



*This Bolivian woman is one of thousands in her country whose lives are affected by what churches are calling an unjust global economic system.
(Photo: WCC/Marcelo Schneider)*

São Paulo Declaration opens discussions with governments

Encouraged by the content of the “São Paulo Statement: International Financial Transformation for the Economy of Life” ecumenical bodies from Latin America have engaged in a series of meetings with government representatives from the continent. Audiences with senior government officials in Argentina, Bolivia and Peru have already been held.

The statement is a common effort produced by the participants of a conference promoted by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), in partnership with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM), held 29 September to October 5, in Guarulhos, Brazil. The “Global Ecumenical Conference on a New Economic and Financial Architecture” was organized by WCRC within the framework of its Justice Programme directed by Dora Arce-Valentín.

On 27 October 2012, the Argentinean chancellery received the document from an ecumenical delegation of representatives from WCC, the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Latin America (AIPRAL), the World Association for Christian Communication and the Latin American and Caribbean Agency of Communication (ALC).

Led by CLAI’s president, Julio Murray, a bishop from Panama, the delegation was received by Juan Landaburu, the ambassador serving as Secretary for Religious Affairs in Argentina’s Ministry of External Relations, and Andrea De Vita, Director of the National Record of Religious Organizations.

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When handing the statement to Landaburu, Dario Barolin, AIPRAL's Executive Secretary, who was a member of the statement drafting group, stressed the strategic importance of the conference.

“Written by theologians and economists, the statement mentions overconsumption and greed as key factors to consider in search for a fairer distribution of global resources,” said Barolin. He pointed out the need for governments to make decisions for a “global financial system that would serve life.”

Despite being a wealthy country at one time, Argentina has more recently faced recurring economic crises, persistent fiscal and current account deficits, high inflation, mounting external debt and capital flight. The major downturn in Argentina's economy was from 1999 to 2000, and is still causing a feeling of uncertainty among its citizens.

“Learning more about your advocacy and development work comforts us,” said Landaburu, who expressed his commitment to share the document with other government sectors.

On 9 January in Bolivia's capital, La Paz, the statement was received by the Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana. The ecumenical delegation was led by Walter Altmann, a Brazilian pastor and moderator of WCC's Central Committee.

Speaking to the delegates, Quintana stressed the importance of working in partnership with different global actors. “Churches can be very effective in sharing and promoting gifts that encourage the good living of all people. We work to defend and promote peoples' dignity, which is also one of your mandates,” Quintana said.

Bolivia is a key participant in debates on development initiated by the United Nations. Under

the leadership of its first Indigenous president, Evo Morales, the country is working on implementing balance within power structures and introducing a process for fair distribution of its natural resources.

The delegation also met with Ambassador Fernando Huanacuni, Vice-minister for Interreligious Affairs at the Ministry of External Affairs in Bolivia. In the meeting, Huanacuni expressed appreciation for the statement.

“This document can be an important piece in the upcoming dialogue among different segments of our society,” he said.

The statement has also been presented to the Peruvian government. On 8 January, Alberto Cruzalegui, advisor to the Executive Director of the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation and Ana Maria Alvarado, advisor on Relations with Civil Society Organization – both members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peru – received a copy of the statement at the Peruvian chancellery in Lima from an ecumenical delegation. Humberto Martin Shikiya, Executive Director of the Regional Ecumenical Centre for Advisory and Service (CREAS), who was present for the meetings with all three governments, evaluates the strategy of advocacy encouraged by the ecumenical document on global economy. “The biggest challenge right now in Latin America is to find a way to engage in these processes that can cause structural changes in our societies. The São Paulo Statement brings a clear proposal that includes social justice and dignity to the poorest and most vulnerable ones,” he said.

“The ecumenical movement needs to deepen its ties both with civil society and governments. Those are our strategic partners to make a difference,” concluded Shikiya.



In January an ecumenical delegation presented Bolivian government officials with a statement outlining new values for the global economic system. (Photo: WCC/Marcelo Schneider)



*Dora Arce-Valentín and Douwe Visser oversee WCRC's Justice and Theology offices.
(Photo: WCRC/Sumichan)*

Head of WCRC's justice programme now based in Geneva

Early in January, Dora Arce-Valentín arrived in Geneva to take on full-time responsibility for the Office of Justice and Partnership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

"Now I am where I have to be. Our staff team needs to be together so that we can make justice issues felt," says Arce-Valentín. "The justice programme is one of the organization's two pillars along with Theology and Communion. I am happy to be here to provide the balance."

