



UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE

Five Bible Studies

These Bible studies invite you to think about the call for church unity and to discuss it with others—whether in your congregation or in your Bible study group at the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in June 2010.

They are intended for use at five daily Bible study sessions during the Uniting General Council. But they are also meant for wider use within the churches that will compose the new communion. We invite delegates and participants in the council to engage in all five of these studies with others, in their congregations or communities, before or after the council meets.

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This is our family








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The kingdom of God
is a present reality
that will be expressed anew
in all its fullness.



MAKING HISTORY

THE WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) are coming together in a new union representing 80 million Reformed Christians worldwide – the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

The Uniting General Council (UGC) that launches this new Reformed organization will be held from 18 to 28 June 2010 in Grand Rapids, Michigan – a community in the United States where WARC and REC churches have a tradition of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and reaching out in healing mission together.

The UGC theme is “Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace” (Ephesians 4.3). Under this theme delegates will consider God’s call to both communion (church unity) and justice as they gather and study around nine sub-themes:

- **Reformed identity, theology and communion**
- **Christian unity and ecumenical engagement**
- **Justice in the economy and the earth**
- **Worship and spiritual renewal**
- **Leadership development and nurture**
- **Gender justice**
- **Youth empowerment**
- **Mission**
- **Peace and reconciliation**

More than 1,000 delegates, guests, visitors, volunteers and staff will gather in the United States at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. Women and youth will hold separate events just prior to the council.

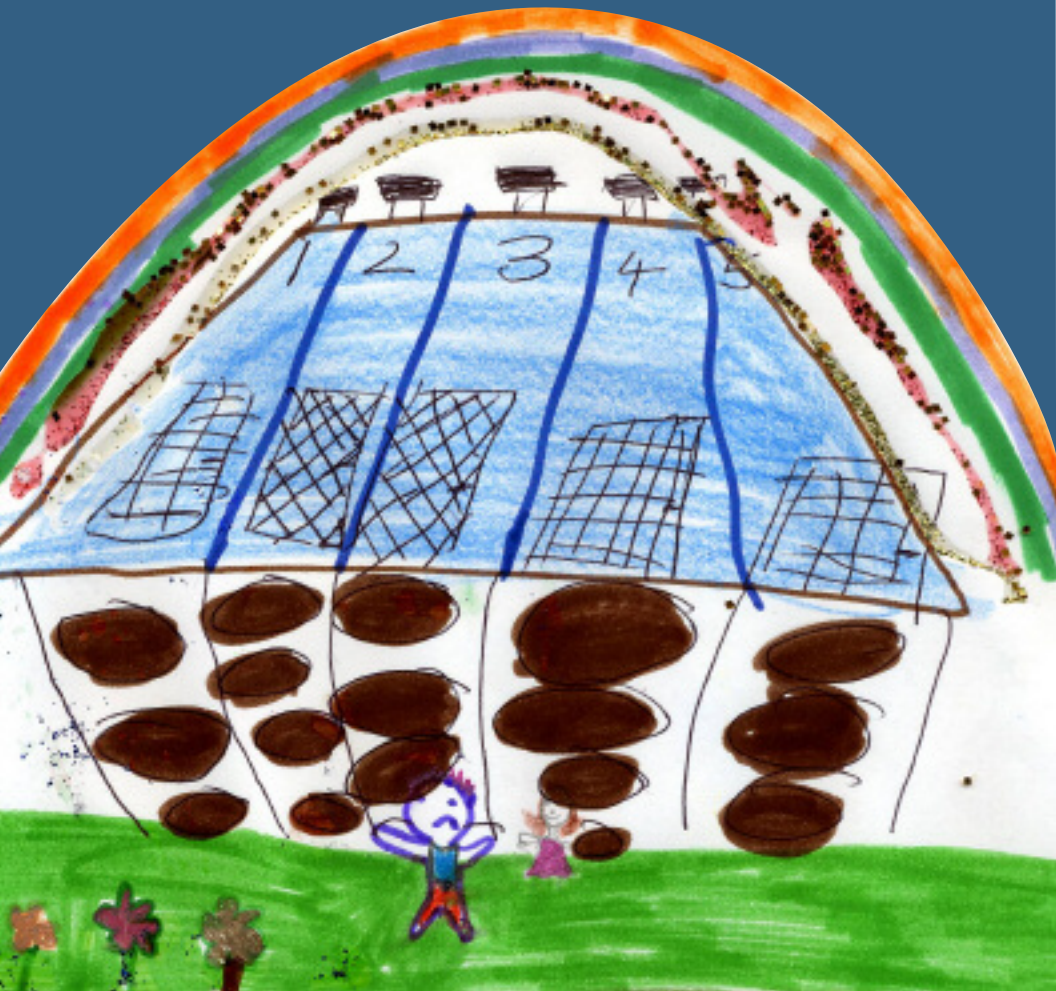
This booklet will be used by UGC participants for five daily Bible study sessions. All five studies may also be used by WARC and REC member churches worldwide in preparation for prayerful accompaniment of their churches’ UGC delegates.

