



# Being Reformed

by Milan Opočenský

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## Introduction

It is fashionable in some North American circles to speak of “the Reformed tradition” as an identifying ecclesial mark. Perhaps it is, but only if it is recognized that the Reformed tradition extends beyond our own churches, stretching through both time and space.

The roots of the Reformed tradition run deeper even than the Geneva reformation, reaching to France’s Waldo, England’s Wycliffe, and Bohemia’s Jan Hus. In the 16th century, Calvin’s influence was not confined to the Netherlands and Scotland, but spread to Hungary, Poland, Italy, and beyond. In our own time, Reformed churches can be found on every continent and virtually every country on the globe. The Reformed tradition is a rich heritage, deep and wide, not the parochial possession of a single time and place.

The depth and breadth of the Reformed tradition is more than an abstract affirmation. It is embodied in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a global family of over 200 member churches. WARC traces its own roots to 1875 when 22 churches recognized their common heritage by forming an association of sister churches. In the 120 years since, the Alliance has served as a means to nurture relationships among Reformed churches, encouraging mutual responsibility in memory and hope.

The 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Debrecen, Hungary, in August 1997. Delegates from Reformed churches around the world gathered for nearly two weeks of prayer and study, deliberation and debate, fellowship and renewal. The meeting of the General Council was bracketed by two remarkable statements — the opening address by WARC General Secretary Milan Opočenský, and the concluding Declaration of Debrecen. These two statements have been gathered together in Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 9, *Being Reformed*.

The Occasional paper’s title, *Being Reformed*, is deliberately ambiguous. *Being Reformed* can be taken to signal an exploration of what it is to exist as Reformed churches, or to acknowledge that our churches are always in the process of reformation. Both senses of the title are appropriate. In Milan Opočenský’s address and in the concluding statement of the General Council, we are encouraged to consider the distinctiveness of Reformed church life today and to ponder the ways in which our churches need to be reformed.

Milan Opočenský has served as General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches since 1989. Dr. Opočenský is a native of the Czech Republic and a minister in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. His distinguished service to the church includes a period as European Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation and as Professor of Christian Social Ethics at the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology in Prague. He has spent time in the United States as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the College of Wooster and as a Fellow of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton.

It is the hope of the Office of Theology and Worship that *Being Reformed* will provide ministers and members of Reformed churches with an opportunity to explore the contemporary dynamics of the Reformed tradition and to renew an awareness of the tradition's power to bring about the continual renewal of the church. *Ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda!*

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**BEING REFORMED**  
**An Address to the 23rd General Council of the**  
**World Alliance of Reformed Churches**

*Milan Opočenský, General Secretary*

**Historic Context**

I greet you most heartily in this historic building, the Great Church (*Nagy Templom*) in Debrecen, Hungary. It was within the walls of this church that on April 14, 1849 the Hungarian leader Kossuth Lajos declared the freedom and independence of Hungary from the House of Hapsburg. Although freedom was short-lived, this great tradition remains alive and inspires us even today. We are most grateful to the Reformed Church of Hungary for inviting the 23rd General Council to the city of Debrecen. We feel honoured and privileged by the invitation to hold this important meeting in the region that has been a stronghold of Reformed faith since the 16th century Reformation. It is not incidental that Debrecen was called “the Reformed Rome.”

In Debrecen we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and martyrs. This church and the nearby Reformed College are symbols of the strength, endurance and vitality of the Reformed faith in this part of the world. Here we are reminded again that church history and national history often coincide, overlap and interact. However, under this pulpit we remember that our identity is in Jesus Christ and our ultimate loyalty belongs to Christ. Jesus Christ challenges us to be ‘originals’: although we affirm our cultural and national identity, the love of Christ commits and urges us to go beyond all human identities and loyalties.

The first General Council met 120 years ago in Edinburgh. As the original twenty-two churches began the first session on July 3, 1877, it was reported that twenty-seven additional churches had expressed a desire to be part of the Alliance. The Reformed Church of Hungary, the Reformed Church of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Reformed Church in Russia were among those churches. Although the Alliance has been linked to this part of the world for its entire 120 year history, this is the first time that a General Council has been held in Central or Eastern Europe.

## Central Europe

Increasingly, we are learning to pay more attention to the particular culture context in which we carry out our witness and mission. We are meeting now in Central Europe. Here in eastern Hungary we find ourselves almost on the dividing line between the Byzantine (*Eastern*) and Roman (*Western*) traditions. These two traditions are interlinked, and yet they are distinctly different. The difference between them is a clue to the difference between Central and Eastern Europe.

It is often assumed that Europe is centered in the West, but Central/Eastern Europe has its own culture and its specific needs that must be taken into consideration. Central Europe is the zone of smaller nations between Germany and Russia: Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians; in the south Croats, Slovenians and Serbs. It has been an embattled and highly fragile territory. The region was Christianized by the Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century, but the influence of Western Christendom soon prevailed. The indigenous Reformation (the Hussite Movement) and the Reformation of Martin Luther and John Calvin were received with enthusiasm. However, the ensuing Counter Reformation decimated the Protestant presence in Central Europe. The people living in this region have been profoundly marked by the 19th century struggle for national identity and independence, the aspiration of Protestants to be recognized as equal partners in social and political life, the illusion of progress and stability at the end of the 19th century, the slaughter of millions who perished in the World Wars, and the prolonged communist rule following the Second World War.