Arce-Valentín had been working in her native Cuba as part-time programme consultant for justice programmes since January 2012. Funding from the Council for World Mission has enabled the Cuban pastor and justice advocate to come to Geneva for 2013. In 2014 she will move with the staff team to new offices in Hannover, Germany.

In welcoming Arce-Valentín, WCRC General Secretary Setri Nyomi says: "Rev. Dora Arce-Valentín comes to WCRC with much experience as a pastor and a person committed to justice. With her as a full-time member of the staff team, WCRC will be better able to continue its work with its member churches to be a strong force for justice in the world."

Arce-Valentín says she is grateful to the Presbyterian Church in Cuba for allowing her to take on this

assignment with WCRC at a time when there is a pressing need for pastors in the country.

"My church doesn't have financial resources. We are giving what we have – human resources. It is our way of saying we know the importance of justice work to WCRC and the ecumenical movement," she says.

In the coming year, Arce-Valentín will be focusing on creating closer contacts with regional church groups. Based on her experience in the Caribbean region, she knows this is the way to connect with local parishes to learn about their needs and let them know what WCRC can offer.

Arce-Valentín's vision for the justice programme puts a priority on working with youth. Plans include offering workshops on positive, non-violent images of masculinity and supporting youth involvement in ecological justice.

"Justice issues appeal to young people," she notes. "There is the potential for youth to take on some issues and force their churches to deal with them."

Plans for 2013 include follow-up to a meeting last year in Brazil that produced proposals for a new frame of reference for the world's financial structures. A panel of experts is now being formed to follow through on the proposals. And in March, Arce-Valentín will convene a meeting of WCRC's networks of justice advocates in the context of a consultation on human trafficking.

Reformed church organization granted corporate status in Germany

The government of the German state of Lower Saxony has granted the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) the rights of a corporation under public law. The new legal status allows the WCRC, among other things, to enter into a formal agreement with the German federal government on issues such as residence and work permits and exemption from social security legislation and employment restrictions.

In January 2014, WCRC will leave its current location in Geneva, Switzerland to operate from Hannover, the capital of Lower Saxony. The move was prompted by concerns about the cost of operating in Switzerland due to the high rate of the Swiss franc. Most of WCRC's income derives from donations in Euros and American dollars.

At a ceremony in Hannover in January, (the now former) Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, David McAllister, presented the document granting corporate rights to WCRC's General Secretary, Setri Nyomi. Those attending the ceremony included WCRC's General Treasurer, Johann Weusmann, and the state's Minister of Cultural Affairs, Bernd Althusmann. WCRC's Executive Secretary for Justice and Partnership, Dora Arce-Valentín, the president of the Evangelical Reformed Church, Jann Schmidt, and EKD Bishop of Foreign Affairs, Martin Schindehütte, also attended the ceremony.

In welcoming WCRC to Hannover, McAllister noted his appreciation that the organization's

leadership had chosen the city as its new location and expressed his hope that WCRC will find Hannover has much to offer the international community.

In his response, Nyomi noted that the granting of the status of a corporation under public law is an expression of hospitality that will allow WCRC to continue its mission of working with member churches on social and economic justice issues, Reformed theology and church unity.



Corporate rights were granted at a ceremony in Hannover: L to R: Jann Schmidt, President of Evangelical Reformed Church; Setri Nyomi, WCRC General Secretary; Dora Arce-Valentín, WCRC Executive Secretary – Justice and Partnership; Johann Weusmann, WCRC General Treasurer

Luther anniversary links Protestant Reformation to contemporary issues

Celebrations linked to the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's call for reform of the Christian church are an opportunity to show the importance and meaning of the Protestant Reformation to society today, says a senior German church official.

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther, a Catholic monk, nailed a list of demands for church reform on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. The gesture came to symbolize demands for church reform throughout Europe that led to the creation of Protestant churches in the 16th century.

"Churches today can use the celebration of Luther's symbolic act to explain to secular audiences about the importance of freedom of expression and of freedom of faith," says Martin Schindehütte, a bishop and vice-president for ecumenical relations of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD).

Schindehütte made his comments in Geneva, Switzerland during discussions before Christmas with representatives

of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The focus of the daylong series of meetings was to discuss plans for worldwide ecumenical activities in the years leading up to 2017.

WCRC was represented by General Secretary, Setri Nyomi, and Douwe Visser, head of WCRC's theology and ecumenical relations programmes

Visser told the German delegation that celebrations in 2009 of the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin marked the beginning of a series of significant anniversaries linked to the development and spread of the Protestant Reformation throughout Europe and from there to the broader world.

Visser noted that understanding what the Bible has to say about today's issues and about how Christians can act for social justice is central to WCRC's programme work and will form the focus of the Communion's activities in the years leading up to 2017.



