


Draft General Council Workbook



27 General Council
Celebrating 150 years
of Mission and
Witness



Persevere In
Your Witness

PREPARING THE DISCERNMENT OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL



PREFACE

1. The journey towards Chiang Mai has begun. The 27th General Council to be held in Chiang Mai, Thailand will also mark the 150 years of mission and witness of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its antecedents. We will be commemorating 150 years of a meaningful journey marked by a quest of the Reformed family to be faithful to God in some challenging eras – in each era read the signs of the times and endeavouring to respond to God’s call to be God’s instruments of transformation.

A BRIEF LOOK BACK AT HISTORY

2. In the last quarter of the 19th Century, the then *Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding on to the Presbyterian System* challenged the forces of colonialism and stood up for people who were suffering at the hands of imperial powers. The first quarter of the 20th Century saw the Alliance standing with small Reformed churches that constituted minorities in their contexts and strengthened them. In the second quarter of the 20th Century, the Alliance was at its ecumenical best in being a strong voice welcoming and encouraging the World Council in the process of formation and was even willing to diminish so that the World Council could increase and flourish. This was also the era in which the Alliance was a strong voice against Nazism. In the third and fourth quarters of the 20th century, the agenda of the Alliance was dominated by the fight against racism, especially in its most vicious forms in apartheid South Africa, as well as gender injustice and economic and climate injustice. It became the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in this era. Some key markers are the *Status Confessionis* on apartheid declared in 1982, the Programme to Act Challenge and Transform (PACT) on gender justice issues, and the *Processus confessionis* on economic and climate justice issues.
3. In this first quarter of the 21st Century, the decisive promulgation of the Accra Confession and its impact on the world is the main marker, while all the other issues that characterized the 20th Century continued to be with us. It is in this era that the Alliance lived into its call to be a communion committed to justice. The 2010 Union of WARC and REC saw the coming into being of a name that reflects our identity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches. In addition, the WCRC picked up healthy ways of facilitating how member churches talk about some difficult ethical issues. All along, conflicts around the world and their devastating effects on whole populations have continued to be a major concern of the WCRC.

CONNECTING STRANDS

4. The strand that connects this long history is our determination to be God’s instruments as a communion committed to justice and transformation of the communities in which we are found. As an organization and as member churches who belong to this umbrella body. This is the witness we feel called to. This witness is rooted in the Biblical calling that the WCRC and its member churches have responded to. The prophets of old in the Old Testament constantly found themselves called to speak truth to power and to proclaim, “Thus saith the Lord ...” fearlessly in the face of evil. The WCRC have lived into this same calling throughout the decades. We dare to believe that we are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ who came to give access to life in fullness (John 10: 10) in contrast to the imposter who comes only to steal, to kill and to destroy (John 10: 9). The question is,

what difference has our commitment in our actions over the last 150 years made? Is our world becoming better and more and more transformed into what God intended it to be?

5. While there may be many things to celebrate in terms of transformation, by and large, we have seen an increase in injustice and domination and suffering in many parts of the world. Our journey to the 27th General Council in Chiang Mai cannot ignore this reality. Suffering people and people in the margins cannot ignore this. In fact, the whole of creation is groaning. Does this mean that fulfilling God's mission and being God's witnesses in the kind of world in which we live is a futile exercise? There are cynics who will take that view. This ought not to be the case with those called by God's name. The theme of the 27th General Council urges us to take a different path – the path of perseverance – “Persevere in your witness”.
6. The writer of the Biblical book of Hebrews urges us to Persevere in the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12: 1-2). The current state of the world and the forces of injustice and evil cannot deter us. We cannot, we must not, yield to those forces. In Jesus name, Babylon and the forces of evil have fallen. This is the time to rally together and live out our calling as a Communion – defying the forces of division, stand together and be God's instruments of change as God's faithful witnesses. The journey of being witnesses in a time such as this may not be easy. But we are called to persevere. We are also reminded of how Jesus explained the Parable of the Sower in Lk 8. The fourteenth verse reads, “But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” The seed that fell on good soil did not just simply produce a good crop magically. It did so by persevering, possibly in a hostile environment. That is the nature of the mission to which we have been called. Perseverance is an important part of the journey.

SUMUD AND SHALOM

7. The word *Sumud* which we have learned from the Palestinian people over the decades, is a very helpful lens through which we can see perseverance. *Sumud* translates into steadfastness, resilience, and perseverance. *Sumud* is anchored in the strive of oppressed people to a cause of justice and of historical rootedness in the land that has seen years of suffering and persecution, injustice. *Sumud* acts as a counterforce to injustice, providing individuals and communities with the strength to confront oppression.
8. Through this workbook, we use *Sumud* as a thematic lens to prophetically speak to many struggles of oppressed peoples in different contexts of oppression, proposing a way of acting and anchoring it in mutual solidarity. *Sumud* forms the central core of our responses to collective and individual injustices. *Sumud*, with its steadfastness, resilience and perseverance, is the main pathway to the true Hebrew concept of *Shalom*. One can even say we are called to persevere in our witness because without perseverance, without *Sumud*, there can be no true meaningful community building peace – *Shalom*.

THE WORKBOOK AS A ROADMAP

9. This Workbook is one of the key roadmaps for our journey. The concept papers have been carefully prepared by working groups representing the variety of gifts we have within our member churches drawn from all the regions of the world. The Executive Commit-

tee, as the body charged with governance, has added its qualitative input in shaping it. The process includes receiving even more qualitative inputs from member churches before it is finalized. It is our hope that churches will engage the workbook and have large cross-sections reading and studying it in order to give qualitative input into it. In this way, the workbook is shaped by the entire WCRC and its member churches at all levels.

10. "Safe journey" as we continue in the race or the journey that God has set for us, with the next stop being Chiang Mai, looking forward to how that stop will also propel us into a new era of our journey together as a communion.

Setri Nyomi
Interim General Secretary

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INTRODUCTION

PREPARING THE VISION AND MISSION OF THE WCRC

According to Art VII of the Constitution, the General Council is the “main governing body of the World Communion of Reformed Churches” and “provides leadership for the World Communion of Reformed Churches in achieving the aims and purposes of the organization”. Large parts of the General Council agenda are designated to discuss the vision and mission of the WCRC.

In preparation for the 27th General Council, we have designed a participatory process that invites member churches and partners to contribute to the shaping of the vision and mission of the WCRC in the period from 2026 to 2032.

This process comprises the following steps:

1. In the first semester of 2024, **programmatically working groups** consisting of people from all parts of the communion devised concept papers for the five areas that constitute the programme work of the WCRC. These concept papers provide the theological basis that guides the vision and mission of the WCRC in these areas. This basis will be the foundation for the development of the 2026-2032 strategic plan of the WCRC.
2. These concept papers were discussed by the **Strategic Programme Planning Group (SPPG)** and the **Executive Committee**. These committees gave qualitative feedback, which afterwards was integrated into the texts.
3. In September 2024, we are in the position to share a first draft of the General Council Workbook **with member churches and partners**. We request that you study the material and give qualitative feedback by the end of February 2025.
4. Once we have received the feedback, the **working groups** will develop the concept notes in light of the responses and work out proposals for decision-making at the General Council.
5. The **General Council** will discern the proposals and make decisions to guide the vision and mission of the WCRC.
6. After the General Council, the **Strategic Planning Committee** will develop the 2026-2032 strategic plan from these General Council actions.

THE WCRC: A DISCERNING COMMUNION

The Reformed tradition calls the church for continuous self-examination according to God’s Word. Every believer is called to contribute to the discernment of what God requires of us at a particular time at a specific place (Micah 6:8).

We understand the participatory process to shape the vision and mission of the WCRC for the 2026-2032 period in the spirit of the Reformed synodal tradition, as it was, e.g., defined by the Emden Synod of 1571:

“God has assigned his gifts to men in such a way that he has not given to individuals the whole fullness, but only a very definite measure and a definite share of these gifts, so that they, joined and united together, enrich each other, and that they are among themselves instruments and, as it were, channels for his goodness and his grace, precisely through the fraternal union of their gifts.

