

## **Address of the President**

Dear respected Executive Committee members and partners,

We meet in critical times, while the world faces continued injustices besides the COVID-19 pandemic. We hear of the escalated violent situation in Jerusalem and Gaza between Israel and Palestine, resulting in increasing numbers of deaths, disregarding any respect of human rights and international law, supporting an apartheid approach away from the dignity of the people. We recognize the unjust practices of the Filipino government and its increased repression and oppression on the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and other such laws, practicing harassment of the church leaders and its workers. We identify the violent repression against the popular protests in various cities of Colombia where the Colombian government does not respect the dignity and rights of protestors and suppresses dialogue around the concerns relating to the withdrawal of the tax bill, and the passage of bill 010 on health, the national mass vaccination plan, and basic income. The three mentioned situations are but few from the many injustices that our churches face today in different contexts around the Communion.

I start my address with the reality that the people are in, and the continued struggle for justice that the Communion committed its journey to, at a time where the coronavirus captured our attention and became the injustice that silenced the cries of other injustices, merely because it unified the world with similar pain. The corona impact on people and their struggle towards lived justice became above all injustices. Corona created a new reality that crippled us, threatened us, distracted us, and left us insecure about the future. Yes, these are difficult times and challenging days, where we face every day the cry of the struggling around the world, whether in India, Brazil and Latin America, Africa or other countries where death has become a daily reality, and the fear of tomorrow with all its uncertainties and unpredicted developments urges us to live in the moment and to discern how to remain a Communion of hope, challenged throughout our churches in strengthening our witness in response to the imperatives of the Accra Confession and the call for an economy of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the injustices that surrounds the world whether it is social, political, or economic. It exposed inequality, exploitation, and oppression that are rooted in economic systems and exploited the dignity of people where healthcare and other fundamental rights are only available to those who can afford it. Almost everywhere the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized are most affected by the disease and by the measures of disease control. The pandemic situation has opened our eyes on many challenges, and how to balance between the corona pandemic challenge and other injustices is key on the coming journey of the Communion.

### **A call for renewed imagination**

How do we stand in the face of the corona crisis, define our future, growth, strength, and role as a Communion? Still a crisis could become an opportunity, when in the midst of our pain and

struggle, we see hope, mainly because God is with us, as we strengthen one another. This is a time of building a stronger Communion, a prophetic one, an impactful presence in every place that hurts.

Today is a time of *kairos* as well. In Greek there are two words for time: *chronos*, which is a sequential, measured, linear moving from the past to future and has no freedom—and *kairos*, a time of imagination that cannot be controlled or possessed. *Kairos* is circular, moving back and forth, without beginning or ending, and knows no boundaries. It is numinous time where the divine interferes and shapes us in a new way.

It is not an easy way to balance between *chronos* and *kairos*, especially where the concept of time as *chronos* is disturbed, but in such synchronicity of *chronos* and *kairos* lies our deepest consolation and our steepest aspiration. *Chronos* time is controlled, organized, and predictable while *kairos* time is a time of enrichment, rich opportunities, inspiration, and imagination. *Kairos* time is disturbing time as well, but pushes us to new realities.

In the midst of our disturbance, we recognize the *kairos* where we are called to act, be prophetic voices, and strive towards healing the world from the long-lasting injustice that even a vaccine will not heal. It is a *kairos* moment in our self-understanding as churches and communion and our mission as we prepare the agenda of our next General Council. It is our role to seek new ways of strengthening the Communion and transforming the world as we are transformed ourselves. To be the church in the public square reflecting the presence of God in spite of difficult times. To dream of new alternatives and see visions of a reality based on justice. As we hear the witness of our churches around the Communion, our envisioning is deepened recognizing new possibilities, new blessings. Then we gain hope in what God is doing among us and can still do.

On July 2017 the WCRC signed a valued document, the Wittenberg Witness, which was an expression of deepening the unity in the body of Christ between Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and WCRC member churches around the world. It expresses the common call of churches to witness in the world. The Wittenberg Witness, which was the fruits of theological dialogues, claimed in section 6 for a call for new imagination:

*Together we long for renewed imagination of what being the church in communion could mean—for our world, in our time.*

*We need new imagination to live together in ways that would embrace our unity not only as gift but also as calling.*

*We need new imagination to dream a different world, a world where justice, peace and reconciliation prevail.*

*We need new imagination to practice spiritualities of resistance and prophetic vision, spiritualities in service of life, spiritualities formed by the mission of God.*

When the Wittenberg Witness was written we never imagined that this would speak so clearly to the present situation. The corona situation challenges us to be shaped with new imagination

about how to be the church for today; the Communion for today. It calls us to live up to new imagination, to think with imaginative minds towards change through practical steps, to be in *kairos* time and have new imagination. We believe that the new imagination is led by the work of the Holy Spirit among us and urges us to join efforts and live with courage and assurance that we are in *kairos* time, awaiting new shaping for a new tomorrow.