*Executive Committee members will visit Elmina Castle, a slave deportation centre in Ghana.
(Photo: Anouk Zijlma)*

Planning underway for Executive Committee meeting in Ghana

The Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is set to meet in Ghana in May. The annual event is being hosted by WCRC's two Ghanaian member churches: the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana, and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Thirty-three participants are expected to gather for the 10-day event from 6 to 16 May in Dodowa near the country's capital, Accra.

The theme for the meeting is *WCRC's Ecumenical vision: Quo imus?* In exploring the theme, Executive Committee members, advisors and senior staff will consider the role of WCRC in the global ecumenical movement following its relocation from Geneva, Switzerland to Hannover, Germany in January 2014.

WCRC's General Secretary, Setri Nyomi, says that participants will be asked to affirm and clarify WCRC's ecumenical vision and "how the new venue can become a solid base for that vision."

"The key questions will be how WCRC can continue to build the Communion within its vision, how it can be an effective contributor to global ecumenism and what it means to be ecumenical in the context of transition. The issue at the core of the discussion is how WCRC will secure its identity as a Communion committed to justice," Nyomi explains.

The Ghanaian theologian and ecumenical leader, whose term as General Secretary ends in April 2014, welcomes the opportunity to meet in his home country.

"We are grateful to the Ghanaian churches for their hospitality as they host this meeting which is the last

Executive Committee meeting under my watch. It is my hope that the clarity of vision that this meeting will bring will make the WCRC even stronger in its impact as a communion committed to justice" says Nyomi.

Highlights of the Executive Committee agenda include updates on the relocation of WCRC's offices, approval of the budget for 2013 and the election of a new General Secretary. The programme includes visits to local churches and church missions.

WCRC's new Director for Fund Development, Steve Lytch, will report on fundraising initiatives to support a campaign to raise \$11 million for a sustainability fund for the organization by 2017.

Prior to the meeting, participants will visit Elmina Castle built by Portuguese traders in 1482 as the first European slave trading post in sub-Saharan Africa. The visit is part of what is billed as a "Day of Pilgrimage" and will include an address at the castle by the General Secretary of the Council for World Mission, Colin Cowan.

Nyomi notes the pilgrimage to the site is intended to connect Executive Committee members with a tragic aspect of human history in which human beings were enslaved and commoditized.

"This will deepen their understanding of the context of the evil of any form of enslavement which will in turn strengthen their commitment to combating injustice," Nyomi says.



School in occupied Palestinian territories is under threat of closure. (Photo: Natalie Maxson)

Palestinian school under demolition order: "We want to stay," says child.

By Natalie Maxson

During the lunch break at the school in Izbat at Tabib a young boy approached me to offer a fistful of salty pretzels amidst the noise and activity of students at play in the schoolyard. Hospitality and warmth like this is something I experienced a lot but is surprising considering Palestinians subsist on so little in this area

of the occupied Palestinian territories. My teammates and I, with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAAPI), had stopped by the school to introduce a television crew from Germany to this small community of less than three hundred people. The community consists of refugees, many Bedouins, who resettled on their family's land east of Qalqiliya in the northern West Bank when they were displaced in 1948 at the time the State of Israel was created.

Over the last ten years, the World Council of Churches has coordinated the presence of international Ecumenical Accompaniers who are sent by their local churches and provide a protective presence to communities facing hardship because of the conflict. We commit to work on human rights advocacy and towards a just and peaceful end to the occupation. I was sent by the United Church of Canada, a member church of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), and served in Jayyous from September to November 2012.



Principal and children fear for future of their school. (Photo: Natalie Maxson)

During the three months we did many tasks, including accompanying farmers to their land during the olive harvest where there was risk of violence from Israeli settlers, monitoring Israeli military check points where civilians pass to get to work and to school, documenting arrests of Palestinian children and adults by Israeli military, and offering support to Israeli and Palestinian groups working for peace.

The village of Izbat at Tabib is situated in a zone known on United Nation's maps as Area C, which was supposed to be a temporary arrangement under the 1995 Oslo accords. But like many Palestinians communities in Area C throughout the West Bank, they are still living under Israeli control. This means that in Area C it is next to impossible to secure a building permit. As a result 33 out of the 45 houses in Izbat at Tabib built without permits have demolition orders from the Israeli Civil Administration.

The community did not always have a school of their own. It was built in 2005 after one child was killed and another seriously injured in traffic accidents while walking to school on a busy highway to the neighbouring town of Azzun. The school serves 48 children from grades one to seven. The building also has a meeting hall for the village council and a health clinic for a visiting mobile health team. Given administrative difficulties due to being located in Area C, the school was built without a permit. In August 2012 the Israeli Civil Administration issued an administrative demolition order and ordered that the building be vacated in 21 days.

