

Defining the vocation of the church in today's world, approaches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its members".

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Dear Partners,

President and respected Members of EPRAL Synod,

I am so grateful to God and the leadership of this Synod for the possibility of meeting today after difficult year and a half. In the last days we have seen the world shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, The pandemic situation has opened our eyes on many challenges and realities that affirmed the need for the church to question what does the Lord require of us as a church today? As a communion today. What role and vocation does the church has today and how does the church face the new reality that the world is facing. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the injustices that surrounds the world whether it is social, political and economic. It exposed inequality, exploitation and oppression that are rooted in economic systems that exploited the dignity of people where healthcare and other fundamental rights are only available to those who can afford it. Almost everywhere the vulnerable, poor and marginalized are most affected by the disease, and by the measures of disease control.

How can we be an impactful church today? What is the church called to today?

John and Mary were celebrating their 30th wedding Anniversary. They worked hard to make this night a special night. After checking on the best restaurants in town. They found a nice restaurant. The reservation was made at 7 at night and they made sure that they got the best table. But John got caught in meetings, and he was late. Mary was angry. The couple reached late to their Anniversary dinner and they were tense and troubled. Angela the waiter noticed that they were not well. She approached their table and offered them 2 glasses of wine. We did not order this said Mary in a troubled voice. I know

said Angela, it is just that I noticed you were troubled and wanted to help you feel better. Angela was hospitable. She was not merely serving the couple, doing things in the proper way but rather she was living hospitality, caring for how they feel. She was thinking about them, their frustration and how she can create positivity. When we talk about hospitality it is thinking about others and how they feel.

In the world of hotelier, There is a difference between service and hospitality. In service we are interested to present what we learned, while in hospitality we are concerned with how the people feel. **Hospitality is about them not us. It is not merely service but rather a way to make people happy, respected, and dignified. It is stepping in their shoes and trying to lessen their struggle and pain and make them happy, or even get them out of their misery.**

One of the most interesting and confusing biblical texts about Hospitality are found in Luke with 2 well known stories: **The good Samaritan** (Luke 10: 25-37) **The story of Mary and Martha**, (Luke 10 :38-42) The two stories put side to side different perceptions about Hospitality. The first story speaks about a person coming to Jesus asking about who is my neighbor. And Jesus tells him **“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.**

The Samaritan was the hospitable one, while the Priest and the Levite were far from Hospitality.

Henry Neumann, a Catholic priest in his book “ Reach out “ says:

Hospitality is a fundamental attitude towards our fellow human beings, it means to create a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change and transformation can take place besides spiritual growth.

The church is called for Hospitality to create new spaces where we are renewed by Hospitality , where we dare to be in new space, where we accept the invitation to the table set by God and the invited and inviting are both shaped anew.. The corona virus has created distancing, self-centeredness, fear from the other. It is time that the church to live hospitality inviting the struggling and marginalized around us.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan was ready to create a free space; to meet a stranger, and to learn from this new encounter. If you interviewed the Samaritan before the encounter, he would have never guessed that he would end up bandaging his wounds, putting him on his own donkey, and brought him to an inn and paid his money for his recovery”

When we get in this new free space we are changed, the helped and the helper. The Good Samaritan and the wounded; Our task as a church is to create free space and learn more about God in this encounter. According to the first story, Hospitality is to go outside the circle and the regular and to feel with the pain of the people and to act accordingly trusting that God will change us in this new space. **What is strange in this story is that those who were supposed to be hospitable missed it and the Samaritan was the one who was ready to take the risk.**

Hospitality is to take the risk in stepping into a new space and I believe this is the same risk that Jesus took as he was incarnated in our humanity.

The second story is the story of Mary and Martha which poses a challenging understanding for hospitality. At a quick glance at the story, Martha represents the real hospitable person. Martha symbolizes the model of hospitality, who was welcoming Jesus in her house and serving him with Middle Eastern Hospitality to the extent that she was distracted with much serving and she came to Jesus complaining **“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help**

me.” As a Middle Eastern, I understand Martha very well since we show our love through hospitality, but what was shocking is that Jesus did not appreciate all this Hospitality, and said “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; ⁴² one thing is needful . Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

What do we learn from this story about Hospitality, Hospitality is not mere actions, as you open a soup kitchen, or café for refugees, give them food and housing. Or rushing from one task to another, But rather with **What spirit we do hospitality, affects the impact of hospitality.** Hospitality is not as act of pity but is rooted in our faith. It is not a troubled experience but an experience where we ask our lord what do you need from us and how do you want us to live our faith? It is not a troubled experience but rather sitting at the feet of the lord and experience the new space where God shapes us.