In this sketchy survey one fact must not be forgotten: Central Europe was deeply influenced by the presence of Jewish people, who brought a unique dimension to social and cultural life. It is part of the moving and, at times, tragic history of this region that almost all Jews were exterminated during the Holocaust. I am grateful that among those who were spared was Elie Wiesel, who comes from Sighet in nearby Transylvania. In his writings he continues the Jewish tradition of this region in an admirable way.

In many ways we stand in the ruins of a world that has collapsed. It is not just a collapse of communism; it is a deep crisis in Western civilization which reaches back to the 18th and 19th centuries. In spite of technical and scientific achievements, the dreams and great designs of yesterday have not been fulfilled. In spite of all our gadgets and sophistication, human life has become more shallow and superficial. The organization of human society has not become fair and just. In some

parts of the world people are exposed to suffering and poverty beyond imagination. Pablo Picasso's classic painting "Guernica," memorializing the bombardment of a town during the Spanish Civil War, still symbolizes the ambiguity of the situation in which humankind finds itself. Many chains of injustice need to be broken.

### **The Demise of the Second World**

Shortly after the conclusion of the 22nd General Council (Seoul, 1991), major changes occurred in the world. Within a few months the Second World — countries in the Soviet sphere of influence — crumbled and fell apart. These recent developments are epoch-making. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has come to Hungary to manifest our solidarity with the peoples and churches of the area. What is the legacy of the fifty preceding years of communist rule? What are the experiences of the last eight years?

Let me mention some causes of the collapse. The Stalinist model developed the immense concentration of power in the hands of a small elite. All opposition and democracy were eliminated through control of the press and mass media. Economic life was directed by commands from above. A great military establishment became a self-perpetuating force. A police state created an atmosphere of fear and conformism. Bureaucracy became excessive and oppressive. The courts were often misused, personal freedom was limited, and human rights were violated. However, the fundamental failure was that the Second World became blinded and fascinated by capitalism, and gradually gave up the development of a society based on its own principles.

My theological critique is related to the understanding of human beings in the philosophy on which that type of society was built. What is the operative concept of power? How do we evaluate evil and the evil forces of destruction that impact us? In the long run, can a society function without the dimensions of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation? At the same time, we must affirm that the biblical and theological understanding of human beings sees people as both individual and social beings. Therefore, individual and social rights are inseparable. Any future concept of society has to include the liberal and socialist elements that were attempted to some extent in the social market economy and in the social welfare state.

It is not sufficient to highlight the Second World's reality of totali-

tarianism over against pluralism and liberalism. We cannot ignore the question of the relationship between economic mechanisms and social justice. The power of capital cannot be fully controlled. It escapes democratic control and thereby becomes a threat to freedom and pluralism, a threat to the environment and all creation. It is said that state totalitarianism has been replaced by the total market. Political totalitarianism is socially destructive. However, the economic exclusion which takes place in many parts of the world can be equally destructive.

I do not want to take lightly the suffering of people inflicted by communist regimes. However, the socio-political and economic concept which was presented as the only viable solution after the demise of communism does not seem to be an adequate alternative. The General Council's theme, "Break the Chains of Injustice," compels us to ask what structures could facilitate the political realization of social justice?

The failure of one utopia does not imply the end of every social utopia. The cry of suffering people today challenges us to develop a realistic utopia which is neither divorced from reality nor frustrated by present reality. We look for a sustainable, ecologically responsible, and socially just society that would embrace people, not discriminate against and exclude them. Some people speak about the end of utopias. On the contrary, I plead for utopian thinking which would inspire and empower politicians, economists and social scientists. I claim that this is a service which a Christian community, a church, can render in an era of pluralism and post-modernism. Let us look history in the face boldly and openly. The biblical message of liberation and hope encourages us to work for a model of society that would be politically responsible, socially just, and ecologically sensitive.

### **Lessons for the Church Universal**

Let me indicate briefly the experience of Christian existence in Central and Eastern Europe in the period after the Second World War. The situation in each country was different, of course, and so it is not easy to speak about a common denominator. Christian communities were exposed to difficulties and harassment, but also to new challenges. God did not emigrate to the West. Life was under both the judgment and promise of God. Demonization of one or glorification of the other can only lead us up a blind alley. Instead, fair and sober scrutiny is called for. Are there any lesson for the Church Universal? I wish to mention a

few insights:

A Christian community can live in a secular society and even in a hostile environment, without privileges and without access to power. The powerlessness and marginalization of Christians has often become the source of authority, credibility, and a new confidence. After the prolonged period of Costantinian mingling of the church with the state, it was a purifying experience for the church to be distanced and excluded from official power structures. Being close to the everyday life of ordinary people has helped the church. The church is often a little flock living in a minority situation. However, even a decisive minority can play an important and significant role.

