

Hope Beyond the Tears

The World Communion of Reformed Churches gathered for its 27th General Council, the second since the Uniting General Council in 2010. Our gathering was a reminder of the newness of this body, even as we celebrated 150 years of existence and history. This time of celebration was joyous, a celebration of the past, of accomplishments, of God present and at work among us.

We heard the impossibilities that became possibilities. We remembered those who gave vision to what we now understand to be the World Communion of Reformed Churches. We celebrated those who listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and defied the social norms to provide hospitality and welcome to all of God's people. They saw the needs of the world around them and became co-creators with God in calling into being a new thing, and they watched it spring forth (Isaiah 43:18).

The juxtaposition of this historic witness of 150 years and the newness of the WCRC at 15 years, is a place for remembering the historic markers along the way, the perseverance of those who came before, and the challenges that were overcome. And it is also a place where the learnings of the past inform the future stretching before us, as once again we together answer the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ and justice seekers.

The cries of the ancestors beckon us toward a future God will create for and with us (Romans 4:17).

Crying for Generations

"...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."

The cries across the generations have been both tears of celebration and tears of despair. Tears that accompanied the witness of a world that is created by God and does not always experience God's love and care through the actions of humanity. Tears that resulted from the joy of experiencing God present and at work in the best of the human spirit, seeing the church live into "loving neighbor as ourselves" (Mark 12:31).

The cries of the Reformed family expressed in the Accra Confession are still with us. The cries for justice and for peace, the cries for freedom and for change.

We acknowledge that in our history we have been complicit in actions that caused suffering to people and communities like the persecution of the Anabaptists. We confess that such persecution is a betrayal of the Gospel.

We commemorate 1700 years of the Nicene Confession and receive with gratitude this effort to establish a theological base upon which to build the mandate for Christian unity (John 17), crying for the unity of the church, the body of Christ that is, and yet to be. We are diverse, a tapestry of God's design reflecting the global community.

We are siblings from different countries and communities, bringing with us the realities of the places that shaped and formed us. In our diversity are differences to be celebrated yet sometimes are experienced as obstacles to be overcome or challenges to be ignored. We celebrate our diversity, with tears of deep gratitude and joy for the many who are yet striving for full participation among us.

We celebrate the youth among us and the wisdom they bring. Their cries are our cries, their hearts yearning with the desire for more than what is realized and accepted among us. We listened, and now together, we forge ways for writing a new vision for the church, for our witness in the world, and for those yet to come. We celebrate with joy, the youth in our midst.

We are grateful for the women who bring gifts of leadership and connection to God in meaningful ways. Theirs is a steadfast witness, a commitment to being present offering what they have, even when all of who they are is not fully received in the life of the church and this communion. We celebrate with joy, the women in our midst.

We welcome siblings with disabilities and rejoice in their presence and participation. We live into being communion when we receive from all who are made in the image of the Divine. Our disabled siblings are a reminder that God is present and made visible in and through us all. We celebrate with joy, persons with disabilities who continue to challenge and enrich our lives.

We journey with our indigenous siblings aware of the historic atrocities and denial of their humanity. We celebrate their connection to the earth, to the land, to the rivers and the seas. We continue to challenge colonialism, the theft of natural goods, the ravaging of land and people. We celebrate with joy their resistance and resilience and continue to learn from their wisdom.

We are thankful for our hosts, the Church of Christ in Thailand. Their perseverance in the faith, their active witness is an example and true source of inspiration for our whole communion. We are thankful for their hospitality.

We give thanks to God that in this General Council we find common ground and mutual forgiveness with the Mennonite World Conference to walk together and join efforts in actions for justice, peace, and the wholeness of creation.

We are the body of Christ. We celebrate all of who we are, as representations of God's love and mercy.

Confessing Our Concerns

"Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely"

The reality of the world defies the intentions of a God of love and compassion. The wounds are evident in people and community, wounds created by the dis-ease present in the world. We confess that we are not as attentive as we should be to those in need around us.