The teachers told the television crew how the pending demolition order has created anxiety amongst the children. One student proposed to come to class on top of the rubble if the school is destroyed. In the schoolyard I met a boy named Othman whose English is outstanding for someone in grade five. I asked him how he felt about everything going on here with the demolition order. "We want to stay in our school," he told me.

Othman's favourite subject is math but on that day he was getting ready for an English quiz. He told me he scored 10 out of 10 on his last test. I wished him good luck and wondered about the fate of this bright, young boy if his education is interrupted by a demolition or if he is forced to walk along the dangerous road to the overcrowded school in Azzun. The village council is engaged in a difficult legal process in an attempt to protect their school. Unfortunately this process is not a guarantee that the school will be saved. Groups and individuals, both Palestinian and Israeli,



An ecumenical accompanier plays with school children in Izbat at Tabib. (Photo: Natalie Maxson)

continue to show their support for the school in Izbat at Tabib during the community's ongoing, non-violent demonstrations bringing attention to the importance and right of access to education for the children.

Natalie Maxson is programme director at the United Church of Canada's educational facility, Naramata Centre. She served as an Ecumenical Accompanier from September to November 2012. The United Church of Canada is a WCRC member church.



Fair Trade chocolate is an alternate to products produced with cacao produced with exploitative labour practices. (Photo: WCRC/Greenaway)

Eating chocolate can violate a child's human rights

In August 1983 the South African journalist, Tobie Wiese, wrote from the fringes of the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Vancouver, Canada, about an incident involving the famous golden yellow South African Outspan oranges. During a lunch meeting for 500 women visitors, the juicy fruit was served as desert. The women were enjoying themselves until Helen Caldicott, an Australian physicist and opponent of nuclear weapons and the German theologian, Dorothee Sölle, broke the peace to tell the women the oranges were raised in South Africa. At the time, Black and Coloured South Africans were suffering under the country's brutal apartheid regime. Both women took a moral stand against the consumption of a product produced in a repressive labour context. Caldicott told the women: "Just like animals we also kill people for food."

Since last year, the American news agency, CNN, has been broadcasting a series called "CNN Freedom Project, Ending Modern – Day Slavery." As I watch the series, I remember the story of the "apartheid oranges." CNN is focusing on issues of modern-day slavery throughout the world, but one of the topics hits close to home. It is about the horrifying stories of children working on cacao farms in Ivory Coast and Ghana, in West Africa.

David Mackenzie, CNN reporter, tells the disturbing story of the cacao trade and gives it a human face in the story of 10 year old Abdul. Abdul is from neighbouring Burkino Faso. When his father died, a stranger brought him to Ivory Coast to work on a cacao farm. He earns no wages, just food and the occasional tip from the owner and the torn clothes on his back. Abdul is nothing more than a child slave. The

irony, Mackenzie says, is that Abdul does not know what cacao is used for. He has never eaten chocolate.

According to UNICEF, an estimated 200 000 children from Ivory Coast work on cacao farms as child labourers along with others who are trafficked across national borders. When this horrifying story surfaced in 2001, Mackenzie says American lawmakers put together a protocol which all the big names in the chocolate industry signed while promising to end child slavery as a matter of urgency. A decade later, CNN investigated if the promises to certify cacao as free from the worst forms of child labour had been met. Sadly, it is not the case. This raises the question: Who really pays for the chocolates in our shops? Is it us? Or is it Abdul and children like him?

As Christians we must think deeply about life on this earth and make choices which display our morality as Christians. The Belhar Confession says, "God sides with the poor and the oppressed and the church must stand where God stands." On which side are we? On Abdul's? Or are we on the side of the industry? Next time you enjoy the products of cacao, ask yourself if you might not be an accomplice to the oppression of a child, violating his human rights!

Editorial from URCSA News (14 December 2012) Reprinted with permission.

Looking for an alternate source of chocolate? Check for the "Fair Trade" label on your next bag of cacao or chocolate bar. The certification is not a guarantee that its production is free of exploitation. But by choosing a "Fair Trade" alternative you are at least letting your grocer and the chocolate industry know you are looking for ethical options.

Partnership Fund:

Churches offered emergency disaster support

By *Douwe Visser*

The Partnership Fund of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is best known for its support of mission and development projects proposed by member churches. Perhaps less well-known is WCRC's tradition of supporting member churches affected by disasters. In such situations, the member church does not need to apply for help first. Once it is known that there is an emergency affecting a member church, WCRC's General Secretary sends a direct message to the church often offering financial support from the Partnership Fund's emergency response portfolio.

