” level in the Biblical sense of judgement and a situation which demands moral resolution. Moreover, this time is clearly “*kairos*.” It is a time also of great rising up. Of growing resistance to the status quo. Of children, youth, women oppressed, and dispossessed people saying no to the systems and structures that destroy life and yes to justice, solidarity, love, and transformation. The reading of the signs of the times, interpreting them, and acting faithfully requires the courage and willingness to engage complexity and diversity that comes as allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of the living God as followers of Jesus the crucified and disposed one.
9. Our theme is apt. But is more of a task than a prescription. To know what God requires of us ... at a time such as this requires discernment, in fact to know what time it is. And to locate ourselves as Esther was forced to at the intersection between our faith in God and our entanglement in the current unjust realities of our world while standing with all within creation where life is threatened. As I will outline below discerning together as a Communion what God requires of us is a great challenge and an even greater gift for the WCRC and our member churches and regions.
10. This report will follow the structure and framework of the Strategic Plan 2018-2024 and will focus on the key issues and decisions facing the WCRC Executive at this time.
11. Since our meeting in Kappel the Strategic Plan Program Group (SPPG), together with the program reference groups and the executive staff and general secretary have moved forward in focusing the Strategic Plan as adopted in making it easier to understand and implement.
12. The **overarching goal** until the next General Council:

By 2024 the World Communion of Reformed Churches will strive to be significantly strengthened and increasingly effective in living out God’s call to communion and commitment to justice.

As a Global Koinonia, we are marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. The WCRC, with all the partners God provides, serves its member churches and also works for the transformation of the whole world, which is so loved by God but still trapped by multiple injustices and death, having fallen among thieves (john10:10).

As it strives to fulfill its vision, the WCRC works through two strategic trajectories:

- *Strengthening and deepening the Koinonia.*
- *Growing and expanding its work for a greater global impact.*

The trajectories are applied through five interlocking dimensions:

- *Communion*

- *Justice*
- *Theology*
- *Mission*
- *Ecumenical Engagement and Interreligious Cooperation*

13. The Strategic Plan is structured around four verbs, two trajectories, and five interlocking dimensions our work.
14. In the last two years the Secretariat together with the SPPG has simplified the number of program areas to five corresponding to the five interlocking dimensions.
15. There now are impact-oriented goals and objects for each program area and also operational goals for nonprogrammatic work. Priorities and work plans are established for each program together with the reference groups and relevant working groups. This process is coordinated and evaluated by the SPPG.
16. The five programmes are:
 - P1: Cultivating a Justice Communion
 - P2: Covenanting for Justice
 - P3: Doing Theology for Transformation
 - P4: Engaging God's Mission in a Context of Crisis
 - P5: Working with All the Partners God Provides
17. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis required a total rethinking concerning the implementation of the Strategic Plan. The activities and programs related to the Strategic Plan up to the end of 2020 including adjustments made under the direction of the SPPG and the officers group were reported upon last year and the relevant accountability reports sent to all members of the Executive at that time (they are contained in an addendum to this report solely to be entered into the official record).
18. My report will share the updates since that time and particularly focus on the framework that has been defined for moving forward with the Strategic Plan in light of the current global context, the restrictions, limitations, and challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the completion of my term as general secretary, being at the mid-point of the Strategic Plan period, and the urgency of planning for the 2024 General Council.
19. By God's grace we can report that our communion is well on track in the implementation of our Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan framework and our structures, especially regional networks, have allowed us to respond to the crisis and advance our goal according to our two trajectories even while virtually all regular activities were suspended. Making extensive use of virtual communication we have significantly deepened and strengthened the life of our Communion. We have been able to create together a Communion-wide process of discerning, confessing, and witnessing that has marked by creativity and resilience and robust theological and prophetic engagement.

The details of the “COVID and Beyond” process can be found in the attached reports and specifically the SPPG and Communion and Theology report.