It follows from this: The greater the number of believers who are united among themselves, the richer is the resulting flow of grace for all; just as, in the other case, when they are fragmented and at odds with each other, they deprive each other of the most glorious gift of God.”¹

The WCRC has adopted this synodal theology in its Rules of Order. These rules invite a diversity of voices and call for intensified engagement in seeking to ‘understand what the will of the Lord is’ (Ephesians 5:17):

“Our common commitment to seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our deliberations is confirmed by the experience of the fruit of the Spirit amongst us as we work. [...] There are no winners and losers—we are all seekers and discerners together, affirming through our common loyalty to Jesus Christ that:

- the General Council is a community of faith earnestly seeking to understand God’s will;
- each participant in the General Council has been given unique gifts and insights by God;
- every participant’s contribution is worthy of respect;
- our aim is to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches through the General Council;
- our commitment is to find faithful ways forward on which all can agree.”²

FOUR VERBS AND FIVE ACTIONS

The concept papers in this workbook engage with the Reformed traditions to gather theological resources for perseverance in witness. It follows the **four verbs** that describe the self-understanding of the World Communion of Reformed Churches: *Discerning*, *Confessing*, *Witnessing*, and *Being Reformed together*.

- The WCRC *discerns* both, the signs of the times and God’s call to action, guided equally by its commitment to justice and maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- The WCRC is a *confessing* body driven by the unfinished agenda of the Reformation and inspired by the Confessing Church in Germany, the community of the Belhar Confession, and the Accra Confession.
- The WCRC *witnesses* to the good news of Jesus Christ that transforms death-dealing systems and structures and liberates for the fullness of life.

¹ M. Freudenberg and A. Siller (ed.), Emden Synode 1571 – Wesen und Wirkungen eines Grundtextes der Moderne, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 2020, p. 68f, [https://www.emder-synode-1571.de/Das_Einladungsschreiben_zur_Emden_Synode_von_1571-26856-0-0-75.html].

² Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Leipzig, Germany, 29 June – 7 July 2017, p. 93f.

- In *being reformed*, the WCRC collaborates and engages in God's work of reforming and transforming according to the Word of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

These four verbs shape the **five actions** that structure the programmatic work of the WCRC:

- P1: Fostering a Just Communion;
- P2: Covenanting for Justice;
- P3: Doing Theology for Transformation;
- P4: Mission in a Context of Crisis;
- P5: Working with All the Partners That God Provides.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK?

We ask WCRC member churches and partners for qualitative feedback on the concept papers in this workbook. We would be delighted if we could get responses from all parts of the communion. Please share this workbook with regional synods and congregations, theological schools and the different ministries of your church.

As we learn from the Emden synod, discernment is not restricted to experts but is a call directed to every believer. We have tried to formulate the documents in accessible language and invite broad and diverse feedback.

The WCRC is working in many fields. Not every group has the capacity to study all the documents in detail. We, therefore, suggest that you engage with those concept papers that are close to your interest.

Every concept paper ends with a number of questions that might help you to structure the discussion. Again, in many contexts, it will not be possible to discuss all the questions. We recommend that you choose those questions that are most relevant to your context.

We are asking for qualitative feedback on the theological foundations provided in the different documents. At this stage of the process, we are not yet looking for particular programmes or activities. Those will be discussed at the General Council and in the strategic planning process.

Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wrc.eu.

P1: FOSTERING A JUST COMMUNION

We request qualitative feedback on the communion concept paper from member churches, ecumenical partners and theological networks. Please engage critically with the theological foundations of our communion and make suggestions on how this conceptual framework can be improved. Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wcrs.eu.

After we have received your feedback, we will revise the concept papers in accordance with what we have heard before they are submitted to the discernment of the General Council.

INTRODUCTION

1. The World Communion of Reformed Churches says that it is called to communion and committed to justice. But what does communion mean? What is its connection to justice? What does it say about full and just participation? In the context of climate catastrophe, war, genocide, increasing racial tensions marked by police brutality, rampant misogyny, political polarization and the growing of right-wing movements that totter on the brink of fascism, what do ideas such as unity and communion actually mean?
2. The Biblical idea of communion is rooted in the idea of love of neighbour and even love of one's enemies.

“AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”

3. We live in a world that is increasingly marked by fragmentation, supremacism and division and the violence, inequity and injustices these drive. But, there are also signs of persistent/resistant community, re-communion and counter solidarities. These enable key communities to mount and maintain their struggles for climate justice, racial justice, gender justice, land return and reparations. This points to a landscape in which there can be no commitment to justice without seeking communion to resist the interconnected forces we face, and there can be no communion unless justice breaks out from the new realities life in communion makes possible. For the WCRC, communion and justice are closely and inseparably linked.
4. The General Council calls us all together to persevere in our witness during acute, interconnected crises and profound challenges. These crises and challenges, from climate emergency to genocidal nationalisms, from global apartheid to familial violence, are rooted in systemic ‘un-communion’: The deliberate, crafted and centuries-long ways of keeping power, resource and fullness from the majority of the world's peoples, the willful, crafted and centuries-long way of abusing the life and treasure of the creation, the deliberate, crafted and centuries-long establishment of power interests which mutate rather than transform.
5. The WCRC seeks to celebrate and renew its identity and integrity as a communion, as a people whose witness speaks to our prophetic, biblical and relational history and whose story is marked by courageous witness and also marred by sinful division. As a global family, we come to the Lord's Table in ways that reveal and subvert our communion in Christ. Like in Corinth, there are many who come to the table hungry, while those who are too full of the world's resources take their place (1 Cor 11:21). It is clear we are living

through a time where answering justly, generously and truly who is our neighbour would lead us into deep communion with each other, the earth and our Creator. But we cannot ask this question while our practice of unity leaves unchanged the inequities and asymmetries empire maintains.

6. The urgency of communion makes itself known in a series of crises:

DESPOILATION

7. Our neighbours' lands continue to be the subject of avarice and powerful interest. Indigenous people continue to testify to the loss of land today even as they demand the return of ancestral lands long stolen under colonial powers. Our neighbours' needs continue to be made secondary, at best, to the needs of capital and those who profit from capital's sovereignty. And then our neighbour, mother and home, the earth suffers at an unprecedented rate.
8. According to WWF, We've already warmed the planet by 1.1°C since pre-industrial times, causing dangerous disruption in nature and impacting people worldwide. Global greenhouse gas emissions between 2010 and 2019 were higher than any previous decade in human history. Already, freshwater supplies are shrinking, agricultural yields are dropping, our forests are burning, and rising oceans are more acidic—all, in part, due to a warming climate. We are living through the 6th global extinction with a rapid loss of species estimated by experts to be between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate.¹
9. The UN Secretary-General points to “a litany of broken climate promises”, which revealed a “yawning gap between climate pledges and reality.” He wrote that high-emitting governments and corporations were not just turning a blind eye; “they are adding fuel to the flames by continuing to invest in climate-choking industries. Scientists warn that we are already perilously close to tipping points that could lead to cascading and irreversible climate effects.”²
10. The Accra Confession, written in 2004, reminds us, “The policy of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment. In 1989, one species disappeared each day and by 2000 it was one every hour. Climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, and threats to freshwater are among the devastating consequences. Communities are disrupted, livelihoods are lost, coastal regions and Pacific islands are threatened with inundation, and storms increase. High levels of radioactivity threaten health and ecology. Life forms and cultural knowledge are being patented for financial gain.”³

DE-INTEGRATION

11. Many global institutions and international agreements and arrangements that have expressed some degree of international cooperation are being subverted, defunded, resisted, and disrespected. This is visible in geo-political actions like BREXIT but also in the refusal to abide by international court rulings in the case of Ukraine and Palestine. National manifestations and milestones of unity and integration are being dismantled in ar-

¹ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/ipcc-climate-report-6-key-findings-about-the-climate-crisis>.

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115452>.

³ The Accra Confession, §8, [<https://wcrc.eu/about/accra-confession/>].

rights like health care, welfare rights, gender rights and refugee rights. The notion of a social contract is becoming more and more tenuous in states that use the privatizing logic of neo-liberal economics to protect and preserve the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the common good and to the exclusion of the poor.