There are some conditions which apply to this form of assistance. The church must reply to the General Secretary's message by submitting a request for support. The maximum amount of the contribution is set at \$11,000 and the church has six months after receiving the funds in which to file a report of how the donation was spent.

- In 2010 large pieces of land in central Uganda were damaged because of mudslides after heavy rain. Five thousand five hundred dollars was sent to the Reformed Christian Centre, Uganda, to help clean up the area and assist the community in rebuilding.
- Also in 2010 there were heavy rains in Pakistan. Many parts of the country were flooded and villages were destroyed. Five thousand five hundred dollars was given in support of relief efforts by the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan.



Flood waters devastated large areas of Pakistan in 2011. With help from WCRC Partnership Fund, the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan responded to needs of people affected by the flooding. (Photo: Ghulam Rasool/CWS-ACT)

- In 2011 crops in Burma (also known as Myanmar) were infested by a rat plague. Five thousand five hundred dollars was sent to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Myanmar to help the community in pest control.

These are just some examples of the many occasions on which WCRC has offered disaster assistance. On average, help is offered four times a year. WCRC is please to offer this sign of solidarity that makes the Communion visible in caring for its members.

For information about the Partnership Fund visit www.wcrc.ch or email us at partnershipfund@wcrc.ch

Pastors in Africa called to be peacemakers

Pastors can and must play a role in peacemaking in their communities, says the president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

"I personally believe that one of the things destroying African countries and communities is ethnic and racial violence," Jerry Pillay told a gathering of pastors of the Presbyterian Church Ghana (PCG) in January. "As pastors, we have a very significant role to play in preaching racial tolerance and asserting human dignity."

The South African church leader made his remarks in Kumasi, Ghana at a church event attended by 700 participants. The conference focused on the theme "The Holy Spirit and Peace: Blessed are the peacemakers".

"Pastors can analyze the issues that disturb peace in the local context and mobilize congregations towards peacekeeping ministries," Pillay told the group.

In a parallel event for pastors of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana in Ho, Ghana, WCRC's General Secretary, Setri Nyomi, told participants that WCRC is able and willing to help them in their role of leading local parishes.

"WCRC offers support for mission, worship renewal, justice programmes and theological formation," Nyomi told members of his home church. "This helps you equip your parishes through good teaching and leadership."

Both the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana are WCRC members.

Korean church leader shares vision for next decade

The Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) is to focus over the coming decade on the role of churches as reconcilers and healers in society according to the church's senior elected official.

"Our church recognizes that Korean society is torn by dissension at different levels and so we want to build our church as healer of society," says Son Dal Ig who serves as PCK's moderator.

Son says the church's goal for the next 10 year period

is to work towards true reconciliation on the Korean peninsula that will lead to peace and reunification.

The moderator made his remarks during discussions in Geneva, Switzerland in November with the General Secretary and senior staff of the World Communion



Son Dal Ig, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, visited WCRC's Geneva offices in late 2012. (Photo: WCRC/Greenaway)

of Reformed Churches (WCRC). PCK's newly-appointed Ecumenical Officer, Byun Chang-bae, accompanied the moderator. PCK is the largest of four active WCRC member churches in South Korea.

Discussions between the moderator and General Secretary included a review of plans for the World Council of Churches (WCC) assembly scheduled for October 2013 in Busan, South Korea. PCK is taking an active leadership role in planning for the event that is held once every seven years.

Nyomi reported that WCRC's Officers will be meeting in Busan in parallel with the assembly. WCRC is also supporting the participation of Reformed church theology students in an intensive short-term study programme organized by WCC to coincide with the assembly.

Nyomi and Son noted that one of WCRC's predecessor organizations – the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – held its General Council meeting in South Korea in 1989.

New church formed in France from Reformed-Lutheran union

The newly-created United Protestant Church of France is to hold its first national synod meeting 8-12 May 2013 in Lyon, France, following the merger of the Reformed Church of France and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France in 2012. The creation of the new church marked the culmination of a five-year process of unification begun in 2007.

The inauguration of the unified church will be celebrated at a public event on Saturday, 11 May in Lyon. Civil and religious authorities are expected to attend along with representatives of the global ecumenical movement. During the synod a national council will be elected which will designate its president.

In France 1.5 million people describe themselves as Protestant (three per cent of the population). Of these, 400,000 are active members or call on the services of the United Protestant Church of France.