20. In the midst of untold suffering, crises, and trials we have in fact an irrefutable indication of health and vitality of our Communion in face of an unprecedented crisis where by the power of the Spirit and upheld by the God of life, not only have continued to be faithful to our vocation but have adapted to the adversity in such a way as to emerge even stronger as a *koinonia*.
21. Thanks to the generosity of our largest program fund partners, the *Tavola Waldenses*, EMW, and the Church of Westphalia we were able to redirect programme funds to emergency and COVID-related response of our member churches. This has been tremendously important again as an indication of how important our Communion is offering global support and solidarity to our members many of whom would have had no other external support. The work of the Reformed Partnership Fund also continued to transform through this period as it moved from beyond just a channel of funds to a vehicle to support our churches to work together as a family often regionally and sub-regionally in service to others. In fact, after all our struggles with the operation of the Partnership Fund this period has allowed us to fully overcome administrative failings of the past and one could say “put the partnership” back into the RPF! The specific details of the projects supported and breakdown by countries and regions are available in attached reports.
22. In keeping with our “communion strengthening trajectory” we can also say confidently that our activities in this period made visible WCRC’s call to build a just communion and commitment to justice and the global prophetic vocation true to the Reformed tradition in its diversity. This crisis has called us to intentionally attend to the full participation of our family by region, language groups, members of governing bodies, networks, Indigenous peoples, persons living with disabilities, youth, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, racialized communities. We still have far to go but this crisis has set us on the course to ensure that in literally everything we do we do it with an eye to building a just communion. In our discernment process the centrality of justice to our faith and witness has been affirmed and reaffirmed. It is part of our distinctive identity to bring with our theological reflection and robust engagement with scripture our prophetic witness to justice.
23. Similarly, we have continued strongly in these last 15 months to make a global impact as WCRC. This has been both in terms of consolidating our presence in global ecumenical fora such as ACT Alliance where we are now full members and active in the ACT Global Forum, The Global Christian Forum Steering Committee, the Leadership Group of the WCC Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace Reference Group, convening the JDDJ follow up steering group, initiating and participating in ecumenical forums and peace processes for Taiwan, Cameroon, Palestine/Israel, and Colombia. In coordinating new efforts for coordinated ecumenical responses to emergencies and global conflicts. These specific activities are reported in the appended reports but are mentioned here to indicate that

our global impact has in fact increased during this recent period in spite of a total inability to travel and be physical present at consultations or in contexts of conflict.

24. In fact, the significant forward movement of our Strategic Plan's goals and the refocusing of us way of working has reflected the increased focus and priority setting which was needed in the first two years of this Strategic Plan cycle. However, our goals are still extremely ambitious and continue to strain the capacity of both staff and non-staff alike.
25. The capacity issue is not to be ignored and goes along with the extremely positive fact of being on track with both trajectories of our Strategic Plan overarching goals. We will not continue to meet our basic goals if capacity issues are not addressed. This means both new resources and new and different ways of meeting our goals.
26. We are facing a sustainability crisis. A major issue raised in the Strategic Plan which has been with WCRC in some way or other since 2010 is the unresolved challenged of long-term **sustainability**. The Strategic Plan goals include to both increase executive staff capacity and to resolve the medium- and long-term problem of funding of the WCRC core budget. The fundraising for a new executive staff position to support global advocacy and to address the gender justice deficit in the executive staff complement have been frustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Significant funds have been offered by PC(USA) but more must be found to actually allow us to hire. But the fundraising for that position even before COVID-19 was in tension with an annual shortfall in the WCRC core budget. It was not possible to fundraise for a new permanent position when each year we started the year not knowing if the we could raise enough for the current staff.
27. As outlined in the Strategic Plan and in our self-understanding as a Communion sustainability cannot be reduced to financially security. At the same time, we have a specifically financial crisis on short, medium, and long terms that must be addressed if we are to meet our goals as a global *koinonia*.
28. The Financial Report and the Auditor Report which are appended make it clear that each year we have successfully closed with a balanced budget or in some cases a surplus. Every year during my time as general secretary, I together with the general treasurer have had to approach member churches or private donors or seek special projects to balance the core budget. This situation has been frequently reported to the Executive and well known to all of us. I will therefore not rehearse the details about previous fundraising efforts. Although it must be acknowledged that the Council for World Mission (CWM) made an extraordinary and generous donation of a million British pounds for a capital fund and that even still we have not been able to leverage that to solve the core budget issue.
29. I stress core budget because you will recall that we receive adequate program funding from very faithful and generous funding partners. Even with the efforts to change our membership contribution formula to make it fairer we have never been able to meet our