DEHUMANIZATION

12. Central to the idea of communion is the idea of community. Yet we find that community is defined in parochial ways, conforming to the codes of blood, kinship, ethnicity and patriarchy. This is being played out in deadly and dangerous ways around the world, from the genocide being committed against Palestinians in Gaza to the deepening and entrenched racism in North America and the caste atrocities in South Asia. Boundaries and borders are being drawn more deeply and firmly. At the same time, sanctions against nations which do not toe the line of neo-liberal capitalism are driving into poverty a large section of their populations and are depriving them of much-needed resources, including life-saving medication. Community is being globally organized according to the designs of dominating powers and at the cost of those on the margins.
13. Jesus, in the gospels, reminds us, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” He goes on to point to his disciples and say, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:48-50). In doing so, Jesus subverts narrow notions of kinship and family and instead opens the notion of family and community to all those committed to justice.

“PERSEVERE IN YOUR WITNESS.” A CALL TO COMMUNION AS AN INTENTIONAL METHODOLOGY

14. We affirm that communion is a gift from God and is sustained and nurtured through the work of the Holy Spirit. This affirmation does not absolve humans from the hard work required to build and maintain communion. In and through the pandemic, we noticed how communities worldwide struggled and found new and innovative ways to hold communion. Likewise, we also noticed how the church struggled to be the church despite being physically distanced. While technology opened the platform for people to connect and even worship to be celebrated, other forms of communication also flourished. In many contexts and spaces, this allowed for a rethinking of what it meant to be a community, what it meant to be church and indeed, how one was to celebrate communion and come to the Lord’s table virtually.
15. While these were some of the struggles faced by the institutional church, people’s movements and solidarity movements also found ways to embody solidarity and find a common witness. It was in and through the pandemic, and what was perhaps incorrectly named as social distancing, that we found that prophetic communities of resistance and hope continued to persevere and offer witness. Whether in Syria or Palestine, in the Black Lives Movement or in the struggle for the dismantling of patriarchy by women, many of whom were being brutalized in the confines of their homes during the pandemic, there was a determined perseverance in witness.
16. Many indigenous peoples understand communion as holistic, including humans, nature, spirits, and animals. In contrast to individualistic perspectives, indigenous communities perceive themselves as integral members of a broader familial network encompassing living and non-living entities. Their worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms- nature is a source of sustenance, and they have a spiri-

tual connection to all of nature. Rituals are performed to honour the spirits of the land and sustain harmony among all life forms. This sacred relationship between humans, nature, spirits, and animals highlights the unity and harmony of all life forms. This challenges the anthropocentric relationships that have been dominant in the traditional Christian understanding of communion and has led to environmental destruction, causing further harm to vulnerable beings and land.

17. Indigenous communities, such as the Naga community in India, consider nature, spirits, humans, and animals as siblings. It challenges the conventional notion of family and sibling relationships outside the bonds of exclusive human-to-human relationships or narrow kinship relationships that the patriarchal family, race, or caste define. This sacred relationship is apparent even in folk tales. Indigenous peoples consider myths and folk tales as an intrinsic part of life. It teaches theological, moral, and ethical life values.

REFLECTIONS FROM NAGALAND, INDIA:

A Naga folk story narrates the tale of three brothers- a human, a spirit, and a Tiger. They were born of the same mother. It presents us with a familial sibling story beyond the constraints of heteronormativity. Despite the complex relationship dynamic, it highlights the unity of all life forms.

The story of the three brothers- Tiger, Spirit, and Man:

“In olden days, the mythology says that a spirit, tiger and man were born of the same mother. Their mother became old, and the three brothers had to take turns to look after her. When the spirit looked after her mother, he washed her, fed her with rice and gave her rice-beer to drink, so his mother fared well. When the man looked after her, she was okay, but when the tiger looked after her, he scratched her and licked his own mother’s blood so that she withered with time.

One day, the mother said to the spirit and man that she would die that day and that they were to send the tiger to their field. She further instructed them to bury her when she was dead and to cook and eat their meal on top of her grave.

After the tiger had gone to the field, their mother died. They buried her as per her wishes and began to cook their food at the top of her grave and took their meal there. After some time, the tiger arrived from the field and began to search for his mother. When he could not find her, he started wailing for her and scratched around his mother’s grave, but not able to find her, fled away to the jungle.”

On another account,

“When their mother passed away, man and tiger quarrelled over who would receive their mother’s worldly possessions. They decided to hold a competition to settle the matter. Man, with his guile, eventually beat the tiger, who then went to dwell in the forest. The spirit, angered by man’s deception, cursed him so that he’d never see the spirit again. Later, when the man began to miss his brothers, he came up with an array of rituals to appease them. These ceremonies became a part of Naga culture in due course.”

18. This alternative familial bond highlights not only the unity of all life forms but also the complexity of relationships and, most importantly, a move toward the restoration of just relationships, a move toward the communion of humans, nature, spirits, and animals.

19. Indigenous notions of communion resonate with the broader aspect of the triune God, which is rooted in communal relationships. As Indigenous communities focus on the communion of relationships with all life forms, God calls us into communion by participating in God's work of liberation and witnessing. Further, Indigenous peoples have rituals and ceremonies that show the sacramental nature of the relationship between humans, the divine, and the natural world. These rituals and ceremonies show the interconnectedness of life within Indigenous communities.
20. Indigenous perspectives on communion show the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of maintaining harmony and balance in the created world. They challenge the traditional understanding of communion by emphasizing communion in relationship with nature and animals. They direct us to an alternative vision of relating to the divine and natural world. These Indigenous perspectives urge us to reevaluate our relationships and foster a more profound sense of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for all life forms.

COMMUNION REFLECTIONS

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE CELEBRATE AND EMBODY CHRIST'S COUNTER-SOVEREIGNTY

21. "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself." (Phil 3:20-21)
22. Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi speaks to how Reformed discipleship and witness root themselves in costly loyalty to Christ Jesus. All of the Reformed confessions of faith echo the fundamental cry that Jesus is Lord. This singular relationship is not realized in private faith alone but in the connected witness of all those who see in Christ Jesus their life, resurrection, way, and truth.
23. The Accra confession names solidarities and commitments that shape Reformed communion. It reminds us: "We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all may have life in fullness (Jn 10:10)."⁴ And again, it says "We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9:8-12). God has created an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Isa 55:1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows us this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the "least of these" (Mt 25:40) at the centre of community life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2:18ff)."⁵
24. Colonialism's sin was to depose Christ Jesus and replace him with a deity bent on the wishes of White Christian political and economic interests. From this sin, many manifestations of systemic and personal violence and division have taken root and beset us today. The sin of colonialism is at the root of the divided and divisive ways we live and the

⁴ Accra Confession, §17.

⁵ Accra Confession, §20.

systems which operate in all dimensions of our lives, private and public, sacred and secular. This is a sin that remains unrepented and unrepaired.

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE TAKE OUR PLACE AS PART OF THE CREATION, NOT ABOVE OR OUTSIDE IT.

25. “Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!’” (Job 38: 4-5)
26. This quotation captures a fantastic dialogue between God and Job when God exposes the hubris of anthropocentrism, that humanity is the pinnacle of creation. The ego-ology of humanity versus the ecology of the Creator. The book of Job, in more than one place, resists the idea that humans are somehow over and above the rest of creation. In Job 12, for example, the call of the text is to listen to the earth and learn from it. The text says,
27. “But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.
Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?” (Job 12:7-9)
28. The world envisioned by the author(s) of Job is not a kyriarchy in which mostly white men rule over the rest of creation but instead sees animals, birds and fish in a position where they can teach humans. Even more so, the earth is seen to be in a position in which it has the capacity to educate. This vision of creation stands in stark contrast with the vision of humanity that sees itself as being the masters or the lords of creation. A vision in which creation exists for the sake of humanity and in order to sustain human life. Such visions have led to inadequate theologies that, within their patriarchal paternalism, speak of humans as stewards, positioning us over and above the rest of creation who, is seen to have value only in as much as it serves human interests. Such theologies do not see non-human nature as having value in and for itself or even as having rights. Fortunately, indigenous visions, particularly those emerging from Bolivia, have taught us otherwise.
29. It is precisely such elevation of humans over and above the rest of creation that has led some scientists to conclude that we are living in and through an Anthropocene, an age in which human existence has begun to have a significant impact on the environment and climate of our planet. Yet perhaps even this position is not entirely true. Others, including some economists, have argued that this is perhaps an unfair assessment and analysis of the environmental catastrophe we are living through. They argue that it is not all humans that are to blame for the climate catastrophe that we are living in, but it is instead the capitalist class that is to blame for the crisis. They would argue that we are actually living in a Capitalocene that is devouring and consuming all and everything for the sake of the narrow and short-term interests of profit. What cannot be denied is that these notions embedded in kyriarchal structures lie at the heart of the destruction of communion and koinonia.