The Reformed Church of France went through an earlier unification process when in 1938 four Reformed and Methodist church unions merged. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of France, created in 1872, is primarily based in the region of Paris and in the north-east of the country. Both the Lutheran and the Reformed churches have roots in the 16th century Protestant Reformation and were founding members of the Protestant Federation



The creation of the new church will be celebrated at the Grand Temple in Lyon, France. (Photo: Christine Chadier)

of France. They also contributed to the creation of the Communion of Protestant Churches of Europe, a federation of one hundred churches founded following the signature of the Leuenberg Agreement in 1973. The agreement served as the theological basis for the union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches of France.

The United Protestant Church of France will retain membership in the ecumenical and confessional organizations to which its founding members belonged prior to unification. This includes the World Communion of Reformed Churches of which the Reformed Church of France was a founding member.

For additional information about the new church visit www.eglise-protestante-unie.fr

Excerpted from a news release issued by United Protestant Church of France, 22 January 2013.

Translation: Kristine Greenaway, WCRC.



Viktoria Kóczyán (Hungary) and Frans du Plessis (South Africa) are interning with WCRC until October. (Photo: WCRC/Sumichan)

Youth interns join WCRC team

Two youth interns have joined the WCRC staff team in Geneva for a 10-month work-study experience. Viktoria Kóczyán from Hungary and Frans du Plessis from South Africa will combine studies in theology and mission with practical experience in programme implementation and communication.

WCRC offers young ecumenists with theological training the opportunity to work with staff at the Ecumenical Centre for 10-12 month periods followed by six-months with their home church to integrate their international experience into the local context. The programme in Geneva includes encounters with interns from other ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation and visits to the United Nations.

Both the young theologians say that change and growth will be the focus of their time in Geneva.

“I want to learn from different cultures and points of view. People here will help and guide me,” says du Plessis. “My mission professor told me to take chances and celebrate my failures.”

Kóczyán says she wants to explore her questions about unity and difference in the church. “How can we be changed and enriched by other theologies and believers,” she asks. “How can we live united experiences despite our differences?”

Du Plessis was ordained into the Dutch Reformed Church in November 2012 and completed his practical year of ministry in a congregation in Kathu, South Africa prior to accepting the WCRC internship. While in Geneva, du Plessis will continue work on his M.Th. in mission for the University of Pretoria and study German. His work focus will be on communication and include work on building a new website and expanding WCRC’s reach through social media.

Kóczyán is to work closely with Douwe Visser, WCRC Executive Secretary for Theology and Communion, on ecumenical dialogue, support for churches in interfaith conflict situations and exploration of Reformed identity. Following ordination into the Reformed Church in Hungary in 2010, Kóczyán began Ph. D. studies in medieval Jewish mysticism and is in Geneva with the support of a Hungarian government study grant.

“I have a theoretical background in mission, contextual theology and interfaith,” she says. “My motivation for taking the internship is to learn how to put theory into practice.”

Both du Plessis and Kóczyán participated in the Global Institute of Theology (GIT) in 2012 in Indonesia.



On New Year's thousands of young people gathered on St. Peter's Square for an ecumenical service in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI and Taizé brothers. (Photo: Wieslawa Klemens)

Taizé youth event in Rome: "It was almost like the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement was finally fulfilled."

By Aiko Sumichan

How do you begin writing about an experience when the absolute best part of it was in fact eight minutes of silence?

Imagine yourself on St. Peter's Square in Rome. Bright night sky, full moon, and you can see hundreds of stars. All around you there are at least 50,000 people, the majority under 35. And everyone is silent: praying or meditating on scripture. It is one of those moments where you can feel the presence of God even if you have never really understood what it means to feel the presence of God. And the moment lasted eight minutes!

I had that very experience this New Year's Eve. I was on St. Peter's Square to take part in the Taizé

European Meeting. This is an annual programme organized by the Taizé ecumenical community for young people, ages 16 to 35. The programme includes communal prayer three times daily, pilgrimage walks through the city, workshops and small group discussions as well as lunch – which can be really interesting when there are 40,000 people to be fed!

You would think that as it was the Taizé European Meeting, I would be surrounded by Europeans. Not true. By some strange (shall I say divine?) coincidence, I spent most of my time walking around Rome with four other Indonesians. On the evening of "country meetings" we even managed to gather a group of about 10 Indonesians. Amazing!

People who were at previous Taizé events complained that instead of praying in a big exposition hall with minimalistic orange decoration, as you would do when you go to the Taizé community's home base in the Burgundy region of France, we had to go to different Catholic basilicas for our daily prayers. All of them are massive and highly decorative. Personally I do not understand the complaints. These were houses of prayer at some point in history though I admit some are more of a tourist attraction than a place of worship today. But they were returned to their original purpose when we were there, sitting on the floor, singing, listening to the gospel, and praying. It was wonderful.