Unity as seen through the eyes of children

Illustrations for this booklet were made by children of the Church of Scotland, Geneva, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva. Both these congregations have members from all parts of the world and so the children reflect the variety of the worldwide Christian community as they come together for church school on Sunday morning. The children were asked to show in a drawing how they see their church community. Their drawings witness to "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".



There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called
to the one hope of your calling.



PREFACE

THE UNITING GENERAL COUNCIL is taking place in 2010, just one year after we celebrated the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. We thank God for the renewal movement of the church of Jesus Christ inspired by Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, William Farel, John Knox, Heinrich Bullinger, Theodore Beza, Marie Dentière and many others. Like these early reformers we are grateful to God that our salvation is given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Like these reformers we cherish the word of God and commit ourselves to regular Bible study and reflection to undergird our lives and actions.

This is our family.

We did not originate in the 16th century. Our roots go back to the beginning – to the first groups of believers who confessed Jesus as Lord, as recorded in the New Testament. We have later roots in the First Reformation renewal movements of Peter Valdes and Jan Hus. Later still, we were heirs of the Swiss Reformation and the Radical Reformation that through figures such as William the Silent, Stephen Bocksay, Oliver Cromwell and Roger Williams radiated out to Europe and North America and then to the ends of the earth. We include many united and uniting churches. And the tradition of renewal and reform continues in our own century.

This is our family.

For more than a century, this family has been coming together. In 1875, one branch organized as the Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian System. In 1891, another branch combined in the International Congregational Council (ICC). In 1946, churches not yet involved anywhere else created the Reformed Ecumenical Synod; later, this became the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC). In 1970, the first two of these gatherings united as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC).

God continues the work of reconciliation and creating new beginnings. In June 2010 we will celebrate the uniting of WARC and REC.

This is our family.

We are 80 million Christians. We come from 108 countries in all continents. We are not alone. We know God is with us. We belong – body and soul, in

life and in death – not to ourselves but to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ.

We come from different cultural contexts and deal with different economic realities. Together we are witnesses to Jesus Christ. Together we commit ourselves to being prophetic in challenging the forces of evil and exposing injustice in church and society. We cherish the call to Christian unity and the work we do within the wider ecumenical movement. We are thankful to God for our relationships with Disciples, Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, Adventists, African Independent Churches, and others.

This is our family.

Our union in 2010 is a milestone. It is a clear sign that we are responding to God's call for unity among those who belong to Christ, as expressed in the high priestly prayer (John 17). We Reformed are indicating that we will overcome every obstacle that separates us, just as Calvin was ready to cross ten seas for the sake of Christian unity. Churches should not add to the world's fragmentation. In the face of growing conflicts and grave financial challenges, the unity of our churches will make our witness stronger.

We are becoming the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Woven from Congregationalist, Disciples, Presbyterian, Reformed, United and Uniting strands, we belong together as a communion, sharing in one baptism and in pulpit and altar fellowship. When one part of the body rejoices, we all rejoice. When one part suffers, we all suffer. Our communion means we shall seek to be in solidarity with one another, offering mutual help and encouragement wherever we can. We shall work to love and care for one another and foster global policies that impact the world for good.

Some of our churches face dwindling numbers, while others grow so fast they do not have enough seats for all who come to worship. The challenge of decline should not be the concern only of churches with falling rolls; it should be taken up by all in the family. Likewise, covenanting for justice should not be the concern only of the victims of economic injustice. It should be taken up equally by churches in parts of the world not disadvantaged by the global economy. This is our family, and we are family together.