In Lebanon the Presbyterian Church in Lebanon started schools for the Syrian refugee children. At the beginning some members of our churches were against such hospitality, they thought that this will trouble our church and this should not be our responsibility. Some of them were afraid that these children will end up staying in Lebanon. But many of our congregation looked at them as children of God who deserve to be protected from the streets, and enjoy dignified life and learn to read and write. I want to say that this ministry shaped who we are as the church today; we even discovered that unless we reflect hospitality in our daily life, then we have missed the real meaning of the Gospel and the love of God to all people. Unless we are ready to cross to new space we do not grow as Christians. This is why many young people look at the church as monotonous and boring. Unless you discover a new space to live your faith, you will end up doing the regular, the service, but not hospitality.

Today the world is threatened with radical attitudes, where radicalism did creep to our minds. Hospitality is one way to cure the world from radicalism. To allow a new encounter of humanity aside from terms as we are the good ones and you are the bad ones. (This is the thinking behind radicalism), but rather we will meet each other to learn more from each other on how we can be better humans who need to learn daily how to love our neighbor, whether our neighbor is another church or another religion.

1-The Church is called for Hospitality

2-The church is called for new Imagination of how to live its faith and do mission:

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

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

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

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

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

When The Wittenberg witness was written we never imagined that this will speak so clearly to the present situation. The Corona situation challenges us to be shaped with new imagination about how to be the church for today; the Communion for today. It calls us to live up to new Imagination; To think with imaginative minds towards change through practical steps. To be in Kairos time and have new imagination. We believe that the new imagination is led by the work of the Holy Spirit among us and urges us to join efforts and live with courage and assurance that we are in Kairos time, awaiting new shaping for a new tomorrow.

3-The church is called for discernment, confessing witnessing and reforming. How can we be the church of today?

As churches and Communion (Global Koinonia) called to Communion and Committed to Justice how , we are challenged to reflect on our identity in these foundation shattering times? To go through the process of Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing and Being Reformed Together. This is

central in the shaping that the communion focused at in the process of “Covid and Beyond” The four Verbs are in the present tense .Verbs that incarnate what we are called to do as a global family, as regional group and as member churches. This we do together our koinonia is God’s Gift to be received and nurtured. A Reformed community always reforming according to the word of God.

Discerning the Signs of the Times

To discern the signs of the times was the imperative that was offered by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A discerning of the signs of the times is crucial for our witness and confession: “The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted. The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death” (Accra Confession, paragraph 6).

At the center of this is discernment: As the Accra Confession said: “The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted”. For our global koinonia this mean we must do the discerning together. We are called to a process that mobilizes, involves, and strengthens and with Gods help empowers the whole global family in our difference and distinctiveness. The process we are undertaking requires a focus on reading the signs of the times that takes seriously injustice and brokenness of our world and our own churches. Our communion is not yet the koinonia God calls us to be.

So, the question for the World Communion is not whether we can discern the signs of the times. Those signs are all too clear. The question rather, “Christians can see God at work through the revolutions of the world” and whether we are “in the grip of the essential truth” that it is about justice, dignity, life, and the creation of a new humanity.

This process then requires us a theologically and biblically rooted engagement that speaks to global, regional, national and local realities. We must recognize the interconnection between the local and the global. There is no local reality which is not impacted by and shaped by the global world order. There is no global reality that is not constructed through and by local communities and resources. to mobilize our whole communion as a confessing, witnessing family committed to our own transformation and radical change in service to the God of Life.

The process is marked by urgency to respond to God's call. Koinonia is our gift. Justice is our responsibility.

Discerning together is also a gift so that we uphold each other to do together that which we cannot do alone and to honor that which each one of us brings to this global family. For indeed when one suffers we all suffer and even so when one rejoices we all rejoice.