Genuine Christian existence is costly discipleship. In a situation of external pressure and internal struggle, life would be almost impossible without the support of fellow Christians. If you swim against the stream you need to belong to a community. In a situation of censorship and surveillance this fellowship can become a zone of free speech and independent thinking.

The churches of Central and Eastern Europe, together with those in similar situations around the world, were placed in the particular context of a Marxist society. Their task was and is to witness to Jesus Christ. By taking this task upon themselves these churches struggled and witnessed in a vicarious way on behalf of the Christian fellowship around the world. In such a situation, Christian witness and mission do not ultimately depend on a social system or on external safeguards. An unfriendly atmosphere does not destroy Christian faith. Christians are challenged constantly to examine their spiritual stamina and to renew their spiritual foundations. It is necessary to struggle each day for integrity and new strength. We have learned what it is to be a Christian church that is politically relevant, without direct access to the corridors of power. We have also understood that every sermon and Bible study is also a political action. We have understood that the resurrection is a reality in the everyday life of people.

### **Globalization and the Present Predicament**

The radical changes of 1989-90 have produced a new situation for the churches in Central and Eastern Europe that seems to be more friendly and open to Christian witness and presence. However, in spite of their best efforts the churches were not able to fill the ideological



vacuum. They may have missed a precious opportunity to become a focal point for social orientation and meaning. In some places churches even turned their back on the ecumenical movement and are in danger of a new isolation.

It would be a serious failure if churches became opportunistic, simply denouncing the past while turning a complacent face to the present and the future. In this era of neo-liberalism there are new temptations and seductions to be identified and addressed. As always, Christians must learn to distinguish between the biblical God and the old and new idols. Christians strongly affirm democratic and participatory procedures, freedom of assembly, speech and press. But these freedoms cannot be divorced from the concern for justice. Therefore, issues of economic justice, exclusion, marginalization, unemployment, exploitation, violence, and hunger in the societies of the North and throughout the entire world cannot be dropped from our prayers and intercessions and from the agenda of the churches.

Beyond Central and Eastern Europe, the radical changes of 1989-90 accelerated a process that has an impact on all of us. We are confronted by economic globalization, enhanced by advanced communication technology, new means of transportation, and the use of mass media. Transnational corporations transcend the limitations of national boundaries and cultures as sophisticated technology facilitates the making of financial contracts and agreements with unprecedented speed. These trade agreements reduce the ability of governments to act in the interests of their citizens. Globalization has resulted in a massive debt crisis involving a number of developing countries. Meanwhile, the media try to persuade us that the welfare of multinational corporations is more important than the welfare of the household of God.

Thus, cultures are converted into markets and autonomous peoples are transformed into consumers. The globalization of advertising creates a monoculture of consumerism and insatiable desires. This process has been aptly termed a 'colonization of consciousness.' Some experts even foresee that certain areas and regions, certain parts of the world population, are expendable and can be sacrificed.

Economic globalization is not merely an innocent process of extending structures and benefits of the economy from the industrial countries to the Southern hemisphere. In many parts of the world, the consequence of this process is exclusion, injustice and death. It is the denial of God's blessing. We are called to resist the mechanism which serves mammon and requires both human and environmental sacri-

fices. I quote from the report of a 1995 WARC consultation in Kitwe: “It is our painful conclusion that the African reality of poverty caused by an unjust economic world order has gone beyond an ethical problem and become a theological one. It now constitutes a *status confessionis*. The gospel to the poor is at stake in the very mechanism of the global economy today.”

It is against this background that we come together at the 23rd General Council in Debrecen. We are gathered under the theme: *Break the Chains of Injustice*. We believe that this prophetic word responds to the hopes and expectations of many people in our member churches and to the longing of the entire humanity. Indeed, the whole creation has been groaning (Romans 8:22). We are connected with many millions of people around the globe — believers and non-believers — through our passion for justice, our struggle for peace, and our reverence and respect for creation.

The meeting of the General Council is a joyous occasion. The Study Texts and other preparatory materials stem from our work and consultations over the last eight years since the Seoul meeting of the General Council. Many new people have been drawn into this process, and now we are making you a part of this process. We want the time in Debrecen to be a time of celebration, sharing, exchange of experiences, and decision-making. At the end of the General Council I hope we can commit ourselves to take our actions and resolutions from Debrecen to our respective member churches and to start serious discussions on the level of sessions, presbyteries, synods, and General Assemblies. Let us see this General Council as the beginning of a process that will last until the next General Council, meeting in the first years of the 21st century.

### **Confessio semper reformanda**

In the light of recent developments and today’s political and social situation in the world, I would like to ask a more fundamental theological question: Who are we Reformed people? Do we still have a common basis on which we can build our worldwide fellowship? Our roots reach into different historic epochs and our church life is related to different traditions. Although our churches are rooted in the 16th century Reformation, many in the South are the fruits of 19th and 20th century missionary activity.

The question, “Who are we?” can be answered in part by referring to our classical confessions: the First and Second Helvetic Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Confession. In this century, the Theological Declaration of Barmen was formulated when the church in Germany was threatened by heretical tendencies. More recent attempts have been made by different churches to produce a contemporary statement of faith. This points to the recognition that Reformed churches do not possess one common confession, nor do they even share an identical set of confessional statements.