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN THOSE WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HARM REPENT AND SEEK TO REPAIR THE DAMAGE THEY HAVE DONE TO THEIR NEIGHBOURS

30. “Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ¹⁴ Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’, yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right— ¹⁵ if the wicked restore the pledge, give back what they have taken by robbery, and walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity—they shall surely live, they shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right, they shall surely live.” (Ezek 33:13–16)
31. Reformed theology stands on the experience of grace, that we are not able to justify salvation at God’s hands, that God pours this out from God’s abundant and unmerited love. God’s saving grace is the basis for the transformation from being in Adam to being in Christ (Eph 2:8–9). God’s sanctifying grace conforms us to the image of his Son (Titus 2:11–12) and creates a new community formed and marked by love (Rom 12:1ff, 2 Cor 5:17, Eph 4:1-6). Paul’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor 11 can then be read in combination with Ezek 33:10-20 so that we more deeply understand what communion calls of the community of faith met in the midst of inequity. Most profoundly, Ezekiel’s theology of grace does not demand that those who have been harmed forgive those responsible. Rather, he expects those who are responsible for harm to make amends. Failure to do this risks not just the communion with our neighbours but also the eternal communion with our Redeemer.
32. The implications of this are clear as we name the inequities and injustices around which our churches gather and in which we are unequally implicated. Reparative action is vital for the life of the earth and all our communities as we name realities like the climate emergency, the legacies of slavery and racism, misogynistic, homophobic, casteist and sexual violence. Understanding what reparation requires and reveals only further realizes the teaching of Jesus that if “you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24).

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE ENSURE THE SECURITY OF OTHERS IN SYSTEMS AND RELATIONSHIPS WHICH PROTECT DIGNITY, DISMANTLE INEQUITY, PROMOTE PEACE AND LEAD TO FULLNESS OF LIFE

33. “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. To take away a neighbour’s living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.” (Eccl 34:25-27)
34. This text is attributed to the conversion of Fra Bartolome de las Casas. He was a sixteenth-century Spanish Dominican priest sent as a missionary to Hispaniola. He was confronted there with the violent encomienda system, which enslaved and murdered indigenous people for the profit of the Spanish crown and people. As he prepared to give his first sermon and mass, he read this text from Ecclesiasticus and could find no way to speak unless he exposed the sinfulness of this system. He gave up his extensive land holdings and slaves and travelled to his homeland in Spain in 1515 to petition the Spanish Crown to stop the abuses that European colonists were inflicting upon the natives of

the New World. Las Casas has been controversially celebrated as the 'Protector of the Indians' who were, of course, busily leading their own rebellions and resistances against a system they knew was inhumane and evil. But his mission to speak out points to a text which once again roots communion in solidarity. The story of Las Casas also indicates that this sense of communion and solidarity needs to be open to growing and including ever more of God's people, which empire seeks to dominate and capitalize. De las Casas failed in this as he was one of those who called for the replacement of enslaved Indigenous people with transported Africans.

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE INTENTIONALLY CHOOSE TO BE A BLESSING TO THE PEOPLES AND PLACES GOD SENDS OR SETS US IN

35. "(Naomi) set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?'" (Ruth 1:7–11)
36. The story of Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law offers us a biblical and contemporary location from which to think about and speak to the nature and characteristics of communion. It invites us to interrogate the story, as those who are migrants and those who are settlers, and to ask how each can seek communion with each other and with those who are indigenous. Naomi left her home, like many before her, since and now, because there was a famine in Judah. Famine and misfortune come to her new home in Moab, and hearing the famine has lifted there, she decides to return home. Her daughters-in-law initially chose to join her. Naomi protested and insisted that they stay with their families. Of the two, Orpah was convinced by Naomi to return to her family, while Ruth was determined to follow Naomi. Ruth is prepared to sojourn with Naomi to Judah, being aware of the uncertainty of the outcome of her choice or what her future might be. She trusts the relationship she had developed with Naomi over the years and is aware of the strength of the covenant, as she expresses: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)
37. Naomi represents a colonial settler perspective. Israel claimed all the lands around it, and Naomi operates her privilege of being able to travel smoothly across its borders. Ruth's migrant realities are quickly revealed in the risks she has to take to provide for her and Naomi. Orpah will not sever her indigenous roots, and she is confident that the Lord Naomi serves would not want Orpah to desert her ancestral land. Into this web of complicities and inequalities comes the further figure, the baby who is the precursor to Israel's David and the World's Christ. Both these figures, David and Christ, have been applied to a Zionistic colonial settler vision and praxis that lives out the kind of excluding communion that would have justified annihilating Orpah, her people and taken their land and made it impossible for Ruth, then and now, to bring the world transforming blessing God was inspiring in her.
38. The story brings together notions of living together in a community that stretches across both ethnic and religious lines. Undoubtedly, the narrative is complex and complicated on many levels, but it is also a story of women, migration and survival in which, in a spirit of

mutual hospitality, each of the women in the story is able to serve the best interests of the other.

39. Migration and migrants are not new to human history; no community around the world has not been impacted by this in one way or another. In an age of continuing colonialism, economic globalization and climate crisis, migration has become a part of the matrix of a global community living together. However, in many places around the world, we find that right-wing, racist and xenophobic forces are on the rise. In many countries of the global north, we find that immigration laws and processes for seeking asylum have been tightened. It is equally significant that the first response to the pandemic that hit was to close the borders. Almost equating the stranger and the foreigner to a virus.

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE REALIZE IN PRACTICE JESUS' CALL TO PUT THE FIRST LAST

40. *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."* (Mt 20:16)

41. The idea of the first being last and the last being first is not only the idea of discipleship that is rooted in servanthood. It is also the revolutionary revisioning of society to one in which the very social order is reversed. In a world in which communion is being rent apart by racism, genocide, ecocide, and patriarchy, what is required is a radical revolution that seeks recognition, remorse, repentance and reparations. We need a recognition of the violence that has taken place; the dominant culture seeks an intentional amnesia of the past. In such a context, there should be a recognition of what has happened and an open acknowledgement of it. Particularly for the church, it means that the church should recognize how it has used unity, ecumenism and communion to conceal asymmetry and inequity or even baptize them. The church should engage honestly with its own imperial legacy.
42. Further, what is required is genuine remorse over the continuing overt and covert forms of violence that is perpetuated by destructive and exclusionary social structures. Thirdly, we need genuine repentance for what has been done, and lastly, reparations are also required. Only then can reconciliation truly take place and communion be built.
43. In Christianity, in the visions of reconciliation that emerge from the cross, we recognize that the terms of reconciliation are set by those who have been wounded. Therefore, if we are to build communion, we must do this by exposing and dismantling Christian Colonial supremacist ideologies and their place in ecocide and genocide. And this should be done from the perspective of those who have been wounded.

WE HAVE COMMUNION WHEN WE BEHAVE LIKE WE BELONG TO THE SPIRIT OF UNITY AND PERSEVERE IN THAT WITNESS

44. "On their way, they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them (and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them).'" (Luke 9:52-56)
45. Luke 9 is a chapter full of mission, movement and action. It opens with the sending of the twelve (1-6), continues with the feeding of the 5,000 (10-17), shifts to Peter's confession of faith (18-20), which prompts Jesus to predict his coming death and resurrection (21-

27), that makes way for the moment of Jesus' transfiguration (28-36). The potency of the transfiguration is further revealed with the healing of a boy possessed with a demon, (37-43) and the reminder again to the disciples of Jesus' coming betrayal and death (43-46). All of this has a deep impact on the disciples, and they start to argue about who of them is greatest (46-48). This triggers Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and as he sets out with the disciples, he seeks hospitality from a Samaritan village (51-56).