We hope all involved will appreciate the deeply biblical language of our new constitution. We hope all will appreciate the Trinitarian expressions, the solid foundation of the body in the Word of God, and the commitment to be obedient to God in all things. We hope all of us will respond positively to the calling to a true shalom, where justice and peace for all shall prevail.

As we study the Bible in connection with the Uniting General Council, may

we be moved to renew our commitment to the oneness articulated in the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. If we say we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, we are called to live lives consistent with this vision. Let us therefore make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This is our family, the family we are called to be.

Setri Nyomi
WARC general secretary

Richard van Houten
REC general secretary

The church is a household
where life is lived together
in both word and deed.



INTRODUCTION

THE FOLLOWING BIBLE STUDIES for group discussion invite you to think about the call to unity and discuss it with others – whether in your congregation or church or in your Bible study group at the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

They are intended for use at five daily Bible study sessions during the Uniting General Council. But they are also meant for wider use within the churches that will compose the new communion. We invite delegates and participants in the council to engage in all five of these studies with others in their congregations or communities before or after the council meets. We invite our churches to encourage their use within congregations and in other contexts. This will enable a much larger group than the council participants to share in the formation of the WCRC.

Four points by way of introduction:

Unity is, not surprisingly, the leading word in the council theme. But unity has to be far more than a formal process of two organizations coming together. Unity shows its significance in all that it enables, in all the richness it brings forth.

Unity and diversity do not exclude each other, as we in the Reformed family know better than most. No other family of churches is so diverse. Our challenge, and our constant endeavour, will be to make diversity constructive and fruitful for our sense of communion.

Unity lies, to begin with, in our shared theological and confessional traditions. More fundamentally, it lies in Christ. Being Reformed – in the many and various ways we are – is our way of being Christian. For us, being Reformed does not separate us from other Christians; it unites us with them.

This awareness of being part of the universal church of Jesus Christ challenges the WCRC to be a sign of hope in a broken world. For the unity we seek, finally, is not merely the unity of the church but the unity of humankind: one people under God. We seek justice in a world where injustice is so often the everyday reality. Our unity is the firm foundation on which that commitment stands: we are called to communion, committed to justice.

We offer you these Bible studies, trusting that they will prove fruitful, before, during and after the Uniting General Council, in learning from one another and in sharing common hopes and dreams.



Come, let us go up to the
mountain of the Lord.

GUIDELINES FOR USE

At the Uniting General Council

- Start with a member of the group reading out the passage.
- Participants are invited to mention what they have heard (this can be a word or a phrase) that in a particular way speaks to them, that irritates, absorbs or bothers them. Everybody has the right to speak without interruption or comments by others.
- The passage is read again by another member of the group.
- Participants are invited to share what comes to their mind and heart: a memory, an experience, an association, a question, a prayer, a picture, a testimony, a song – whatever.
- After everybody who wants to offer a first response has had the freedom to do so, the leader may invite participants to make any comments on the written commentary for the session. Please note that the commentary for the first day is longer than those for the other days.
- Each session has a portion entitled “Voices from...” This portion is an invitation for the group to tell their own stories on how the theme relates to their own situations and to raise their own questions.
- The questions attached to each study session are suggestions to aid discussion. More important are the questions that come up in the group itself.

In churches and congregations

The same study method can be used as above.

The Bible study series can run over five evenings in a week, five weeks, five fortnightly meetings, five months... Choose the pattern that suits the group. We suggest that groups of six to twelve people are best for broad and inclusive discussion.

Whatever the pattern and whatever size the group, covenant together that you will faithfully attend all sessions. Otherwise, the continuity is broken and the circle is broken.

In this booklet, we have used the New Revised Standard edition of the Bible. You may also like to read other translations or consult commentaries.



VESSEL



A communion cup for fellowship,
unity, togetherness.
A vessel to refresh, cleanse and renew.
A vessel of service to give and receive.

CIRCLE



Christ's church in the world
A worldwide family
A circle of unity with justice for all
Caring for God's earth
The circle open both to give and to receive

INTERWOVEN THREADS



Woven together for greater strength
Partnership, cooperation
A continuous thread of God's faithfulness
in past, present and future

CROSS



Confessional identity
Witness of the church
United in faith and mission

The symbol of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

THE SYMBOL of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) that is incorporated into this series of Bible studies is rich in theological significance and symbolizes the key elements uniting the Reformed church family.