When the World Alliance came into being there was an effort to strive for a common confession of faith. This project was soon dropped, however. Our forebears understood that, on principle, confessing the faith is an open process. Thus, concerning our confession we can also say: *Confessio reformata et semper reformanda*. A confession is like a guide rail that helps us to move and guides us in the understanding of the Holy Scripture. We should diligently study the Scripture — *Nulla dies sine linea!* [No single day without a line of the scriptures] — but we should also study the ancient creeds, the confessions of the Reformation, and the more recent and contemporary statements that were written as a response to a particular existential situation.

I wish to highlight one contemporary statement in this context: the Confession of Belhar. It was an outcry of faith. It was a call to faithfulness and repentance. The Belhar Confession was issued soon after the action of the 21st General Council in Ottawa declaring *status confessionis* on the matter of apartheid. The Belhar Confession is a response to *status confessionis* because the proclamation of the Gospel was at stake in the particular situation of South Africa in 1982. The Confession of Belhar makes it clear that forced separation of people on grounds of race and colour strikes at the very heart of the Gospel! Belhar is a clear decision for the truth of the Gospel. It was declared by a Christian community in South Africa but it was an invitation and a challenge to all churches, especially in the Reformed family, to concur in the act of confessing. The Belhar Confession teaches us that at certain moments in history it is necessary to put aside all considerations and calculations and to take a confessional stance on matters of great urgency.

WARC still holds to its 1982 Ottawa resolution on racism and South Africa. That resolution was not merely a socio-political assessment of the situation, but rather a profound theological declaration which has not lost any of its seriousness and validity. I hope that the Dutch Re-

formed Church in South Africa will fully concur with this statement. The Belhar Confession now plays an important role in the process of unification among churches in South Africa. Clearly, racism in our world has not been overcome and eliminated. Old and new tendencies in the social, cultural, and economic spheres call for a similar process to that which led to the Statement of Ottawa and subsequently to the Belhar Confession. Belhar is an example from contemporary history of the struggle to break the chains of injustice. This example reminds and teaches us that a confession is something practical, tangible, and concrete, something related to our faithfulness in everyday life.

Let me return, then, to the question of our self-understanding. Who are we? Do we still have a common Reformed basis? We do not possess the truth of the Gospel. It is only by the grace of God that the truth comes to us through the Word of God and seizes our hearts. We are challenged and our hearts are searched by the power of the Gospel. But we are equally challenged by the urgent issues and problems of our day. Our faith is forged at the intersection of two levels: the calling of the gospel and the specifics of the social-political situation.

We are pilgrims on the way, listening to the stories of Israel and the story of Jesus of Nazareth (who cannot be fully understood without the background of the Old Testament). As we travel this way we learn that we need each other. We need the fellowship of encounters in which we learn from each other by exchanging our experiences, theological insights, innovations in worship, and renewed spirituality. We need a communion of people who are traveling in the same direction. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, opens us to the fellowship of faith and to the hopes and concerns of our contemporaries. We believe that faith keeps us open to the future which belongs — not to dark and evil forces — but ultimately to God.

At the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches we come together to compare notes. In Bible Study groups, Sections and Sub-sections, committees, worship services, and personal encounters we share our experiences and our visions. We can help each other perceive the basic tenets of Reformed teaching more clearly if we listen to each other and to a great variety of voices. No one of us is *beatus possidens* (having truth); we all are listeners and learners. We all live and witness in a given context, and each situation is equally relevant and important. We need to unlearn our explicit or subtle paternalism and our cultural imperialism, so that we may discover and embrace a true partnership.

## **A Common Reformed Basis?**

Let us examine briefly some basic features of Reformed faith and let us hear the questions that are being raised.

✚The Reformed tradition stresses the unity of the Old and New Testaments. A variety of voices in the Bible point to the voice of God. Yet how can we express the authority of Scripture when we are faced with so many interpretations? How can we avoid falling into the trap of fundamentalism?

✚Reformed teaching emphasizes the otherness and distinctiveness of God, indicating the vast difference between the Creator and the creation. How then can we accommodate the justified critique of feminist Christian theology that stresses the closeness between God and humans?

✚We would not be truly faithful to Reformed understanding if we did not speak about grace and covenant as basic pillars of Reformed faith. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God who is constantly on the move towards humans. It is a miracle that “the infinite embraces us who are finite.” Thus, we live from an amnesty of grace which surpasses all understanding. But how can we interpret ‘covenant’ adequately without putting too much emphasis on obligation?

✚We believe that the gospel is prior and that only in the light of the gospel can we fully and profoundly grasp the meaning of the Law. The gospel is inclusive, not exclusive, for the first word of the gospel is ‘yes.’ How can we avoid the dangers of self-righteous legalism and of being subservient to the principalities and powers of the world?

✚The Holy Spirit is nothing else than the triune God at work. The Holy Spirit is a bridge-builder, leading us into fellowship. In a situation where we are confronted with the rise of interest in spirituality and spiritual values, are we in a position to distinguish between the Spirit of God and the human spirit? What can we learn from the Pentecostal churches? What can they learn from the Reformed tradition?