46. This story hinges on a lack of communion. It lies not in the rejection of hospitality by the Samaritans but in the attitude the disciples take to this rejection. The Samaritan village refuses to offer hospitality to Jesus because he is focused on Jerusalem, and they know Zion has no room for them. So, they feel there will be no genuine encounter between them and Jesus, and they say, no, travel on. It seems that James and John have been overwhelmed by witnessing Jesus' transfiguration that despite the twice repeated predictions of Jesus' coming death in Jerusalem, seeing his miraculous powers to help, heal and feed, James and John want to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village, to turn it into ash and rubble.
47. Jesus rebukes them in verse 56, and they carry on. But in other ancient versions of the text, this verse reads in more detail: "Jesus rebuked them and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.'"
48. How do the Reformed belong to the Spirit? How would anyone discern this or testify to it, apart from ourselves? So, we read this text as disciples who have long been in the company of Jesus yet find myriad ways to belong to a spirit counter to Jesus. It is a sign of a lack of communion that followers of Jesus, people of God's Spirit, can passionately call for the destruction of entire villages, communities or peoples in the name of Jesus, as we see so terribly in Gaza today. What is it about Christian identity that can make sectarian mentality and violence seem to fit with the mission of Jesus to save and unite? What spirits need to be cast out and down in our systems?
49. Belonging to the Spirit is a commitment to the present and to the future. Paul's vision of belonging to the Spirit speaks of 'fruits'. Gal 5:22-23 names them as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These speak of the ethics of persevering witness and the practice of being a blessing. In Romans 8:1-30, Paul roots the coming world in our current struggles through the life and movement of the Spirit. This speaks about how the new creation comes, but also to the way, generation by generation, for good and ill, the world perpetuates its sin and blessing. So, we are faced with an intergenerational, ecological and apocalyptic choice: to persevere in a witness which is not a curse but a blessing, as the Great Law of Haudenosaunee Confederacy teaches, to seven generations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

Please discuss the Concept Paper on Communion. The following questions might help you in your conversation. Please choose those that are most relevant to your situation:

INTRODUCTION:

- The WCRC identifies with the tagline “called to communion, committed to justice.” Reflect the relationship between communion and justice.
- The WCRC is committed to “full and just participation.” Discuss the differences between this commitment and calls to integration and assimilation.

“AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”

- *“We live in a world that is increasingly marked by fragmentation, supremacism and division and the violence, inequity and injustices these drive.”*
Give examples of the different expressions of Un-Communion and reflect upon the characteristic injustices that mark the separations and divisions.
- *“But, there are also signs of persistent/resistant community, re-communion and counter solidarities.”*
Give examples of such communities and share your own experiences of resistance.
- *“The WCRC seeks to celebrate and renew its identity and integrity as a communion, as a people whose witness speaks to our prophetic, biblical and relational history and whose story is marked by courageous witness and also marred by sinful division.”*
Discuss examples where the church has engaged in courageous witness and where the church has been complicit with injustice.
- *“As a global family, we come to the Lord’s Table in ways that reveal and subvert our communion in Christ. Like in Corinth, there are many who come to the table hungry, while those who are too full of the world’s resources take their place (1 Cor 11:21).”*
Share experiences of subverted communion at the Lord’s Table.
- *“Our neighbours’ lands continue to be the subject of avarice and powerful interest.”*
Discuss land conflicts in your region and other parts of the world. Share examples where the needs of people have been subjected to the interests of capital.
- *“Many global institutions and international agreements and arrangements that have expressed some degree of international cooperation are being subverted, defunded, resisted, and disrespected.”*
Give examples and discuss how health care, welfare rights, gender rights and refugee rights have been dismantled in this process.
- *“Central to the idea of communion is the idea of community. Yet we find that community is defined in parochial ways, conforming to the codes of blood, kinship, ethnicity and patriarchy.”*
Give examples and discuss the consequences of Jesus’ statement ‘For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mt 12:48-50) for a Christian understanding of community.

“PERSEVERE IN YOUR WITNESS.” A CALL TO COMMUNION AS AN INTENTIONAL METHODOLOGY

- *“We affirm that communion is a gift from God and is sustained and nurtured through the work of the Holy Spirit.”*

In Reformed understanding, communion is a gift and an obligation. Share situations when the understanding that communion was a gift of God helped to overcome separation and division.

- *“In and through the pandemic, we noticed how communities worldwide struggled and found new and innovative ways to hold communion.”*
Discuss your experiences.
- *“Many indigenous peoples understand communion as holistic, including humans, nature, spirits, and animals.”*
Discuss the potential of the indigenous understanding of communion in a world that is marked by despoilation, De-integration and dehumanization.
- *“In olden days, the mythology says that a spirit, tiger and man were born of the same mother.”* Discuss the dimensions of communion that are being explored in the story from Nagaland.

COMMUNION REFLECTIONS

- *“The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Isa 55:1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows us this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the “least of these” (Mt 25:40) at the centre of community life.”*
Discuss the Accra Confession’s understanding of the covenant and consider the consequences for Christians and the church.
- *“The world envisioned by the author(s) of Job is not a kyriarchy in which mostly white men rule over the rest of creation but instead sees animals, birds and fish in a position where they can teach humans.”*
Discuss the worldview of the author(s) of the book of Job and explore the potential of the understanding that the earth has the capacity to educate.
- *“Ezekiel’s theology of grace does not demand that those who have been harmed forgive those responsible. Rather, he expects those who are responsible for harm to make amends. Failure to do this risks not just the communion with our neighbours but also the eternal communion with our Redeemer.”*
Discuss the particular perspective that Ezekiel’s understanding of grace brings to Reformed theology.
- *“The Spanish Dominican priest Fra Bartolome de las Casas, as he prepared to give his first sermon and mass in Spanish Hispania where he had been sent as a missionary, he read Ecclesiasticus 34:25-27 “and could find no way to speak unless he exposed the sinfulness of this system. He gave up his extensive land holdings and slaves and travelled to his homeland in Spain in 1515 to petition the Spanish Crown to stop the abuses that European colonists were inflicting upon the natives of the New World.”*
Discuss the learnings of de las Casas for the mission of the church today.
- *“The story of Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law offers us a biblical and contemporary location from which to think about and speak to the nature and characteristics of communion. It invites us to interrogate the story, as those who are migrants and those who are settlers, and to ask how each can seek communion with each other and with those who are indigenous.”*

Discuss the story of Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law and explore the learnings for communion between migrants and settlers today.

- *“The idea of the first being last and the last being first is not only the idea of discipleship that is rooted in servanthood. It is also the revolutionary revisioning of society to one in which the very social order is reversed.”*

Discuss situations where the church has used the concept of communion to conceal and baptize inequity and discuss steps of recognition, remorse, repentance and reparations.

P2: COVENANTING FOR JUSTICE

We request qualitative feedback on the justice concept paper from member churches, ecumenical partners and justice networks. Please engage critically with the foundations for the justice work of the WCRC and make suggestions on how this conceptual framework can be improved. Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wrc.eu.

After we have received your feedback, we will revise the concept papers in accordance with what we have heard before they are submitted to the discernment of the General Council.

INTRODUCTION

1. The WCRC has a history and commitment to discerning the signs of the times, offering radical discernment and prophetic action on justice issues central to its life and witness and the life and witness of its member churches. As we enter into General Council 2025, we recognize the brokenness of the world we are in and commit to persevering in our witness. We recognize that we are called to confess in this very moment of our times.
2. However, instead of looking at specific moments, we must recognize that our present situation is the result of events and actions that have taken place over the last few centuries and have come to a head in the last fifty years that have brought us to this point in history. Historical mechanisms that were put into place by the onset of capitalism and were deepened and furthered by colonialism, industrialization, neo-liberalism and now the Fourth Industrial Revolution have led to disastrous consequences for the dispossessed, workers and, in fact, all life on the planet.
3. Yet, while there seems to be a historical continuum, there is also something decidedly new in what we are experiencing, and this 'newness' demands discernment and new language to speak about what is going on. The Biblical injunction to sing new songs is not confined to practices of worship but is intended as a life orientation in which one is to seek out alternative narratives. Such narratives are important because while they present new ways of seeing, they simultaneously dismantle prevailing dominant narratives, which, because of their hegemony, present themselves as the only way of seeing and consequently as the only way of being.
4. In this sense, the continuous task of the community of disciples is to discern the signs of the times, for fresh, in every age. Discerning the signs of the times involves naming the powers, which also accounts for analyzing how these are connected to each other and the naming of alternatives. In such a time, we are compelled not only by the need for discernment but also by the utter urgency of the life-and-death issues we face. Therefore, discernment is not a neutral task; we learn from feminist theory that seeks to analyze the signs of the times from an intentional and critical stance from the margins. Discernment is done from a pastoral perspective that is intentional in a way that necessitates involvement with those who are on the underside of history.
5. All of life is at stake here.