### **Renewed imagination for transition**

Today we are in a time of transition where current General Secretary Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson finishes his seven-year term by 31 August 2021. Rev. Ferguson started his role as a general secretary in 2014 at the edge of a new moment of renewal and transformation in the life of the Communion. Just as the Communion was moving to a new location, Hannover, Chris was called to be part of this renewed commitment to communion and justice. It happens that Chris also leaves at a critical edge of the life of the Communion where the Communion is challenged to face the COVID-19 pandemic as a new reality with all its impact on the life of the churches around the Communion which led the Communion to start a discernment process, trying to envision, “What does the Lord require of us?”

Despite the unusual days and difficulty of meeting face-to-face—where every member church was overwhelmed with the sudden threat to church life and even life itself—in the midst of all discouragement, the officers with the general secretary took courage to continue and to proceed in thinking of the future, at a time where no clear horizon for the world was seen. At a time of discouragement, we committed ourselves to continue and search for the next general secretary. This is why a search process was initiated for the position of general secretary by the officers and a search committee was composed. The people contacted were enthusiastic to join the efforts towards moving forward at a critical time. The General Secretary Search Committee was composed of:

- Rev. Dr. Yvette Noble Bloomfield (Moderator), United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands
- Rev. Dr. Dario Barolin, AIPRAL/Waldensian Church of the River Plate
- Rev. Najla Kassab, WCRC President, National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon
- Ms. Sara Lisherness, Ruling Elder, Presbyterian Church (USA)
- Rev. Catherine McMillian Haueis, Protestant Church in Switzerland
- Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana
- Rev. Dr. Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, Church of South India
- Dr. Johann Weusmann, WCRC General Treasurer, Evangelical Church in the Rhineland

The committee has worked diligently and delivered an interim report to the officers indicating that they have received applications and nominations and reached out to potential candidates. A short list of candidates was interviewed, but the Search Committee did not succeed in presenting a name for a general secretary. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic created a disruptive impact that led many potential candidates to indicate that they were not able to

consider a major move to Hannover at this time. At the same time the economic impact on WCRC member churches underlined the ongoing reality that much of the core budget is funded by churches who found themselves with difficult financial situations and dwindling budgets. Although this financial challenge impacted the whole ecumenical movement, it has affected WCRC particularly.

The WCRC has been able to balance its budget annually since the move from Geneva. Important support has been given by key ecumenical partners as well as member churches. The WCRC has, due to the generosity of key partners, very solid and reliable sources of program funds. However, the Communion's core budget is facing a challenging deficit for 2021, even with adjustments made to the core budget because of the pandemic, and the prospects for future budgets are even more challenging.

This is why the officers decided to ask the Search Committee to temporarily pause their work in order to allow some time for the pandemic-related conditions to improve, and to allow more qualified candidates to consider a major move and very importantly to ensure that the long-term sustainability issue is addressed so that electing a general secretary to a seven-year term happens in a fiscally responsible manner.

The officers met regularly to discuss the situation and think of a paradigm that emerged around the question of which tasks the Communion needs to meet in the coming year, knowing that the world will take another year until it can again function normally. An interim plan was prepared through discussions between officers, general secretary, and executive secretaries, proposing a plan for the consideration of the Executive Committee for one year to cover the period from the conclusion of the general secretary's term after 31 August.

From 1 September, the WCRC shall operate under an interim period. In the interim period, the three executive secretaries will collegially take up the functions of the general secretary as defined in articles X, XI, XII, and XIV of the Constitution and section V of the Bylaws, and an acting general secretary from the executives will be appointed to represent the WCRC. A mid-term review conducted by the Officers' Committee not later than February 2022 will be carried to ensure that different factors are in place: the interim plan, the sustainability efforts, and search process (please see the "Interim Plan Proposal" with a more detailed presentation for the interim period structure presented later). At the same time the Search Committee will continue its work to present a candidate for the Executive Committee to consider.

The interim period will allow a new model of shared responsibility where the involvement of the officers, executive members, and regional leaders will be vital. This will allow a stronger participation from the regions and more involvement from the Communion churches and leaders in sustaining the transitional model. We look forward to the interim model which hopefully will allow new participation and new imagination in building a stronger communion.