✚We are called to be a witnessing community — witnessing to the faithfulness of God who calls us through Jesus Christ to be a sign of forgiveness, love and reconciliation in this world. How do we relate to our older brother Israel and to other religions? How do we communicate as Reformed churches with each other on a national, regional and international level?

✚Freedom is a basic feature of Reformed faith. God’s freedom is the very core of the gospel. Our inner freedom is not arbitrary; we are

free as long as we decide to live in compliance and in harmony with the freedom of God. If we are all receivers of freedom called to service, what does the concept of the universal priesthood of all believers teach us? What does it mean for church structures and the life and activities of ecumenical organizations?

✚ In a particular way Reformed Christians understand that God is also served politically. We believe that political and social responsibility is part and parcel of Christian existence. Christian community lives out a liturgy in the world which follows the liturgy in a church building. There is a need for speaking truth in the corridors of power. How can a Christian community be prophetic without being arrogant?

✚ A Christian community is a fellowship of pilgrims, seekers after the city which is to come. We live both in faith and hope. The church does not build the Kingdom of God but prepares the way for it by acting in hope. How can we avoid indifference and a demobilizing effect that may result from too much stress on our being pilgrims and sojourners?

### **The Ecumenical Imperative**

We are a fellowship of Reformed churches, but are we going in the same direction with similar understandings? We carry out our mission in a particular culture and in a context which is imprinted on the way we interpret the Gospel. We can speak about a common basis only in a broad sense. We are grateful for new voices which come from Christians in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean region, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Those of us in Europe and North America are much enriched by new insights and discoveries. And we realize that every statement is contextual and that we all are determined by the times in which we live and by the location in which we have been placed. So let us enter into a dialogue as equal partners without trying to dominate and control each other. There is a danger that without sharing, dialogue, and partnership, our witness will become weak and marginal.

We are always tempted to be concerned about our own denomination and about our immediate problems. There is an ever-present possibility of living and working in isolation. And yet, we live in a global village; we cannot live alone. We are bonded together in Jesus Christ and we are called to give more visible expression to the unity which already exists in Christ. We are nourished, sustained and upheld by the

witness of churches in other parts of the world, so we can say with the Apostle: “We live because you stand firm in the Lord” (1 Thess. 3:8). We are carried by the faithful witness of brothers and sisters around the world.

Our interconnectedness in the Reformed family and in the wider ecumenical fellowship means that we can learn from each other, we can support each other, we can express our solidarity in situations of stress and difficulty, and we can challenge each other. We have the potential of mutual solidarity and of mutual challenge. In love and charity we can enrich each other spiritually. We can inspire each other in the area of social witness.

An important discovery of the last 70 years in the ecumenical movement is related to racism. There is a firm consensus among Christians that racism is sin and that justification of racism is heresy. Analogically, we may come to see that our position on money and economic matters also bears on the integrity of faith, and that certain situations call for a confessional stance.

We Christians live within a larger household of God — a broader *oikoumene* that includes renascent world religions and cultures. I hope that this General Council will encourage and motivate us to pursue pressing issues: proclamation of the gospel in different cultures, the search of people for identity and self-understanding, justice between genders, the rise of diverse ethnic groups, the challenge of globalization, ecological responsibility, and inter-religious dialogue.

### **Towards a More Visible Communion (*Koinonia*)**

The Alliance helps to express a common witness of Reformed churches. The Alliance is also an instrument for the exchange of information among the member churches. Cooperation among Reformed churches has increased in some areas. We now have five regional bodies acting as intermediaries between the Alliance and churches of the respective regions. In countries such as Korea, Nigeria, Chile, and Mexico, associations of Presbyterian or Reformed churches have been established to facilitate closer cooperation. All this is highly commendable. We rejoice in the growing cooperation of Reformed churches everywhere. However, we must avoid fragmentation and unnecessary confusion that can result from overdeveloping the regional and national structures. The World Alliance provides a valuable and important network which would need to be created if it did not exist.

We lack a deeper awareness of the communion (*koinonia*) among Reformed churches, however. One reason may be that Reformed Christians often downplay the notion of church as God's gift. And yet, we are called to be a communion. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, this *koinonia* is grounded in the *koinonia* which exists in the Trinity. The communion of Reformed Christians and churches is expressed through celebration of worship, witness, practical service, and economic support. You may feel that all that already exists among us. In my view, however, we still need to grow into a more profound and effective communion.

The New Testament speaks about the *koinonia* of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist we have *koinonia* in the body of Christ and in Baptism we participate in the *koinonia* of Christ's cross and resurrection. In faith and hope we look to the full communion of the Kingdom. Because we are called to *koinonia* with God we can have a fully inclusive fellowship and partnership with each other. This *koinonia* manifests itself in our sharing of spiritual gifts and material possessions. Our communion with God is something mysterious, unmerited, and glorious; communion among individual Christians and churches should reveal that mystery and glory.