The basis of the WCRC is the Word (John 1) of the triune God, incarnated in Jesus Christ, revealed in the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and witnessed to by the church. The WCRC embodies Reformed identity articulated in historic Reformed confessions and continued in the life and witness of the Reformed community.

The core callings of the WCRC are:

- to foster Reformed confessional identity and communion among Reformed churches and unity in the whole church
- to promote justice in the economy and the earth, and all of God's creation, and to work for peace and reconciliation in the world
- to encourage the renewal of Reformed worship and spiritual life as a global family of God's people
- to strengthen leadership development and the nurture of the covenant community
- to promote the full participation of women and youth in all aspects of the church's life
- to renew a passion among Reformed Christians for God's mission—both witness and service—in a spirit of partnership and unity
- to interpret Reformed theology for contemporary witness and for the unity of the church

Our new symbol seeks to express this basis and these core callings in its four components.

Unity under the sign of the cross

1

Ephesians 4.1-6 and John 17.20-23

THE CROSS IN THE WCRC SYMBOL signifies confessional identity, witness of the church, unity in faith and mission.

The Bible texts for this study session are taken from Ephesians 4.1-6 and John 17.20-23 (NRSV).

(Ephesians 4) ¹ “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

(John 17) ²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

The unity of the Spirit—an accomplished fact

When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about the unity of the Spirit, he spoke of this unity as an accomplished fact in the spiritual realm. At the risk of sounding other-worldly, this unity already exists – a gift of God to men and women. The unity of which Paul writes cannot be manufactured like a product or a commodity. Instead, it is created by the Holy Spirit and is characteristic of the Spirit’s distinctive mission in God’s redemptive plan.

Our calling is to make every effort to maintain that unity that is already given.

Paul emphasizes that the church must strive earnestly to live a life worthy of its high calling in order to keep the unity of the Spirit and make it effective for the peace of the world. Paul does not leave anyone in doubt as to what kind of life we should live. It is a life of humility, gentleness, longsuffering and unconditional love. These are the characteristic qualities that Paul lifted out of the life of Jesus. From beginning to end, Jesus always reflected in his ministry the unity of the Spirit. As a result Jesus demonstrated an inner peace at every point of his life, and especially during his trial and crucifixion. The cross is therefore at the heart of this unity. Paul does not seem to be concerned so much with what a person does in his or her life as with how he or she does it. Keeping the unity of the Spirit depends more on how life is lived than on what it achieves. How life is lived ought to reflect our oneness with the Lord who died on the cross, making us one with God and calling us into unity with one another.

Peace—the deepest longing and need of humanity

How do we define this peace that is dependent on the unity of the Spirit? The word “peace” means a state of tranquillity or freedom from disturbance and agitation. It also means an absence of war, a state of calmness and silence. The word “peace” in the Bible translates the Hebrew word “shalom” and refers to the absence of conflict and goes deeper to include the presence of harmony, wholeness and reconciliation. The prophet Isaiah prophesied the coming of a new day when the “wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11.6). The New Testament points to Jesus as the one who will bring about peace.

Peace is a virtue, a state of mind. It is a value that humanity has always sought in the world: peace among nations, peace among people, but most of all peace of mind. Many people have sought peace externally; the peace that will influence all living things is the peace that is first discovered internally.

The Bible has much to say about peace within the souls of human beings, peace in the depth of suffering, peace in the midst of tribulation, peace in the valley of the shadow of death; but it does not promise worldwide peace in our time. Peace comes, not from the absence of trouble, but from the presence of God. It is reflected in the New Testament teachings on tolerance, hope, faith and the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5.22).

True peace should be based on justice and equality for all, regardless of

ethnicity, intellect, educational qualifications, social status, age, or gender. It entails an acknowledgement and recognition of not only our own worth, but also that of others.¹ When such peace dwells within us, there can be hope for peace among all people in the world, especially those who are marginalized, demoralized and denied the basic right to live productive lives.