At each communal prayer time, a message was delivered by Brother Alöis (leader of the Taizé community), the Pope, the Cardinal of Rome, or one of the Taizé brothers. Each of them was a reflection of the bible reading, faith and pilgrimage. They were all extremely inspiring. You can read some of them on the Taizé website. <http://www.taize.fr/en> A month before the European Meeting, a similar meeting was held in Rwanda. Young people from a number of African countries came together in a pilgrimage of reconciliation and peace. They gave the Taizé



As youth gathered in Rome's churches for daily meditation they reclaimed the space from tourists and created an atmosphere of awe and prayerful reflection. (Photo: Wieslawa Klemens)

brothers some seeds to symbolize hope that were to be planted in Europe and beyond. During the European meeting, representatives from different countries present in Rome – including the Pope as representative of Vatican City – were given these seeds to carry on the hope, to plant the hope, to let the hope grow.

While it is somewhat easy to mistake this event as a Roman Catholic gathering, the truth is that – true to the spirit of Taizé – it was an ecumenical gathering. There were Roman Catholics, Protestants from many denominations, as well as Orthodox, and even some participants who weren't sure about "this whole religion issue." And yet there we were, together in a place of importance for the Christian faith, worshiping and praying.

It was almost like the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement was finally fulfilled. Or maybe it was a wake-up call, because maybe for us young people it really did not matter what "tradition" you adhere to or what theological reasoning classifies you into a certain group of believers. Maybe the only thing that matters is trust in God and in each other.



The 2012 European gathering organized by France's Taizé community was hosted in Rome. (Photo: Wieslawa Klemens)

Swiss church president now heads mission agency

The former president of the Swiss cantonal (regional) church in Aargau is now serving as head of a mission agency in Basel, Switzerland. Claudia Bandixen took on her new responsibilities as Director of Mission 21 in July 2012 after 10 years as President of the Aargau Reformed Church. The Swiss pastor and women's advocate now oversees a programme supporting approximately 100 mission projects with partners in 25 countries.

While serving in Aargau, Bandixen was one of the founders of the Sylvia Michel Prize awarded biennially by Swiss women church presidents in recognition of projects or individuals encouraging women to become church leaders.

In an interview for the cantonal church's newspaper *A+O*, Bandixen talked with journalist Sophia Siegenthaler about her work as a church president and the challenges of her new role.

A+O: What is different today, in comparison with the situation you found ten years ago when you took over the position of church president?

Bandixen: Since its origin, our cantonal church has centred its attention on three areas of activity: proclaiming the gospel, pastoral care and diaconia. These activities have to constantly adapt to new environments. For example, pastoral care has changed. Accompaniment of terminally sick and dying people has been put in place in many hospitals and clinics. Today we call this "palliative care." Chaplaincy training has to be publicly certified and must correspond to official standards if we want to maintain this ecclesial commitment.

A+O: What were the highlights of your time as head of the cantonal church?

Bandixen: I have always been concerned by issues of human rights and human dignity. Whenever I can make a contribution to improve the fate of people I have a feeling of satisfaction. For instance, I have been particularly impressed by the fact that conservative members of our church



Claudia Bandixen now heads Mission 21 in Basel, Switzerland. (Photo: Felix Wey)

have cooperated with Muslims living in our canton to create statements in support of persecuted Christians and against any form of persecution.

A+O: What would you consider as your greatest disappointment or frustration?

Bandixen: I do not think in categories of disappointment or frustration. But I certainly do have concerns. For instance, I feel concerned when I see that many people live with the illusion that church life might continue as it has always been and thus conclude that they don't have to change. Time is passing and needs are changing. If we find no way of accompanying these changes, our way of "being the church" is in danger.

A+O: The theme "women and church" has always been important to you. In what sense does it matter whether a woman or a man exercises the office of president?

Bandixen: What really counts is not gender but individual characteristics and aptitude. So it is good to know that, in comparison with what we experienced some ten or twenty years ago, women in leadership have become somewhat normal. What mostly matters today is competence, the ability to find solutions, and getting results.

A+O: What kind of challenges are there for you in your role with Mission 21?

Bandixen: The challenge is to be part of an international network with a 200-year tradition. In spite of continuous efforts, Mission 21 has financial problems. We will have to consolidate our international network in coordination with our partner churches. The chances of solving these problems are good. But it will require a common and concerted effort from Mission 21 and its member churches.