## **Renewed imagination for confessing**

The Communion, challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic as a new reality with all its impact on life, started a discernment process known as “COVID and Beyond,” trying to envision what does the Lord require from the Communion today? It is a process where the Communion is striving to establish a renewed and refreshed theological understanding of the current crisis, through a wide discernment process on the present crisis and to provide for a prophetic theological response to move towards a confessing Communion—engaging the whole Communion on local and regional levels; providing space for the regions to share challenges, prophetic theologies, and activities of witness with the global level.

The “COVID and Beyond” process has inspired the Communion to ask the right questions at the right time and set the strategy for the new journey. In the line of the strategic plan, the “COVID and Beyond” process infused new breath in the Communion, to help member churches to get closer and discern together, to hear the cry from different regions, and to strive to experience strength together. I believe this new process will open our eyes to new realities. As president I discovered the commitment of the leaders and partners of the Communion in the process where we are enriched with the blessings of discerning as a Communion. This process allowed new imagination in the life of the Communion and new hope. It is a new journey that will send us out anew to a broken world, away from fear, witnessing to a God of Life.

As we move to the closing of the process of “COVID and Beyond” we await to be a confessing Communion, with new imagination that is shaped by the journey of discerning, witnessing, and confessing—enabling the Communion to provide a prophetic theological response and move to a confessing moment.

## **Renewed imagination for sustainability**

The WCRC is challenged today by sustainability related to the core budget, which finances large portions of the salary bill and office expenditure. While funds for programs are usually acquired without problems, we are challenged to bring the WCRC to a level of sustainability which allows the continuation of its operations.

As our strategic plan states:

*Sustainability should not be defined narrowly in financial terms. We are sustained in all things by the Lord Jesus Christ, who brings our communion into being and nurtures it according to God’s will. While organizational sustainability, including financial stability, is one important part of the faithful living out of our communion, we also recognize and celebrate that we have much to share that sustains us in time and space. We take seriously the sharing of prayer, time, friendship, goodwill, and all the gifts of the Spirit as we carry out our ministry. All this is integral to the sustainability of the WCRC.*

We are challenged today to work towards a new imagination on how we will sustain the work of the Communion. Sustainability is an expression of commitment, relations, ownership, and deepened communion. Sustainability is at the heart of strengthening the communion as a goal.

Renewing our imagination for sustainability will encourage the continuous commitment of those member churches that already contribute substantially to the WCRC budget and create the conditions to raise funds in regions who are currently not yet contributing according to their capacity—besides support from partner organizations.

This is why a Sustainability Task Group will be formed to allow a new approach in this regard and think of a sustainability model which is more intricate than the current one. The “COVID and Beyond” process which involves regions and member churches has already laid the ground for a stronger communication that will help us to think together of better ways of building a strong, sustained, and hopeful Communion. Our hope of sustainability is linked to our togetherness and commitment for our witness and work for justice. It is far from giving up, just as we discover that the budgets of churches were affected. What brings us together is not money, but commitment to our Reformed identity and witness together.

We are called today to join hands, allowing our imagination to find new initiatives for sustainability whether in raising funds or other ways of supporting the work of the Communion.

### **Renewed imagination for inclusion of all marginalized**

One of the essential roles that the Communion calls for is inviting the marginalized to the table of the Communion. The “COVID and Beyond” process has echoed the voice of those who felt marginalized especially due to the coronavirus. Differently-abled people shared their stories of being left out on journeys of justice, as did the youth, the Indigenous groups, and many who were marginalized due to race, colour, sexuality, and other discriminations. We are called in the line of our strategic plan to make sure that all are included—also engaging in dismantling patriarchy, empowering women in church and society, and scrutinizing and auditing the place of women in leadership and decision-making in church life.

At a time of distancing the world is challenged with how to mend the distancing culture. We are challenged to renew our imagination in inviting all those who are distanced and to continue dealing with the injustices that have lasted too long. To stay focused on all kinds of injustice remains at the heart of our struggle. As we recognize the world fallen among thieves, we are called to continue to shed the light and point to realities, to name the thief, and to recognize the roots of injustice towards all who are excluded, even among us, where our practices blinded our sight from recognizing the lived injustice that is many times close to home.

Lifting up the Accra Confession, Barmen Declaration, and Belhar Confession remains as a lens to read the signs of the times and a call to prophetic action—to engage in resisting the empire in the political, economic, and social realms, as well as in daily life.

We remain committed to unfinished business in the gender justice challenge, where moving more churches to accept the ordination of women remains strategically a valued endeavor towards lived justice in the church. Promoting the “Declaration of Faith on the Ordination of Women” and addressing gender leadership and power issues are at the heart of the continued journey that the Communion is challenged with.