goal of having the contributions cover the basic core expenses of salaries, governance, and infrastructure. In fact, the executive salaries are supported by funding partners to larger extent already. The largest percentage of the contributions come from two regions and very few churches. Most of our churches in those regions report declining membership, shrinking resources, and aging membership.

30. It is important to point out that as the world's largest Protestant Christian communion in keeping with Reformed values we, in fact, have the smallest and by all counts modest secretariat and staff complement. It is also important to know that most global and regional ecumenical and church organizations are facing similar sustainability issues in light of the global economic situation and radically changing patterns in ecumenical funding.
31. My term as general secretary comes to and end on 31 August 2021.
32. The WCRC finds itself therefore at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of major global crises, a transition of leadership, a suffering but vital Communion with excellent staff leadership, and dynamic participation of its members well on the way to meeting its strategic vision and a major persistent structural sustainability crisis on the short, medium and long term.
33. The officers named a General Secretary Search Committee as has been previously reported. The committee's report is appended indicating that they are not yet in the position to bring a name or names for the consideration of the Executive.
34. The officers, in light of the Search Committees' report, taking the current pandemic restricts into account, and considering the sustainability issues have paused the search process temporarily and are presenting a proposal for the consideration of the Executive for a one-year collegial interim secretariat in order to address long-term sustainability challenges before electing a general secretary to a seven-year term. This proposal and its details will be presented at a separate moment in our meeting.
35. In order to take up the sustainability challenge and meet the goals and activities outlined in the Strategic Plan which have been frustrated by the last 15 months of COVID-19 impacts, there is a specific proposal aimed at mobilizing the whole Communion to address together the sustainability challenge in such a way as to strengthen our *koinonia* and common witness. The proposal for a Sustainability Task Group will be addressed on 27 May at the designated discernment session.
36. The pandemic and the forced changes it brought has also delayed the planning for our 2024 General Council. Progress on a plan to consider several Asian churches working together to co-host the General Council in one country but supported by a consortium of churches in the same region has been delayed. Therefore, there is a proposal to form a General Council Task Group to move the planning processes forward even though we are not yet able to make specific proposals on venues and budget at this meeting. That

proposal will be discussed today during the discernment session on my report. The terms of reference and proposed group members are presented for your consideration in an attached document.