Sin and the problem of evil—a barrier

Sin has always created a distinct barrier between God and us and between others and us. God is not the guilty partner; humanity is guilty of jeopardizing the relationship. Thus, there can be no unity of the Spirit without an acknowledgement of one’s sinful nature. Human beings fall short when they adopt the thoughts, ways and attitudes that are unacceptable to God. Thus, many become alienated and estranged from God.

Social status, intellectual interests, nationality, race or mere sentiments can create no genuine oneness. A community united by any one of these factors may appear strong, but it is subject to the disintegrating power of sin, particularly of pride and hatred. The problem of unity is really part of a greater problem, the problem of evil. Why do people quarrel and fight incessantly, even to their own destruction? Because of the sinfulness of the human heart and because of the evil we face. We should however not passively submit to evil: we need a ministry of reconciliation.

A ministry of reconciliation

Many in the church and the world have failed to recognize that the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us, as those who have been reconciled to God through Christ.

Reconciliation has been defined as “the activity whereby the disorders of existence are healed, its imbalances redressed, its alienation bridged over. Reconciliation stands at the centre of Christian faith. It is said to be related to redemption, justification, peace and forgiveness. Yet reconciliation has its own nuances, and without it, the New Testament statement for the gospel would be impoverished.”²

“Reconciliation is for Christian faith both a divine act and a human responsibility. For the Church it is both a gift (the gospel) and a task (her mission in behalf of the gospel). Thus, reconciliation defines the entire existence of the Church in the world: her origin in the saving work of Jesus Christ and her calling both as witness of God and as servant to humankind.”³

¹ *Preaching with her on life in fullness* (Geneva: WARC 2003), pages 11-13.

² Allen O. Miller (ed.), *Reconciliation in Today’s World*, Eerdmans Publishing Company 1969, page 51.

³ *Ibid.*, page 9.

John 17: Jesus prays for unity

Reconciliation results in oneness with God and oneness with one another. The high priestly prayer recorded in John 17 stands between our Lord's farewell speeches (John 13-16) and the journey to the cross (John 18-19). It is in this context that Jesus prays for his followers to be one as God and Jesus are one so that the world will know the one God has sent and believe. It affirms that this unity is a gift and a goal.

Calvin calls unity "the end [that is, the purpose] of our happiness", and concludes that "we ought to be one, because otherwise the unity Christ has with the Father would be empty and barren". The Belhar Confession echoes this in indicating that the unity of the church of Jesus Christ is "both a gift and an obligation" and must be made "visible ... so that the world may believe".

From its very beginning, maintaining the unity of the church was a struggle. The divisive tendencies around distribution of food (Acts 6), the issues that led to the first Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the schisms in the church through history, the reforming movements of the 12th and 13th centuries and the 16th century, and the challenges faced by the churches in the 20th and 21st centuries are all indicators of how difficult it is to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

In spite of these challenges, by faith we can receive God's gift of unity that enables us to be one in Christ. If a Christian community is in danger of being torn apart, Christ's prayer embraces his people like "a calm haven, and whoever retreats into it is safe from all danger and shipwreck" (Calvin).

A unity of unique human beings

The gospel understands unity as community: just as the unity of the Triune God does not negate the distinction between "Father" and "Son", so can the many members of the church be one body without losing their uniqueness. The Christian community has, in God, a home with many dwelling places (John 14.2) and can offer many people a place of their own. The church is a household where life is lived together in both word and deed.

God's love towards the church is "the mercy with which God was moved towards the unworthy, and even towards his enemies, before he reconciled them to himself" (Calvin). It is this merciful love that gives believers the strength to love one another and remain in Jesus' love. It even calls us to love those who are not like us as we live out our faith among them.

Conclusion

In the Reformed family, we believe in the creative and redemptive activity of God, inaugurated in Jesus Christ but not yet completed. The Kingdom of God is a present reality that will be expressed anew in all its fullness. This is our Christian hope, which is fundamental to our Christian faith. Christian faith is expectant faith.

The unity of the Spirit is a gift from God and the only power that can create true unity and peace is God's. On the cross, Jesus Christ gave his life to make humanity at one with God and make possible new life for all. Actualizing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace requires letting go of the old creation and embracing the new.