DISCERNING

6. Speaking of our present world in terms of apocalypse has become fashionable. The COVID pandemic that caused global upheaval has been often described in apocalyptic terms. We choose to use the word apocalypse in its Biblical sense; we use it to speak of the deep inequalities that COVID-19 unveiled. The immediate closing of borders, the vaccine inequalities, the inequities in access to health care, and the impact of the pandemic on women, racialized communities, and Indigenous people served to unveil the deeply seated and structural disparities in our world.
7. We are at an unprecedented moment in human history, a planetary crisis that has been hitherto unknown. We are living in the midst of a climate catastrophe of our own making. Climate change and rising temperature levels threaten the very existence of all life on this planet. The risk to life is unprecedented. Rising global temperatures have meant unpredictable and chaotic climate events. The loss of species, along with the decline of genetic and habitat diversity, is ever on the increase. Several tipping points have already been reached. Indeed, all of life on this planet is threatened, and there is limited time within which changes can be made. The crisis is new in the sense that it is urgent! We have to act now!
8. At the root of the climate and ecological catastrophe is an economic system based on a model of growth that sees non-human creation as a tap from which unlimited resources can be drawn and a sink into which unlimited resources can be dumped. This is at the root of climate colonialism. While experts debate whether we have shifted to a new epoch on our planet called the Anthropocene, in reality, we are living through a Capitalocene. The economic system we are living in is destroying both life and livelihood. Undeniably, the wealthy and the pursuit of wealth have created and perpetuated the climate crisis. This is not only through their lifestyles and consumption levels but studies have shown us that it is through investment. The accumulation of wealth is not climate zero but deeply negatively affects the environment.
9. We are amid an impactful economic crisis marked by distressing inequality. The wealthiest 1 % of our planet's population has as much wealth as the rest. While we have enough food to feed the entire planet, one in every ten people is malnourished. At the same time, \$5.3 trillion a day is traded in foreign exchange alone, while 46 % of the population lives on less than \$7 a day. One in twelve (approximately 8.5 %) of the world lives in extreme poverty, and we know that we will not be able to meet the sustainable development goal of eradicating poverty by 2030. Neo-liberal capital policies, driven by global financial institutions, multinational corporations and governments from the global north, have ensured the systematic breaking down of trade unions, labour and peasant movements and have governed over a cutback on social spending, particularly in the areas of securing water, food security and sovereignty, public health and education. The resultant impact of this has been devastating for marginal communities. The particular victims of this have been women.
10. We further recognize what capitalism has meant for the human person. This is not only an economic point of view but also a profoundly spiritual one. Capitalism has atomized society, breaking down solidarity and placing each of us in competition. In this system, humans are just individual consumers rather than communities of support and solidarity. This has more than evidenced itself in the mental health crisis that is exploding, particularly among young people. We have been reduced to merely self-interested consumers with insatiable wants. Everything has been reduced to a commodity; even human life is

commodified, and we find that human trafficking and modern-day slavery abound. Human labour is also turned into a commodity, and even children are not spared. In fact, children are the ones who are left out the most. This is both anti-human and anti-God; in as much as it places acquisition over every other virtue, it is also idolatrous. Yet some commodities seem to be more precious than others, while goods and money flow quite freely across borders. In the age of globalization, humans are restricted at borders, migration is policed, and migrants are seen as problems, while the root causes of migration are ignored.

11. Thirdly, while there have been some gains in the dismantling of patriarchy and moving towards gender equality, these gains have also meant that there has been a pushback against women and increasing misogyny that has meant an increase in violence against women and an increase in hate speech. The experience of COVID and the lockdown that was a part of it showed us that homes are not safe spaces for women and children. At the same time, in spaces for gainful employment, during COVID, women were the first to be let go, perpetuating a patriarchal myth that men are the breadwinners of the family. Further, within capitalism, we find that the burden of caring and nurturing work is often unpaid and even unrecognized as work because it is not paid for.
12. Further, there is a deep and significant link between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the Earth; eco-feminists have clearly shown the link between these two, and not only do women suffer the first consequences of climate disaster, but are also the first to do something about it. As eco-feminists have argued, women, in their closeness to organic life, have an intrinsic connection to the Earth.
13. Similarly, we witness a similar pushback against people of African descent and people of colour. Increasing reports of racism and violence by police forces have been brought to the world's attention. The lines around racialized communities are being hardened, while at the same time, borders around countries are being tightened. We feel the pain of thousands of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean. During the pandemic, it was significant that the first response of governments was to close the borders. The misery of refugees and asylum seekers has increased manifold, mainly as people flee violence and the ravages of climate change.
14. As there is an increasing competition over resources, precipitated by both the ecological and the economic crisis, we find that communities are being galvanized around the rallying points of race, religion and ethnicity. In this context, the poor have increasingly turned against other poor using social constructions such as the supremacy of race, ethnicity, language and religion to privilege one group over the other. This has led to the increase of authoritarian regimes and the increase of right-wing supremacist movements. We further have an increase in racial and caste capital. It is not simply an economic system at work but an economic system that is driven by dominant forces and communities towards their interests at the cost of others.
15. The onslaught of violence, discrimination and exclusion of black bodies has its origins in the ideologies of supremacy that have served to colonize the continent of Africa and transatlantic slavery. We recognize how the system of slavery complex has mutated into the military-industrial patriarchal prison complex, through which large profits are being accumulated for the powerful at the cost of people of colour. At the same time, the logic of privilege is being used to divide the working classes and break down workers' solidarity on racial and ethnic lines.

16. We also find that indigenous people continue to be marginalized. In nations around the world, indigenous people are the poorest and the most oppressed. Their lands, waters, knowledge and culture continue to be colonized for extractive industries and profit. In recent years, the terror of residential schools has also come to light.
17. We are also living in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an era that will be dominated by increasing reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. While, on the one hand, we recognize the deep digital divide that excludes many from the digital revolution, we have questions about this advancement in technology itself. We find that the fourth industrial revolution has profound implications for labour and the making of labour redundant, thereby increasing unemployment and worsening the situation of workers.
18. The implications of the gig economy are that it converts workers into 'partners', thereby cheating them out of living wages while at the same time removing responsibility from corporations for the security of their employees. While the economic implications of this are evident, they also have profound implications for human beings and our role on the planet. The implications of psychological and creative creativity have not even begun to be understood. The implications of AI and machine learning being used for war and the weapons of war have tremendous consequences for humanity. Technology is not neutral, but it emerges out of particular relations of production, and therefore, technology will serve the interests of the dominant forces within these relations of production.
19. Moreover, we find the powerful peddle of the fourth industrial revolution and the promises of AI as the one-fix solution to the dual crisis of ecology and economics that we face. Further, AI is being pushed through market forces. This is, of course, part of the disingenuity of our present system that does not have an imagination beyond the market. Yet we know that our present crisis has been created by the universality and ubiquity of the market, a system that has come to dominate all of our lives. Perhaps herein lies the ingenuity of capitalism in that it can even co-opt its contradictions and commodify them.
20. The challenge is not only economic but also spiritual and moral; through the Fourth Industrial Revolution, humanity is projecting itself as divine. Man becomes god, Homo Sapiens has promoted itself to Homo Deus.
21. Since our last General Council, we have seen the war in Ukraine, in Syria and Yemen, the atrocities in Armenia, and the militarisation of Myanmar. These are the conflicts we name, realizing that many others exist in 'forgotten parts of the world'. As we have been working on this paper, news of the terrible genocide in Gaza inundates our senses. This, while being a continuation of the historical reality of settler colonialism since the Balfour declaration, is new in the sense of the utter destruction of life. At the time of writing, 30,000 people have been killed, a majority of them children. Hospitals, schools and universities have been reduced to rubble.
22. In many ways, the catastrophe in Palestine crystallizes the injustice in our world today; it serves as a microcosm of what is wrong in our world. It is not as though the Middle East is the only place in the world suffering from war and violence, but in many ways, what is happening in the Middle East has come to symbolize what is wrong with the world. Of particular concern and relevance for us is the weaponization of the Bible and theology to justify war and settler colonialism. The situation in Palestine is the same system of colonialism that is propped up by theologies of elections that are vested in notions of colonial supremacy. The weaponization of the Bible and theology is matched with the weaponization of food, water and aid.