It is my hope that in the future Reformed churches will experience unity more deeply in spite of the diversity of confessions and polity. We belong to each other and we are mutually accountable to each other. Exaggerated individualism and an isolationist attitude are departures from the foundation on which the Christian church is built. Communion does not call us merely to be tolerant; communion is full acceptance. We should accept each other as Christ has accepted us (Romans 15:7). Communion means sharing, and if necessary sacrificing and suffering for each other. Each local congregation and each national church is an expression of the universal church. We have to seek a more adequate understanding of the relationship between local and universal.

We are called to realize our oneness with other churches in local and regional situations. No church is more or less important because of its size or financial potential. All churches — numerically small or big — are equal. Every community and every church has the task of witnessing to Jesus Christ in the context in which it has been placed. It is for the sake of this witness and this service that we welcome communities and churches in the Reformed tradition as companions on the journey of faith. Moreover, in our local, national, and regional contexts we should seek conciliar fellowship with other Christian traditions.



One of the characteristics of the worldwide Reformed church is its disunity. There is a tendency toward splits and divisions among us so that it is not unusual to find several Reformed churches in one country. Work on the new comprehensive *Handbook of Reformed Churches* indicates that there are more than twice as many Reformed churches outside the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as there are inside! One deficiency in the Reformed understanding of the church is that we downplay the presence of Christ in the communion of the church. We tend to forget that the church — local and universal — is an expression of the body of Christ. We are all members of this body, equipped with diverse gifts that enrich and serve each other. Therefore, it is a serious failure simply to accept the existing divisions and separations among Reformed churches.

I urge this General Council to undertake steps that could transform the World Alliance of Reformed Churches into a more committed *communion* of churches. It is not a question of changing the name. Rather, it is an opportunity and a challenge to rethink the basic concept of who we are and what we are called to be. Such a shift would have far-reaching consequences for our understanding of how we relate to each other and how we support each other and this organization.

Bonded together in a new way, we would be better equipped to address the existing disunity in missionary work. It is not inconsequential that missionary work is often supported by local congregations, which generally tend toward self-sufficiency and autonomy. In this respect, international cooperation and coordination among Reformed churches needs to be strengthened. We have to remember that the Christian church is both local and universal. One aspect cannot be separated from the other.

### **A Fellowship of Service**

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches is a fellowship of service. We serve each other in solidarity and also through mutual challenge. Our office in Geneva and our regional structures make themselves available to member churches. Member churches and individuals ask us for information, orientation, literature and also for financial support. The Alliance can be of some service in many ways. It can facilitate an exchange of information and deepen communication among member churches. We can also encourage cooperation. For example, we have drawn the attention of churches to the plight of refugees in the

Great Lakes region of Africa, and we have launched an appeal to organize help for the people of North Korea who are suffering from famine and scarcity.

The original New Testament meaning of *diakonia* is service at the Lord's table. The Lord's Supper is central to our *koinonia*. As we partake in the Lord's Supper we are being sent forth to witness and to serve. In the early church this meant to care for those in need, to be concerned about their living and well-being. Today, we are sent from the Lord's table to serve our own community and the human community in general. Our service is often of a theological and intellectual nature, but it should be also very concrete and practical. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples it was an unprecedented, surprising and mind-blowing act. Following in Jesus' footsteps, we are called to serve in a humble way. We are to serve because we have been served.

There are many needs in the Christian community and bleeding wounds in the larger human community. Service has many aspects and dimensions and the church's service has no limits. We are debtors: we owe a debt to fellow Christians . . . Christians owe a debt to humanity . . . Humanity owes a debt to nature and to the whole creation.

Does this seem abstract and philosophical? Let me be concrete and down to earth. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of this General Council concerning the priorities of the coming years. Nevertheless, let me outline what the service of the Alliance might be in the years to come.

✚ We must reflect on the main emphases of Reformed faith, engaging Reformed theologians, pastors, and lay people — including women and youth

✚ We must identify burning issues in science and social life and to reflect on them theologically.

✚ We must continue bilateral dialogues with other Christian communions.

✚ We must visit member churches and have personal contact with them, especially when they face difficulties and are under stress.

✚ We must support the fully inclusive community of women and men, removing every chain of injustice.

✚ We must strive for human rights, exposing unjust and oppressive situation. We must work for economic justice, a peaceful solution of conflicts, and we must work against violence and racial discrimination.

✚ We must cultivate reverence for life and justice for all creation, striving to redirect ecologically destructive developments.

✚ We must address misunderstanding and confusion in the area of mission, working to overcome disunity and lack of coordination in missionary work.

✚ We must continue to search for a clear vision of the Reformed family's specific contribution to the ecumenical movement. (The Alliance has suggested that the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches hold a joint assembly on the first occasion in the 21st century.)

✚ We must open ourselves to other religions and start dialogue and practical cooperation, especially in the multireligious situations in which many member churches find themselves.

These are some of our priorities as I see it. The General Council may affirm these priorities and may add other concerns. According to the measure of our gifts we shall continue to carry out the work of the Alliance. However, we desperately need your prayers and intercessions. Please include WARC — its Geneva staff and its regional work — in your prayers. In our Wednesday meditations in the Geneva office we often remember you, your needs and hopes. We ask for your concern and your prayerful accompaniment.