37. The agenda and methodology of this virtual meeting is limited in time available and by the restrictions of a Zoom meeting. Therefore, the heart of my report is lifted up at the juncture at which we find ourselves and the key decisions (beyond budget decisions and receiving accountability reports) before you as proposed by the officers in light of the Strategic Plan. First the proposal for a collegial interim general secretariat. Then to consider the setting up of a Sustainability Task Group. And thirdly a General Council Task Group.
38. The officers group, at the advice of the general secretary and Executive Staff Council, have further recommended to deal with decisions emerging from the task groups and Strategic Plan-related issues not able to be dealt with at this meeting, that there be a second virtual meeting held 29 November to 1 December 2021.
39. The **SPPG Report is appended**. The SPPG has been dealing with the oversight of the implementation of the Strategic Plan programme. The three programme reference groups report to the SPPG and each reference group leader is a member of the SPPG. The SPPG has been actively involved in the process of refocusing the programme work in the face of the pandemic. The general secretary and the president are SPPG members to ensure close communication and coordination. A very full SPPG report was sent in writing to the Executive at the end of 2020. A new group was set up to coordinate the various initiatives in the peace and reconciliation work called the Peace and Reconciliation Coordinating Group as the present general secretary and the two programme secretaries are all three involved in peace and reconciliation initiatives.
40. We are at mid-term in the Strategic Plan cycle. Normally a mid-term review with adjustments would be proposed, however, given that the COVID-19 crisis has forced a total reworking of the programme activities and work plan and that a new framework was adopted through the "COVID and Beyond" process, the SPPG has decided to affirm those changes as representing the necessary mid-term review while still considering a further reflection later this fall depending on the impact on programmes by the decisions made by this Executive.
41. To summarize key parts of the appended report: "The Reference groups strongly affirmed the ongoing work of the Strategic Plan." "We are agreed this is not a time for scaling back but stepping up." "Towards that end we commend and commit to developing a new working model that is less leader dependent."
42. "We have seen in the 'COVID and Beyond' process what is possible in the way of involving people from all over the world...In some ways the communion is more connected and activated than ever." "The SPPG commends the Executive staff for their creative, flexible and effective leadership in these challenging times."

43. In their report the SPPG makes special note of the capacity challenges during a possible interim, noting, “The primary answer to the diminished staff capacity should—whenever possible—not be to downgrade goals, but to develop a programme model that will allow the implementation of the objectives of the Strategic Plan.”
44. The Report of the Communion and Theology Executive is appended. Special note is made to the items under “Programme work under the conditions of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” This outlines the process and content related to a fundamental shift in our programme work now brought within the framework of “What does God Require of Us? Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in Time of COVID-19 and Beyond.”
45. Following the structure of the Strategic Plan the Communion and Theology Report outlines the activities and related to P1: Cultivating a Just Communion. We note with great satisfaction the reactivation of the editorial board of the *Reformed World* and the decisions to tie the contents of *Reformed World* closely to the other programme activities of the Communion. Also under P1, there is important information on the communion dimension of the change of working style and focus of the Reformed Partnership Fund. the logistic details are found in the Communication and Operations report (also attached).
46. The Communion and Theology report details P3 activities related to Doing Theology for Transformation with additional information about the “COVID and Beyond” discernment process. The process is a lens for understanding the current integration of the WCRC programme work.
47. The report updates on the Global Institute of Theology (GIT). Please note that the face-to-face meeting of GIT will be held in 2022 with GIT students being involved in 2021 “COVID and Beyond” activities.
48. In the report, P4 outlines specific mission activities. The Cameroon Ecumenical Forum has been successful launched and WCRC through Hanns Lessing who continues to provide significant leadership.
49. The GRAPE—Global Reformed Advocacy Platform for Engagement—is a work in progress and is tied to seeking partnering with Bread for the World and securing additional executive staff capacity.
50. P5: Ecumenical Engagement. Of special note are the significant steps taken to follow up on past and current ecumenical dialogues and proposed future activities. Please note the upcoming webinar on 4 June 2021 on justice and justification, as well as the very heartening report on the progress of follow up to the JDDJ.
51. The Justice and Witness Report lifts up particularly the importance of continuing the planning for a WCRC Youth Summit in 2022 which was postponed due to COVID-19.