Voices from our Indonesian member churches

We, Reformed churches in Indonesia, resulting from the gospel message of western gospel messengers (in particular European and American), continue to maintain the Calvinist traditions of the previous centuries as part of our identity. Although the teachings of Calvin are essentially dynamic, we have become aware that the Calvinist traditions we have inherited do not fully provide dynamic inspiration for the identities of our churches. The Reformed churches in Indonesia have grown and developed in various cultural communities throughout the archipelago with a dynamic and open identity geared towards the future. This identity allows our churches to address the social, economic, political and cultural phenomena in Indonesia and also influences the way we conduct theology. Our theological methods are dynamic; they influence and are influenced by the contexts where our churches live and develop.

The majority of the population in the Indonesian archipelago is Muslim. We also live alongside people of other beliefs – Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian – and various ethnic religions. Traditionally we have lived in tolerance. In recent years, the cultural-religious social conflicts throughout the archipelago have led our Reformed churches to reform their methods of doing theology and reconsider Calvinist traditions that are not contextual. We affirm our calling to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through all our challenges.

Questions for discussion

- 1** How, in your context, are you journeying towards “becoming one”?
- 2** What things, in your context, run the risk of tearing your church or community apart?
- 3** How can we work against injustice, exploitation, and the destruction of our environment without giving in to rage or despair?
- 4** Think about a specific conflict that concerns you. How can we break down walls of hostility in ways that reconcile enemies?

For what do we thirst?

John 4.1-26

2

THE VESSEL in the WCRC symbol signifies a communion cup for fellowship, unity, togetherness; a vessel to refresh, cleanse and renew; a vessel of service to give and receive.

The Bible text for this study session is taken from John 4.1-26 (NRSV).

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”—² although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink”. ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

**16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."
 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."**

This transformative conversation takes place by Jacob's well, a place full of historical significance for both Jews and Samaritans. Tired and travelling through foreign territory, Jesus does not stand on ceremony but shows his vulnerability and asks the woman who comes to draw water from the well for something to drink. She challenges him: is he willing to drink from a Samaritan cup? They begin a conversation about water that is actually about faith and meaning. Jesus says the water he will give will be a spring of living water and challenges the woman to return to the well with her husband. Her truthful reply to that request turns the conversation to faith and true worship. Jesus both affirms and challenges the mountain spirituality of the Samaritans and the temple worship of the Jews by saying "God is spirit, and those who worship must worship him in spirit and truth". To this woman who knows that God's anointed is coming, Jesus reveals, "I am he".

Jesus accepts water from the hands of a woman; she quenches his thirst. He quenches her thirst for meaning and faith, speaking with her as he would with one of his disciples, offering revelation and spirit-filled words of living water, encouraging her to recognize her thirst and to live and worship in spirit and in truth.

The woman does not pretend to be something she is not in order to "fit in" with Jesus. She is a Samaritan; she lives with a man who is not her husband. This honesty, this truthfulness about herself, allows for the deeper

transformative conversation about faith to take place. She receives the living water of Jesus' words and becomes a bearer of living water into her own community. She preaches the good news and brings people to the source (John 4.27-42).

For what do we thirst? Our societies today distance us from our spiritual thirst, directing us to things that do not satisfy. It is sometimes harder for us than for the woman at the well to be truthful with Jesus about who we are or to know for what we thirst. The pressure to "fit in" is so often part of who we are. Yet this passage tells us powerfully that Christ will also come and sit next to us in our search for meaning and faith, he will ask us too for something to drink and offer us living water in return.

Voices from our African member churches

A communion is a network, a complex, living organism with a multitude of connections. The body of Christ is always much more than its parts. There is a rhythm and movement in this network. Africans understand the importance of community life. African wisdom claims "I am because we are." We therefore thirst for communion. The communion we thirst for affirms our unity and calls us into mutual accountability for one another and where there is justice for all. There are times when the communion is formalized in constitutions and meetings and agenda, and other times when our communion is most visible in the support one congregation in this global community gives to another or the simple conversation between two individuals who form part of the wider communion. We recognize the importance of expressing our communion and networking character on the local, congregational level. We are especially convinced that networks grow when women and younger generations participate and are therefore committed to the inclusion of their voices and dreams.

Questions for discussion

- 1** Are we tempted to "fit in" to our church or our community in ways that close us off from Jesus Christ?
- 2** Who, in our context, are the "women" or the "Samaritans" we are tempted to exclude from the church or the community?
- 3** Are we willing in spirit and in truth to enter into transformative conversation with Christ and dare to become vulnerable, joyous bearers of the word of Jesus' living water into our community?