Last but not least, if we are to fulfill the established priorities, I ask you all to reconsider your annual financial contribution towards the WARC budget. We cannot fulfill our tasks and visions if the level of our income is not maintained or increased. However, our income is shrinking. If a remedy is not found quickly, we will have to release some members of our staff, impairing our overall work. I urge you to look into this question carefully and to see that your contribution is in tune with the size of your church. The lack of financial means in our fellowship is not primarily an economic problem. It is related to our theology, to our overall spiritual existence, and to whether we see each other as a closely related communion of sister churches.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I wish to thank my colleagues in the support and executive staff for their cooperation and dedication over the years. I am most grateful to all of you. Special thanks go to the staff of the Office of the Coordinator for the General Council.

I wish to thank Madame President Jane Dempsey Douglass, and the officers and members of the Executive Committee for their contribution and concern for the Alliance. Over the years we have created an atmosphere of trust and friendship which is so important in our work. I wish to assure you that it was a delight to work with you and that I feel deeply indebted to you.

I wish to thank the member churches that have maintained contact with the WARC Office in Geneva and supported our work in many ways.

I wish to thank all of you who are delegates to this General Council. I encourage you to feel that your mandate does not end with the closing worship of this meeting. We invite you to maintain close contact with the life of WARC beyond Debrecen. While members of the incoming Executive Committee have special tasks, every delegate of the General Council can help the Alliance by interpreting its work in the member churches. We want you to be a wider circle of the WARC constituency on which we can rely. Only in this way can we cope with the many visions and dreams ahead of us. I hope that for a long time you will remember our time together, which should not only be a time of serious reflection, but also a time of celebration, joy, sharing, and personal encounters.

On the threshold of the next millennium, it is my prayerful wish for the Alliance that it may be a prophetic community — prophetic without arrogance and with compassion. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29). These words are not only about the people of Israel in the time of Moses. They are a promise for all who live in the succession of faith.

Let us not be conformist and opportunistic. Let us be a church and a world communion that is prophetic and that watches faithfully from the walls of our cities and societies.

May the triune God give us courage, endurance and a clear vision of what is important. Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!

## **THE MESSAGE OF THE 23RD GENERAL COUNCIL WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES**

1) We have met in Debrecen, and in the historic Great Church, the scene of so many courageous acts and declarations over the centuries in defence of the Reformed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We have been deepened by our contact with the people and leadership of the Reformed Church of Hungary: constant in faithful witness, impressively growing in strength today.

2) As this General Council draws to a close, we recall once again Isaiah's words:

Is not the real fast I have chosen: to break the chains of injustice,  
to unfasten the leather straps of slavery's yoke,  
to release the crushed to freedom  
and pull off every single yoke?

[Trans. Arthur van Seters]

We respond to this word of God, bearing witness to God's covenant of grace which frees us joyfully to play our parts in God's household of life. Were it not for the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the struggle for justice would be another hopeless burden. In Jesus Christ, we have been liberated to live, not for ourselves alone, but for God and for our neighbors. We have prayed together for the discernment to recognize the moral urgency of this moment in history. We have been moved by the articulate messages of the pre-Council conferences for women and youth. We have been alerted by words from churches oppressed by majority regimes or racked by political or ethnic violence. We have heard from representatives of cultures threatened with extinction. We have attended to the words of delegates concerned with a multitude of particular pressing issues.

3) We do not all live at the same point in the unfolding of historical experience. Issues on one continent or in one culture are not necessarily simultaneously alive for others. By no means have we always agreed with one another. At times our struggles among ourselves have resembled the forms of strife in church and world so much the objects of our concern! But we know that we are all moving together toward a single twenty-first-century global civilization—dominated by technology, universal communications, and a global market system—which threatens to marginalize specific traditions of life such as our own.

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Christian discipleship today has to do not only with personal conduct—with family and congregational life—indispensable as these arenas are to our integrity and credibility. Discipleship also has to do with social justice in such a world. It has to do with creating conditions for the continuation of life on earth, with the integrity of creation itself.

4) It is by no means assured that global disaster can be avoided along the present course of human development. The findings of scientists concerning the degradation of the environment are all too clear. The warnings of economists about the sustainability of present market trends are insistent. There is no guarantee of human progress: no promise that threats to life on this planet can be managed by our human institutions. Neither is it clear that we Christians are prepared to face these problems or even make a useful contribution to their solution. We acknowledge that we have contributed to several of the cultural attitudes—individualism, ethnic particularism, racism, the domination of women by men—that burden the world today. We are beset by culture wars which polarize and divide our communions and congregations. We struggle with differences of theological interpretation and divergent moral perceptions.

5) Our Council themes—unity, justice for all creation, partnership in God's mission, together with all their associated subtopics—have proved to be deeply interconnected. No single theme can be pursued apart from the others. It is only as we read the reports of the 23rd General Council together that we see both the balance and the special direction and force of what we have done together. We are struck by the predominance of issues of practical import. Virtually all our questions in the end come down to one: How shall we live? And, of course, this question implies others. How do our ways of living bear witness to faith? How do we move from theological conviction to ethical insight? How can Christian congregations not only hold ethical convictions but actually be communities of practice which further God's purposes for a just world?