Today we stand working towards being held accountable as leadership in presenting an integrative paradigm in our offices, and hiring a women executive remains an inevitable expression for the journey of justice. We already have some of the funds that are given to WCRC for meeting this need and hope that we will continue our campaign that was hindered due to the coronavirus. We are pioneers in the ecumenical movement in empowering women—present in our last General Council, among our officers, and in leadership as president—but still inclusion of a woman executive will present a profound message of gender justice as we carry our programs and encounter our churches. We stand today in transparency and accountability and claim that gender justice will be expressed on every level of our work, especially as today we present to the ecumenical world as a Communion that walks the talk.

### **Renewed imagination for new spiritualities**

The corona pandemic revealed the fragility of human life and the need of new spiritualities that interpret our Reformed theology into contemporary Christian witness; encouraging the renewal of Christian worship and spiritual life within the Reformed tradition; renewing a commitment to partnership in God’s mission through worship, witness, diaconal service, and work for justice, working towards mission renewal, and mission empowerment and cooperation in ministry.

It is a time where our spiritual vision to see our world, our relationships, our situations, our past, present, and future from God’s perspective (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). We are called to renew our imagination, dreaming for God’s kingdom and God’s people (Ephesians 3:20-21); to interpret life through eternal lenses with spiritual eyes. To journey into maturity and be transformed by the renewal of our minds as we look at life from an eternal perspective (Psalm 1). Justice work will always be rooted in new depths of our spiritual and practical resistance as the transformation of our lives promised through Jesus Christ. Our work is not mere activism; but an expression of spiritual engagement and being deeply rooted in the power of God’s Spirit. This new imagination of spirituality opens our eyes to the presence and power of God in all of creation. Further, it draws us into ever-deeper community with one another. Deepening our spirituality can connect us with God’s power for the healing of personal wounds, social scars, and divisions.

We need new imagination to practice spiritualities of resistance and prophetic vision, spiritualities in service of life, spiritualities formed by the mission of God.

### **Renewed imagination for a Communion empowered by the work of the regions**

Strengthening the regional work remains at the heart of renewed imagination. The “COVID and Beyond” process opened our eyes on the richness that the regions bring to the global in the work for peace, justice, and reconciliation. Joint efforts and coordinated regional work and platforms, networking and cooperating with global platforms creates a stronger Communion. The General Council (in Action 44) reaffirmed the importance of the regions within the WCRC, and their pivotal role in strengthening communion between the churches by providing spaces for dialogue and action; and in programmatic work to enhance the participation of the churches from all regions affirming working styles that strengthen the synergy between the local, regional, and global levels.

We are called for new imagination where despite the varying levels of capacity and involvement in regions—with some regions lacking officially recognized regional councils—still envisioning together a strong synergy between the local and regional is a step towards an impactful Communion.

### **Renewed imagination inspired by hope**

Finally, we can say with I Samuel 7:12, “so far the Lord has helped us.” God has sustained us as a Communion, and remains to sustain us on the journey in the coming days. This is our source of strength.

I want to thank all the people who strived to bring hope to the Communion, the officers who were taking their role seriously and responsibly; for Executive Committee members and regional leaders who got in touch and said we are available for any help for the future; for the staff in our offices who even when facing daily death, struggling with the collapse of many organizational plans, insisted to carry on the work virtually and are ready with great commitment and dedication to put all their talents in the coming year to secure that we continue to have a healthy Communion.

I particularly would like to thank outgoing General Secretary Chris Ferguson, who dedicated seven years of his life for empowering the Communion and witnessing for justice. I know we will have a special time to recognize all his work and efforts, but I would like to take the chance as president to say, even when you leave the position of general secretary, you will remain a valued leader and contributor for the life of the Communion. We will continue to be dedicated together for a better Communion where the journey toward life abundant for all remains at the heart of our vision and hope every day.

George. F. Watts' painting entitled “Hope” portrays the image of a woman sitting upon a globe, blindfolded, with an instrument in her arms that appears to have lost all of its strings but one. The picture shows pain, fear, discouragement; the strings are not in place and broken with only one string left.





Still the woman insists holding on to that instrument. It did not matter to her that the instrument was not complete as it was initially constructed to be. Still the woman insists to continue playing on the remaining string. One string could give the instrument its integrity and give the woman the ability to make beautiful music.

That one string provided *hope* that there was still promise of a different future for her and her instrument. One string could make a tune, probably not the perfect tune, but it is a tune that gives hope. It is a different tune that the world may not give, but it does make a difference. Today we might feel affected, broken, not the same. But we can play our tune of justice.

We stand in hope as the life of Jesus is manifested in us.

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*

—2 Corinthians 4:8-10

As a Communion we renew our imagination inspired by hope where our Lord continues to journey with us for a better tomorrow.

To God all glory.

Rev. Najla Kassab  
President