Excerpted with permission from A+O (June 2012)

Concern expressed for churches on frontline of interfaith violence

By *Douwe Visser*

There is mounting concern within the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) for member churches that are on the frontline of conflicts between peoples of different faiths. In response to requests from our membership, WCRC is organizing a gathering to hear from representatives of churches affected by interreligious violence in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

WCRC's Office of Theology and Communion is taking the lead in organizing the event and has invited the interreligious office of the World Council of Churches to play an active role. Dates and location are under discussion but the event is expected to be held prior to September, subject to funding. Representatives of other faith groups will not be present at this first gathering but will be invited to a follow-up consultation.

The objectives of the meeting are to learn about the religious violence to which some WCRC member churches are subjected and to develop an understanding of the mission of the church and how Christian identity can remain visible in such situations. Theologians with an expertise in the field of interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution will provide input and participate in discussions. The hope is that it will be possible to draft guidelines for continuing to work on the ideas that will emerge during the gathering.

WCRC has committed itself to a process of reconciliation, dialogue and interreligious cooperation, even though in some situations that mission hardly seems possible. Nonetheless, the Communion takes seriously its pastoral role and believes that when people gather to seek solutions, insights can emerge for how best to respond to situations of interreligious violence.

WCRC establishes fund development office

By *Steve Lytch*

In 2012, the Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) established a Development Office and charged it to come up with ways to ensure WCRC's financial stability. The Office works with longtime partners such as church agencies and other ecumenical organizations to support projects where our work intersects. And it seeks new partners, such as congregations and individuals, who want to ensure that the Reformed witness remains vital in a changing world.

Fees and donations from member churches remain the core of WCRC's financial support. But, given the changing dynamics of funding in the member churches, WCRC needs new sources to remain vital. New people and organizations have to be invited to share in the task of supporting the Reformed witness today.

A global fundraising effort presents some challenges. Different

cultures have different attitudes toward raising money. What is standard practice in one country may not be appropriate in another. But that is part of the beauty of the global church. We are all called to the common

task of bearing witness to the gospel and to do it in ways that respect each other's customs, heritage, and mores.

I am donating a year to get the Development Office started because I am convinced that Christ's church needs WCRC as a living expression of Christ's body. The Reformed communion is not the whole body, but it is an essential part, and when this part is healthy and strong, the whole body is stronger.

I would be pleased to hear from you. Do contact me with ideas and offers of support. sglytch@gmail.com Together we can assure a healthy financial future for WCRC.



Stephens Lytch is WCRC's Director of Development.



Setri Nyomi, General Secretary
(Photo: Helen Putzman-Penet)

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**World
Communion
of Reformed
Churches**

Called to
communion,
committed to
justice

FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8: 28).

But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! ... Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today (Genesis 50: 19-20).

We have entered the year 2013 – a year filled with opportunities and challenges for all in the WCRC family. As the year unfolds, it is our prayer that readers of *Reformed Communiqué* will renew their commitment to God and take hold of the God-given opportunities to overcome the challenges.

Many of our churches are experiencing difficult situations. These challenges include the sometimes violent political and social contexts in which they engage in mission, a lack of human and financial resources, and the divisive forces with which they have to contend. The temptation is to remain stuck and wonder if one can ever overcome these situations.

The verse quoted from Genesis above is part of a familiar story in which Joseph was unjustly treated by his brothers. He suffered further from false accusation and imprisonment while in Egypt before rising to prominence. Joseph could have remained chained by the challenges he faced in life. But the message that is quoted here portrays a philosophy that turns the challenges into opportunities – a faith stance that recognizes that no matter what the challenge is, God gives opportunities for overcoming and forging ahead with something good. This is echoed in the Romans passage with the emphatic statement that for believers, all things work together for good.

WCRC had its share of challenges in 2011-2012 which led to some tough choices. The main challenge was the grave financial difficulty in which global currency fluctuations had brought us. Different ideas of how to overcome the difficulty almost brought us to a point of division. We are grateful to God that we did not let the challenges hold us back. Together, WCRC's governing body, member churches and staff worked to seek solutions. Together, we began finding solutions and together, we need to move on now to focus on our calling and mission.

Our task as people of faith includes looking out for opportunities even in the midst of challenges and keeping our eyes focused on our mission. My colleagues and I in the WCRC office have resolved to make this a year of focusing on strategic actions that we are called to engage in and not get stuck in the difficulties of the past. We do not want to use the challenges of transition and relocation that this year brings as an excuse to take our focus off our calling. As any church body today, the challenges will not all disappear. But we see even more clearly the opportunity to focus on building our Communion, uniting the Reformed family and contributing towards the greater unity of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, working for justice and making a difference in the world.

*... for believers, all
things work
together for good.*

Prayers online

Is your church in need of prayers?
Is it concerned for the situation of churches in other parts of the world?
The WCRC website has prayer resources for you.

Visit www.wcrc.ch regularly for inspiration for prayer.