6) With such questions in mind we address the churches of our own confessional family, other Christian churches, and the cultures, institutions and religious communities of the world.

***To Reformed Churches throughout the world,  
both members and non-members of the Alliance***

7) At the centre of our faith stands a gospel promise which propels us into the world to seek justice. Justice is not only something derived

from faith or implied by faith. Doing justice is itself a means of confessing faith in Jesus Christ. We must both pursue this conviction vigorously and at the same time try to understand better what it means. We need to understand ourselves as a community of joyful obedience to God in face of the threats to life today. We have a long history of confessing the faith in documents which represent understandings of God's Word at different times and places. We have never succeeded in confessing the faith together for a particular moment in the world's history, or indeed felt much need to do so. But the need for a common understanding of our faith is greater today. This is not likely to be accomplished by reiterating themes our confessional documents already adequately cover. It will be done, rather, in new ways, including processes by which we seek clarity on particular moral issues and covenanting acts through which we, by God's grace, undertake to live in the world in ways consonant with the truths we believe and discover. We commit ourselves to a common effort to understand—through actions as well as in words—the relation between the faith as we have historically understood it and the urgent necessities of life in the twenty-first century.

### *To the Christian Churches of the world*

8) We reaffirm our commitment to the Apostolic faith we hold in common and to vigorous participation in the ecumenical movement. We ask, in spite of the differences which still, in some cases, keep us from having communion with one another, why we should not seek together to articulate the practical obedience to the gospel needed for witness in this world. On the way to that end, would it not be useful to compare the ways in which our different faith-traditions move from theological conviction to ethical insight? We invite other Christian churches, drawing upon their own insights and terminology, to explore these questions with us and help us where our own insights are incomplete. We recognize that no ecumenical consensus yet exists on these matters, much less a consensus among churches of the Reformed faith. If plans go forward for marking the turn of the millennia by committing ourselves to a future universal council, the question of the relation between our understandings of faith, God's grace in Jesus Christ, and obedient life in God's household should be high on the agenda.

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*To the human world, its religions, cultures, and institutions*

9) We are fellow citizens, with all other human beings, of this planetary community. We are ready to make common cause with those of other faiths, and those of no faith, in resisting evil and seeking to promote what is good for the world of which we are a part. Many of our own members play significant roles in the basic institutions-economic, political, professional, academic and others of the contemporary world. We want these persons and institutions to know of our deep concern about the idolatrous spirituality which drives this world's characteristic preoccupations, particularly in the economic realm. We are ready to walk together with those who sense *that* something is wrong in our world, but feel they have no way within their institutional settings to act on such spiritual promptings. We are ready to learn from those who may be further along the road of moral discernment than we. We have the deepest respect for the witness maintained by our Jewish brothers and sisters. We can learn much from the work of secular ethicists who have laboured long to define the meaning of human rights, of justice, of human community as such. We also respect the ethical visions inherent in other religious traditions. Despite differences of ultimate commitment, there is no reason to withhold cooperation when we see that the practical consequences of different visions can coincide. There is no iron law that says things in this world must remain the way they are. We believe they need to be changed.

10) Let us make a beginning, here and now. The issue behind all the other issues has to do with illusions of power and mastery. It has to do with possessions. What, or whom, do we think we really own, dispose of, or control? Ourselves? Other people? The course of history? The future of the earth? Or did John Calvin speak the truth when he undercut all this from the start, writing again and again, "We are not our own"?

11) We have addressed our words to others. Now we must speak for ourselves. We, participants in the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, hereby commit ourselves to **The Declaration of Debrecen**. We have put our signatures to it. We urge our member churches and our congregations to do the same.



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**THE DECLARATION OF DEBRECEN**

**We belong — body and soul, in life and in death — not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.** We confess our theological and moral failures, our complicity in adding to the world's burdens, our inadequate witness to God's purposes. We ask forgiveness from God and from each other for these transgressions, and also for the injuries we have done to one another. Claiming the new life which forgiveness makes possible, and relying on God's promises that the chains of injustice can be broken, we declare:

**We are not our own.** We belong to the living God who made all things and declared them to be very good. We will not exploit and destroy that creation. We will be stewards of creation for God.

**We are not our own.** We believe in Jesus Christ, who died for us and was raised for our salvation. We confess that no human ideology or agenda holds the secret to the ultimate direction of history. We are in all things dependent on our Redeemer.

**We are not our own.** We know that in Jesus Christ we were bought with a price. We will not patronize, exclude, or ignore the gifts of any person, male or female, young or old. We declare our solidarity with the poor, and with all who are suffering, oppressed, or excluded.

**We are not our own.** We believe in the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth. We refuse the false assumption that everything, including human beings and their labour, is a commodity and has a price.

**We are not our own.** We are called to into a new community in the Spirit of God. We pledge ourselves to a simple life-style which bears witness to God's ordering of the household of life.

**We are not our own.** We do not despair, for God reigns. We will continue to struggle against injustice in this world. We look forward to the Holy City in which God will dwell with human beings and be their God.

**We are not our own.** With Christians of the Reformed faith through the centuries, and with the whole people of God we join our voices to proclaim,

**SOLI DEO GLORIA!**

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