Peace, justice and unity

3

Isaiah 2.2–5

THE ELEMENT OF THE CIRCLE in the WCRC symbol signifies Christ's church in the world, caring for God's earth: a circle of unity with justice for all.

The Bible text for this study session is taken from Isaiah 2.2-5 (NRSV).

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

This passage is full of activity. A mountain shall be raised above all the others. The nations shall stream to that mountain, the mountain of the Lord. Instruction shall go forth. There shall be judgment between the nations. Swords shall be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks; the image is of a blacksmith working with fire, beating the hot metal on the anvil with his hammer. This is not "soft" work; it requires physical strength and a strong will.

Beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks has always symbolized the worldwide work of peacemaking – work that is sometimes regarded as "soft". But if we really want our peacemaking to bring success then it should be done with passion, strength and determination. Ploughshares and pruning-hooks are tools used to cut away, clean the ground and make a new start. The destructive powers of violence and aggression have to be cut away and the ground for peace prepared.

So too with the judgment between the nations. This judgment has to bring forth justice, as opposed to the injustice under which so many people suffer. This requires the same hard work as making peace.

Nor is it easy to bring the nations together to the mountain of the Lord.

The component of the symbol for this passage is the circle. To make a perfect circle is not easy; as such, a circle is a symbol of perfection. The perfection of peace, the perfection of justice, the perfection of nations coming together in unity, peace and justice.

For all of this, God is at work with determination. God calls the church to be part of that work.

Voices from our Latin American member churches

In the Old Testament the vision of justice in the form of care for widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor arose from the people's memory that they had been freed from slavery in response to their cries of pain. That awareness permeates the New Testament. Jesus not only affirmed those traditions but actually practised justice. He is justice, as seen in the beatitudes. He not only proclaimed justice but demonstrated it in concrete acts. The Reformers and Calvin also attempted to implement it in their experiment to set up a just city. To promote justice effectively, we must recognize that theology, the economy and ecology are closely inter-related.

Questions for discussion

- 1 "Peacemakers aren't passive." Do you agree?
- 2 What challenges in peacemaking and peace-building do you face in your church and community?
- 3 What challenges to justice do you face in your church and community?
- 4 How can we serve God in working to make the circle of perfection?

Accepting the gifts of Christ

4

Ephesians 4.11-16

THE INTERWOVEN THREADS in the WCRC symbol signify: woven together for greater strength; partnership, cooperation; a continuous thread of God's faithfulness in past, present and future.

The Bible text for this study session is taken from Ephesians 4.11-16 (NRSV).

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Unity in the descended and ascended Christ (Ephesians 4.8-9) embraces the extremes, from the lowest parts of the earth to high above all the heavens: no place not known to Christ, none not part of his kingdom, nothing beyond the reach of his love. Through Christ's gifts to us, we are given the same ability to embrace, to be next to one another, to be joined and knitted together in one serving community.

We are called to fill this unity with life, let it become visible, make it happen: building up the body of Christ. We do this by accepting what we are: gifted and talented people of God.

In Christ, God looks us in the face. Since he looks at us, we too may look. Since he sees us as we are, we too may open our eyes and see. Since he stands by us and stands in for us, we are of good standing in the world.

Therefore we do not need to feel immature or behave like children. We are called to act as grown-ups, to accept responsibility and to be accountable to one another, to the world we live in, to Christ.

Building the body is possible only as a joint venture of all its different parts. Christ did not come to do without some of us or even to give up some parts. Different as we are, we are called to become one, acting in love and respect for one another and for God's whole creation, treating each other justly since unity cannot be enjoyed without justice.

Unity does not demand uniformity but honours diversity; it respects tradition while encouraging individuality. But it requires the awareness of belonging together and depending on one another as the other parts that are needed to become whole. Like the warp and the weft, we are woven together into God's glorious cloth.