4-The church is called to practice critical Reflections on Empire

It is strategically significant for the WCRC and the churches to use the lens of empire as a means for understanding the context. The WCRC is called to strengthen and deepen a critical theological study process of engaging empire in the present context. to enhance regional critical thinking on empire and encourage cross fertilization among the regions; We church is called to highlight the continuing legacy of empire in our societies and congregations. The WCRC will seek to live out the Accra Confession by concentrating on the specific ways in which empire changes who we are and the contexts in which we live. It will also seek to work with alternatives and seek to lift up those areas and contexts in which alternatives are being worked out;

As communion we focus our continuing work around economic justice by engaging in study processes in which the interconnections between macroeconomic processes and everyday lived reality are exposed. This will particularly seek to engage with the issues of land, labor, unemployment, the economic underpinnings of race, wages, etc.

5-The church is called to Witness for Justice and Peace

The church is called to prophetically witness for transformation. This is central to its missiological imperative. Witnessing for transformation is essential to the vision of the WCRC. The WCRC will therefore seek to increase its witness through specifically-directed advocacy work with a particular focus on the global dimensions of this work. This will involve the strengthening of the WCRC's work with the United Nations. It also specifically means working with other ecumenical bodies and associations that are involved in advocacy work.

Ecological Justice

Working with our member churches on the issue of ecological justice to care for God's creation through worship, study and ecumenical and political advocacy. (General Council Action 68)

Gender-Based Violence

Advocacy work directed towards churches to engage with the issue of gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence through consultations, production of resources and directed campaigns by member churches. This will directly feed into and draw from our mandate for a gender policy by 2019 (General Council Action 31). This work will seek to address the issue of sexual violence in our churches, as well as strengthen the existing work of our member churches on this issue. It will also seek to engage with the entire burden of the problem and include women, men, children and the family and work with other faith groups that are working on the same issue.

1. Engaging Churches on Disability

Regionally based advocacy work on disability so as to ensure that all our churches are safer and more accessible spaces for people with disabilities.

The WCRC strives to strengthen and deepen the existing **Theological Education for Women** in the South Through providing scholarships, Global Institute of Theology (GIT) and make space for theological reflections from Reformed women theologians. This will particularly emphasize and work with and within the regions. The WCRC will work with theological institutions of its member churches in all of the above work, as well as explore additional ways in which to empower women theologians

6- The church is called to promote Ecumenical Dialogues and Cooperation

The ecumenical engagement of the WCRC with other Christian communions aims to promote the visible unity of the larger church in its common witness to the world. In dialogues and other programs, the WCRC will emphasize the interconnectedness of theology, communion, mission and justice and will foreground voices and perspectives of Christians in the Global South.

Dialogues for Life"

The WCRC will engage in "Dialogues for Life" with those groups of other religions where the interaction will have a constructive impact on

situations that are relevant for its member churches. The situation in the following countries will receive particular attention: Middle East, Nigeria and Indonesia. The activities will be conducted in cooperation with partners within the regions that have experiences in programs of interreligious cooperation

Today we meet as one family around the Communion as we are challenged throughout our churches in strengthening our witness in response to the imperatives of the Accra Confession and the call for an economy of life

This is a special time, where Crisis could become an opportunity, where in the Midst of our pain and struggle, we see hope, mainly because God is with us, as we strengthen one another. This is a time of building a stronger Communion, a prophetic one, an impactful presence in every place that hurts.

Still today is moment of Kairos where we are called to act, be prophetic voices and strive towards healing the world from the long lasting injustice that even a vaccine will not heal, It is a Kairos moment in our self-understanding as churches and communion and our mission It is our role to seek new ways of strengthening the communion and transforming the world as we are transformed ourselves. To be the church in the public square reflecting the presence of God in spite of difficult times; to dream of new alternatives and see visions of a reality based on Justice.

Today is a time where we gain strength as we come together and strengthen one another

It is a time to discover the blessings of togetherness

It is a time of manifestation for how God could send us out to a broken world

It is a time to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”

It is a time of witnessing to a God of Life

Together we can make a difference. Let us live in hope.

May the Lord bless your Synod work and give us all strength.