23. We see a global lack of confidence in democracy as it was once known. While we recognize the rise of dictatorial regimes in Latin America, we also are witness to the displacement of dictatorial regimes in Africa through new democratic movements that are emerging from below and challenging systems that are propped up by imperial powers. We notice that in the midst of the power of Empire, there is also an increase in people's power. Moreover, there are some suggestions that we no longer live in a unipolar world but in a multipolar one.
24. These multiple crises of injustice are not isolated but are interconnected and feed off each other, fostering a system through which the distance between those who make the decisions and those who suffer its consequences is ever-increasing.
25. In the past, the WCRC attempted to name this coming together of economic, political, and military power as Empire. This was a term that received a lot of attention and catalyzed controversy. It was seen as a divisive term that brought a division between the churches of the global north and the global south. Two events brought the term into ecclesial circles. The first was the economic collapse of 2008, which saw the disintegration of the housing market in the United States and its resultant fallout on the global markets. The second was the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on the one hand and the rise of China as a global superpower on the other. In other instances, we find imperial desires and interests suppress the struggles for self-determination, humanity and dignity.
26. Empire is not only exerted through the power of nation-states. We live in an age where multinational corporations and the super-wealthy are not restricted by national boundaries, nor do they owe allegiance to any particular nation, their only allegiance being to capital. Their tax-evasion mechanisms that enable their assets and profits to be moved to tax havens is enough evidence for this. What we are finding is that Empire is dislocated from space and is rooted in systems that privilege some at the cost of many others. At the same time, the United States has strengthened its military presence around the world while Euro-centric notions of supremacy continue to hold sway and control the extraction and allocation of resources. There is an accrual of privilege along racial and national lines that cannot be ignored.
27. Empire is not only a name for the coming together of economic, political, and military power but also serves as a lens through which we discern society. We recognize that the various social, political and economic issues that we have named, the ecological crisis, the economic crisis, patriarchy, racism, authoritarianism, and militarization, are not isolated, but they are deeply connected as part of one structural and systemic whole and feed off each other. The powerful are the beneficiaries of this system, which is based on the exploitation of the many.
28. Through the COVID-19 process, the WCRC undertook a process of discernment with all of our member churches, regions, networks and programmes. This process offered the term Global Apartheid to describe what is happening in the world today. Global Apartheid is a global system of separation that benefits some at the cost of the majority. This separation is seen not only in the hardening of national borders but also in a global system of haves and have-nots.
29. We should not let ourselves be caught in a noose of words, whether we choose to name what is happening as Empire or Global Apartheid; we know that there is a coming together of economic, political, military, religious and cultural power to the advantage of a few at the cost of the disadvantage of many.

CONFESSING

30. Christian faith begins with a man on his way to the cross. The cross was a method of execution that was no ordinary punishment. It was reserved for those who dared to challenge the power of the Roman Empire. Jesus, in his life and ministry, called those who believed in him to put their faith in something other than the Roman Empire and its collaborators. The Kingdom of God was a counter-cultural imagination of the Roman Empire. It was a place of a community of equals that was counter to the hierarchy of the Romans. It was a space for sharing that was a counter to the colonial accumulation of the Roman Empire. It was a place of justice in which there was sufficiency as opposed to the accumulation of Rome. It was a place of peace as opposed to the menace of militarisation of Rome.
31. Confessing that Jesus is Lord does, therefore, not only indicate Christ's divinity but also that it is vested in temporal consequences. While it is undeniable that the idea of lordship is immersed in a kyriarchal theology, it is also its subversion. The term 'Lord' was given to the Roman Emperor. To claim that 'Jesus is Lord' is to claim that 'Caesar is not Lord' and that lordship is not to be understood through the matrix of hierarchy and power but instead in servanthood and in the emptying of oneself of power rather than the accumulation of it.
32. Confessing that all things come under Jesus' Lordship means that we can no longer claim that business is business or that politics has no place within the context of the Christian faith. If Jesus is Lord of all, economics and politics are the concerns of faith and the faithful.
33. The God of the Bible, the God of life, calls for the transformation of the world into God's will and desire. Justice lies at the very heart of faith because it is at the heart of the divine and God's desire for the world. What does God require of you?, asks Micah, and the answer is to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly before God. The question and its answer are not merely ethical demands but open us to the very heart of the divine. Justice is a question of the divine identity and is a communicable attribute of God.
34. If this is true, then injustice is not only a sin and a heresy; it is the antithesis of God's very being. Injustice is anti-God, so to speak. This being the case, areas of economic, political, religious and cultural activity that deny life and life in its fullness are areas in which God is denied. In other words, economic and political life are faith concerns and the lines on which faith stances must be taken. Justice is the substance of faith.
35. From a reformed tradition in which the sovereignty of the divine is essential, it states that God is sovereign over economic, social, and political systems and that economic, social, and political systems must relate to God and be Godly. In as much as the divine relationship between the three persons of the Trinity is signified by mutuality and just relationships, so too must relationships between human beings and between human beings and the rest of creation. Injustice is, therefore, against the very nature of the triune God.
36. Significantly, the word *kyrios* is also the word the Septuagint uses to translate YHWH. This is the divine name revealed to Moses in the burning bush as the divine being instructed him to liberate slaves from oppression. Its meaning is probably translated as "I am" or "I am with you". It is the promise of accompaniment in overthrowing oppression. To participate in the task of liberation is to participate in God's action in the world. Scripture calls us away from an anthropocentric vision of the world. Instead, it claims that the

Earth and everything in it is the Lord's (Ps 24:1). The destruction of our planet and the interconnected web of life that it sustains is an affront to God.

37. To recognize that Jesus is Lord is to be rooted in an incarnational theology. In pitching his tent with us, Jesus gave up power, taking human form and, therefore, life on this planet seriously. We draw inspiration from the Jesus, who is Lord, who overcame the forces of death and is the Risen Lord. The resurrection is the defeat of the forces of death, and all that causes death. The resurrection calls us into insurrection against all death-dealing forces.
38. The call is not to be a confessional body but rather a confessing body. A confessing body, one that declares faith in Jesus as Lord, mandates a movement towards being a confessing church. The WCRC has a long history of being a confessing church and making hard and perhaps even controversial decisions. This was seen in our work around the Belhar confession and then again around the Accra confession. Now, the time is again for us to discern where our line of faith lies, particularly in climate catastrophe.

WITNESSING

39. Having discerned our present world and sought to confess a God of life who opposes injustice, we re-commit to God's covenant with all creation and pledge to witness to justice in the economy and on Earth through the following covenants:

COVENANTING WITH THE EARTH

40. Firstly, we commit to a covenantal relationship with the Earth and all of non-human nature to being a part of the web of life that holds us all together. Our economic and theological visions have been based on a hierarchy between humans and the rest of creation for too long. Notions of stewardship have only served to further such hierarchies and not dismantle them.
41. We seek an ecological vision in which the value of all creation is recognized within a context of mutuality. Theologically, this has been referred to as the web of life, a web that recognizes the interconnectedness of all of life. We, therefore, reject any binaries between humans and nature, as well as between the spiritual and the material. We recognize that ecumenism, economics and ecology are closely related. We further recognize that we have a limited time for repair. The clock is ticking out on us. A covenantal relationship with the Earth requires that we make mitigating the climate crisis a matter of confession and a matter of extreme urgency.

COVENANTING WITH THE POOR AND THE DISPOSSESSED

42. We recognize that covenanting with the planet requires us to commit to covenanting for a just economy based on just relationships between humans. We recognize that humanity is divided along lines of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality. A just economy must ensure justice along these axes of division. This necessarily requires the dismantling of both patriarchy and the military-industrial complex. We recognize the special place of indigenous people in this context. It further requires a robust critique of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the role of AI in human life and the commodification of life. The problem is not merely consumerism but neo-liberal capitalism. We name neo-liberal capitalism as standing against the covenantal relationships that God intends for humanity and between creation. It denies God and denies life.