The poor are getting poorer. The legacy and presence of Empire are even more evident in these days where the wealth of the world is held by a few.

The quest for justice is ever before us, with the concerns multiplying at a rate that challenges our ability to respond. We identified compassion fatigue as a challenge to our desire to serve God. Our ability to minister to those in need requires that we journey together, working together to attain a just world for all.

The call to love our neighbors as ourselves is a call that is unconditional. Yet, navigating a world with multiple faith traditions is not easy. In many places, seeking justice in our communities

requires working with our siblings from other faith traditions as they too express the love of God in the world.

As we attend to the needs of the world, we are also clear that attention needs to be paid to the communion.

All members of the communion were not present with us and their absence was felt. We pondered why some do not participate consistently, why others do not show up, and want to find ways to ensure that all are able to participate within the communion.

The missing siblings and voices are needed if we are to be responsive and live fully into being in communion with opportunities to hear and learn from each other, and to grow together. Loving our neighbor is also about welcoming all to the table, to break bread and be the body of Christ.

Calling to Live as Communion

and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

As we look back, we look forward. The reformers before us made commitments to God and to each other. We too, need to consider the commitments we need to make to God and to each other, to live as a communion, a place of togetherness, fellowship and community - for such a time as this (Esther 4:14).

Being together is a priority. Gathering will strengthen our ability to know each other as we revel in conversations that strengthen our faith and transform our lives. Our conversations should be open, with a willingness to learn about those with whom we fellowship.

This time of uncertainty in the world is a call to unity and diversity in the church. Our diversity is a gift, learning from each other will require setting aside prejudices and preconceived ideas about others as we encounter God present in those we meet. The contexts from which we come are important, with our cultural dynamics shaping and molding us as people of faith. Expectations of uniformity deny the fullness of who we are in our diversity.

Being a community is about being together, seeking justice and living out the abundance of the Holy Spirit with us. Caring for ourselves spiritually will ensure that we have what we need for the living of these days. We can only transform as we are transformed.

The WCRC believes Christian faith means responding to God's call to foster justice and meet the spiritual needs of all people in the transformation of the world, through the love of Jesus Christ.

Our desire to see change in the world should come from our connection to God and living of the Spirit.

Being together in community with others provides us with the capacity for deepening our spirituality. This call to renewal is a call for these times when there is too much to do. Seeking depth of spirit is the fuel needed to answer the call to do justice. Our love for God moves us to the practices of spiritual care which includes prayer for the body of Christ.

Continuing with Courage*looking to Jesus*

The call to prophetic witness is one that requires courage. We are reformed and reforming, living into the needs of this 21st century church. 150 years ago, reformers took bold steps that pushed them beyond the places of comfort into creating something new. We too, find ourselves in a world that requires we take bold steps to be the counter narrative at a time when injustice is normalized and accepted.

Mission continues to be disruptive and transformative, a hope and a future that calls the church to address the growing needs of the world around us. Mission is the church in action. Through our commitment to mission, we live out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, bringing food to the hungry and water to the thirsty, freedom to the captive, liberation to the oppressed, binding the wounds of the brokenhearted, the church bringing the good news to the poor.

The call to be communion is one that requires courage. Courage to act on what we have heard and observed, to attend to the need to decolonize our governance and structure to ensure the inclusion of all voices.

We pray for the courage to receive with care the gifts of all who are among us. The church must be a place where love flourishes. The love of God, given to us through Jesus Christ is a boundless love extended to all.

Looking to Jesus means we craft a vision that is centered in following Jesus, his teaching, his deeds, his life in prayer and communion. Jesus took time to step away and pray. He took time to care for himself spiritually and so should we. The psalmist wrote: "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) Our doing should be accompanied by being with God. We pray for the courage to be faithful disciples of Christ.

Out of the stillness and being with God, we will cast a vision for the church these days. A vision for a future where all are fed and free, a future where the church is relevant and working to dismantle normalized suffering created by the power of Empire.

The power of this communion centered in the love of God is the power to change the world. May God grant us the courage beyond the tears of yesterday and today.