Voices from our Pacific member churches

Many in the Pacific live in small island communities. The global climate change is affecting the future of these communities very much. For quite a few island communities there may be no future if they stay on their islands. This brings thinking about communion very much into relation with the environmental issue. As churches in the Pacific we see communion grounded in the life-giving work of Jesus Christ. This work is represented most clearly in the holy communion or eucharist. To be a communion is for us to be like the bread and wine – taken, blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world. The eucharistic foundation reminds us that communion is initiated by God, who sustains and transforms us in a reconciling fellowship that flows from the triune life of God.

This communion calls us to be practical and honest about our brokenness and our struggles in living the life to which we have been called. Our life together must include openness to give and receive gifts and insights to and from those who are different from us, to weep with those who weep and to laugh with those who laugh. Confident in our unity in Jesus Christ, we are open to hearing the word of grace and new life in and through our cultural and denominational diversity.

Birthered and sustained in worship, the World Communion of Reformed Churches seeks opportunities for shared witness and service. It will organize its life to promote culturally appropriate ways of sharing (content and style) that can be given and received with humility.

Questions for discussion

- 1** What special gifts has Christ blessed you with? How do you cherish them?
- 2** Where do you find opportunities to let your talents flourish?
- 3** What circumstances hinder you from living out the call to build up the body of Christ?
- 4** What do you understand by Christian maturity? In what ways have you yet to become mature?



Living together in unity

5

Psalm 133

THE WCRC SYMBOL UNITES the four elements— vessel, circle, interwoven threads and cross—with all that they signify.

The Bible text for this study session is taken from Psalm 133 (NRSV).

A Song of Ascents

1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! ² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. ³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life for evermore.

When was this psalm written? Calvin thinks that it comes from a specific context: Israel and Judah, the kingdoms of north and south, having been united after years of conflict and mistrust. Yet as always in the psalms there is truth here for every time and place. The core message is this – it is good when people live together in unity and peace, but this unity and peace come as a gift from God.

The writer describes this harmony in two ways. First, he offers the image of a priest being anointed. Aaron was a priest recognized by both halves of the previously divided kingdom, and the blessing of God is described as first touching his head before spreading out to affect the whole body. Then we are given the image of dew falling upon the two mountains of Hermon and Zion, these being situated in each of the two kingdoms. The dew was essential for watering the land and keeping it rich and fertile.

So the unity celebrated here is not merely human agreement. That is clearly a good thing and much to be sought after in our divided world. Yet this unity is something that comes from on high, a blessing that is given rather than a human achievement. It is something to receive and live in, as it spreads among us and touches us all. Unity is always better than conflict and separation, but unity is deeper and stronger and more enduring when it comes from our common faith and trust in God.

History teaches us that the unity celebrated in this psalm turned out to be fragile: the kingdom of David, and later of his son Solomon, soon fell apart. The history of our churches similarly bears witness to how difficult humans find it to remain visibly united in our witness to the one God. Yet it is important that we continue to strive for this. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes: “the Holy Ghost is to be viewed as commending in this passage that mutual harmony that should subsist amongst all God’s children and exhorting us to make every endeavour to maintain it... As we are one in God the Father, and in Christ, the union must be ratified amongst us by reciprocal harmony and fraternal love.”

With Calvin, we look to Christ as the ultimate blessing that came down from God, and our unity must always be centred on him. Indeed, whenever we focus on him, our divisions look all the more scandalous and ridiculous. As the Psalm concludes, the promised blessing of God, “life for evermore”, is connected with our willingness to live in peace and harmony here and now. This same promise was repeated by Paul when he wrote, “Be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinthians 13.11b). The new symbol of the WCRC captures the essence of this calling when it pictures our interconnectedness as held within a greater circle of care and carried by an underlying support.

Voices from our North American and Caribbean member churches

Many people think that communion can be easily achieved in a short time. However, because of its inherent connection to justice, true communion can neither be conceived as a finished product nor accomplished quickly. Communion is a long, slow but hope-filled process of commitment to the humanization and dignity of all. There are already glimpses of hope in our various communities and contexts. Some of our churches are already working hard at creating self-sustaining alternatives, building their communities outside the present global neoliberal model of exploitation, consumption and destruction of the environment.

Questions for discussion

- 1 **Where, in your context, do you see God at work, giving Christ’s church the gift of unity?**
- 2 **How, in your context, can you work for greater unity?**
- 3 **In what practical ways can you contribute, from your context, to “reciprocal harmony and fraternal love” in the new World Communion of Reformed Churches?**



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