52. The report stresses the need to follow up on the issues of sexuality and justice and a consultation to follow up on the Chennai Consultation on Sexuality.
53. The “COVID and Beyond” process has allowed forward movement on the justice work with people living with disabilities. The work with Indigenous peoples continues despite frustrations due to covid restrictions.
54. The Justice Report emphasizes that the NIFEA work and particularly the GEM School has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. However, much of the work was picked up online. And progress is being made and important webinars have been held. And the ZacTax campaign has advanced. We are extremely happy to announce that the World Methodist Conference has joined the NIFEA consortium along with WCC, LWF, CWM, and WCRC.
55. The peace and reconciliation work has really intensified in this period and is largely shared between the general secretary and the justice and witness desk. As this is being written we are involved in specific and intense processes in Korea, Palestine/Israel, Colombia, Cameroon, Myanmar, Taiwan, Philippines, Bolivia, West Papua, and other contexts less intensely.
56. The Communications and Operations Report is appended. The report outlines the adjustments necessary in the last 15 month and special projects such as the database project funded by EKD which is both a major need for WCRC and a great opportunity to collaborate with other ecumenical organizations.
57. As mentioned earlier this report explains the details about changes in the operation of the Reformed Partnership Fund which we are pleased to report is working extremely well thanks to concerted effort by all staff and an excellent committee.
58. The good work in operational effectiveness has a consequence in not allowing as much time for communications, notwithstanding the good work done in newsletters, social media, and the website and plans for a new website design.
59. Another great gift of the COVID process has been to move the dynamic relationship with our regional councils to a new place of communication and cooperation for which we give thanks.
60. The UN Office Report is appended. Great Thanks to Ryan Smith for his time with us during his tenure in the office and welcome to Sue Rheem. We appreciate the important work done and hope that through the justice and witness desk this relationship will become even more active over the next years.

61. The John Knox International Reformed Centre relationship had not been getting the time and attention it deserved since we left Geneva in 2014. In the last year we have re-invigorated the relationship and are now part of the committee structure and intimately involved in the plans for a new future for the centre. We are pleased that the Protestant Church in Switzerland will be representing WCRC on the John Knox Committee.
62. The internship program continues, and we are grateful to Meta Ginting from Indonesia, our current intern, who has extended her time with us to the end of the year. Jessica Bwali from Zambia left at the end of last year. It has been a tough time to be interns but their resilient and open attitude and considerable skill has added to the ability of the Hannover staff to move forward creatively during this period. Great thanks to them.
63. It has been a challenging time on all fronts with the administrative staff in a period where remote work was the norm. Weekly worship and regular zoom meetings have help keep us connected.
64. Sanjog Patro has been the temporary assistant to the general secretary, and he finishes his time with us at the end of June. Werner Joecker will be leaving us at the end of June as well to take up new opportunities. Anne Krüger and Amritha Perumalla continue. We are in the process of temporarily adjusting the administrative staff complement from four to three and regrouping the responsibilities and changing the staff model. We are currently seeking a person for the position of Administrator for the General Secretariat as one step towards the new model.
65. If the Interim Plan Proposal is approved that means that there is an effective reduction in core staff from eight to six (of course noting the invaluable contribution of the interns and that of our volunteer finance coordinator, Gerhard Plenter, to whom thanks is also given). Urgent attention must be paid to giving the staff adequate support and bending all efforts to increase capacity and to adopt different shared working methods if I may be bold to say.
66. Combining a personal and official remark I want to extend my most profound appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to all the WCRC staff. Other reports have stressed the diligence, resilience, dedication, competence, flexibility, team work, and positivity of the staff during this period. That is even yet an understatement. The WCRC has an exemplary staff team and I thank them for all the support, cooperation, wisdom, humour, and hard work in service of justice and in care of our Communion.
67. At such time as this...I end my time not able to reconnect personally with the people as I had hoped for some farewell and closure, and contexts that have shaped my time with WCRC over these last seven years, but the virtual reality has allowed me to be in daily touch with so many.
68. I want to express my full support for the executive staff time in the time of interim if that be the decision of the Executive.

69. I express my gratitude to our president and the officers, the Executive members, and all those in the regions, networks, and committees with whom I have had the pleasure to serve.

70. The Strategic Plan is a clear expression of our prophetic task and we have been bold to ask together what God requires of us at this time...you know, says Micah, yes you know...do justice, love kindness and walk in God's way.

Thanks be to God.

Rev. Chris Ferguson
General Secretary