- a) We recognize that capitalism, as a system, leaves out those who are not 'productive' according to its own definitions. It is a system that has no place for those living with disabilities, the elderly and children. We covenant to work with these 'very last' who are left out of the system and commit to working with them for a new, just world.
- b) We realize that this (2025) is the anniversary of the Jubilee Campaign. We recognize the tremendous advocacy that was done for debt relief around the world and the illegitimacy of that debt. We covenant for working for a jubilee which means the forgiveness of debt, the return of land and reparations. We particularly commit to work for climate reparations and reparations for transatlantic slavery.

COVENANTING FOR THE DISMANTLING OF PATRIARCHY

43. Thirdly, we commit to covenanting to just relationships between all genders. We recognize that patriarchy is the control over women's labour, fertility and sexuality and that women and girls bear the burden of the unjust economic system and the ecological catastrophe. We further recognize the violence that is perpetrated on the bodies of those who resist the normativity of gender binaries and sexuality. We name as ungodly the violence that is being perpetuated on the bodies of women and those who do not conform to gender norms. We name as sinful the misogynistic and homophobic hate speech that emerges out of our pulpits, church committees and theological commissions that deny just and mutual relationships. We also recognize the discrimination of women and sexual and gender minorities in the context of the leadership and ministry of the church.

COVENANTING FOR PEACE WITH PEACE-MAKERS

44. Fourthly, we uphold the situation of those facing militarisation and violence the world over. We particularly uphold Palestinians who face both the loss of lands to settler colonialism and the loss of lives through the threat of genocide. We recognize how Christian theology has been invoked to support this grave injustice and recognize that any theology that supports injustice against Palestinian people denies a God of life and instead propagates a false god who seeks death. We decry any theology that justifies the oppression of people, the stealing of their lands and the justification of war on them.

COVENANTING FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE DISMANTLING OF RACE AND CASTE

45. Finally, we recognize that a growing authoritarianism seeks to consolidate the power of the privileged at the cost of those who are marginalized. This particularly includes people of colour, minorities, Dalits and women. We seek to resist this consolidation of dominant forces and their right-wing interests and instead seek to work for democracy and the sovereignty of people through the breaking down of racism, casteism, patriarchy and homophobia.
46. We recognize that global issues such as these cannot be resolved by ourselves on our own but must be done in partnership with other ecumenical organizations, social movements, and like-minded individuals and institutions. In all things, we must be led by those who are oppressed and marginalized, and we call the WCRC General Secretariat in all its programmatic work and the WCRC member churches into a deep solidarity with women, workers, indigenous people, sexual minorities, the poor and dispossessed, and Palestinians.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

Please discuss the Justice Concept Paper. The following questions might help you in your conversation. Please choose those that are most relevant to your situation:

INTRODUCTION

- *“The WCRC has a history and commitment to discerning the signs of the times, offering radical discernment and prophetic action on justice issues central to its life and witness and the life and witness of its member churches.”*
Read Mt 16:-14 and §§5-17 of the Accra Confession and discuss how your church is discerning the signs of the times.
- *“We must recognize that our present situation is the result of events and actions that have taken place over the last few centuries and have come to a head in the last fifty years that have brought us to this point in history.”*
Explore how the brokenness of our world has been produced and aggravated by capitalism, colonialism, industrialization and neo-liberalism.
- *“Yet, while there seems to be a historical continuum, there is also something decidedly new in what we are experiencing, and this ‘newness’ demands discernment and new language to speak about what is going on.”*
Discuss how new developments, like the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Artificial Intelligence, influence our reading the signs of the times. What could be new ways of seeing that can dismantle dominant narratives that claim that there is no alternative?
- *“Therefore, discernment is not a neutral task; we [...] analyze the signs of the times from an intentional and critical stance from the margins. Discernment is done from a pastoral perspective that is intentional in a way that necessitates involvement with those who are on the underside of history.”*
Reflect on why discernment in the spirit of the Bible cannot be neutral and ought to be conducted from the stance of the margins.

DISCERNING

- *“The COVID pandemic that caused global upheaval has been often described in apocalyptic terms. We choose to use the word apocalypse in its Biblical sense; we use it to speak of the deep inequalities that COVID-19 unveiled.”*
Explore the Biblical understanding of the apocalypse and discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to see the injustices of a fallen world.
- *“Indeed, all of life on this planet is threatened, and there is limited time within which changes can be made. The crisis is new in the sense that it is urgent! We have to act now!”*
Discuss the urgency of the emerging climate catastrophe and deliberate how this can be understood as an apocalypse in the Biblical sense.
- *“While experts debate whether we have shifted to a new epoch on our planet called the Anthropocene, in reality, we are living through a Capitalocene. The economic system we are living in is destroying both life and livelihood.”*
Explore the concepts of Anthropocene and Capitalocene and discuss how they impact the reading of the signs of the time.
- *“We further recognize what capitalism has meant for the human person. This is not only an economic point of view but also a profoundly spiritual one. [...] In this system, humans are just individual consumers rather than communities of support and soli-*

parity.”

Discuss the spiritual dimension of capitalism and deliberate how commodification, atomization and competition have affected the well-being of people.

- *“While there have been some gains in the dismantling of patriarchy and moving towards gender equality, these gains have also meant that there has been a pushback against women and increasing misogyny that has meant an increase in violence against women and an increase in hate speech.”*
Discuss the power structures that propagate misogyny, violence and hate speech.
- *“We witness a similar pushback against people of African descent and people of colour. Increasing reports of racism and violence by police forces have been brought to the world’s attention..”*
Discuss the power structures that harden the lines around racialized communities and legitimize violence, state-sponsored and otherwise.
- *“Of particular concern and relevance for us is the weaponization of the Bible and theology to justify war and settler colonialism.”*
Share situations where Bible and theology have been weaponized to justify war and settler colonialism.

CONFESSING

- *“The Kingdom of God was a counter-cultural imagination of the Roman Empire.”*
Discuss the understanding of the Kingdom of God as opposed to the Roman Empire and discuss how it can be a counter-cultural imagination today.
- *“Injustice is not only a sin and a heresy; it is the antithesis of God’s very being. Injustice is anti-God, so to speak. This being the case, areas of economic, political, religious and cultural activity that deny life and life in its fullness are areas in which God is denied. [...] Justice is the substance of faith.”*
Discuss the statement that “justice is the substance of faith”. Which stances must be taken in our time?
- *“Significantly, the word *kyrios* is also the word the Septuagint uses to translate YHWH. [...] Its meaning is probably translated as “I am” or “I am with you”. It is the promise of accompaniment in overthrowing oppression. To participate in the task of liberation is to participate in God’s action in the world.”*
How do we experience God’s with-ness in struggles today?
- *“The call is not to be a confessional body but rather a confessing body. A confessing body, one that declares faith in Jesus as Lord, mandates a movement towards being a confessing church.”*
Explore the difference between a confessional and a confessing body. How can your church transform into a confessing church?

WITNESSING

- *“Having discerned our present world and sought to confess a God of life who opposes injustice, we re-commit to God’s covenant with all creation and pledge to witness to justice in the economy and on Earth through the following covenants.”*
Explore the relationship between God’s covenant with all creation and the covenants that witness to justice.
- *“We commit to a covenantal relationship with the Earth and all of non-human nature to being a part of the web of life that holds us all together.”*

Traditionally, economic and theological visions have been based on a hierarchy between humans and the rest of creation. How would a covenantal relationship with the Earth look like?

- *“We recognize that covenanting with the planet requires us to commit to covenanting for a just economy based on just relationships between humans.”*
How would a covenanting relationship with the poor and dispossessed transform the divisions along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality?
- *“We name as ungodly the violence that is being perpetuated on the bodies of women and those who do not conform to gender norms. We name as sinful the misogynistic and homophobic hate speech that emerges out of our pulpits, church committees and theological commissions that deny just and mutual relationships.”*
How could covenanting for the dismantling of patriarchy contribute to just relationships between all genders?
- *“We recognize that global issues such as these cannot be resolved by ourselves on our own but must be done in partnership with other ecumenical organizations, social movements, and like-minded individuals and institutions.”*
Reflect on how covenants for justice between Christian organizations and social movements could be fostered.

P3: “PERSEVERE IN YOUR WITNESS”

THEOLOGIES FOR A WOUNDED WORLD

We request qualitative feedback on the concept paper from member churches, ecumenical partners and theological networks. Please engage critically with the theological foundations for the theological work of the WCRC and make suggestions on how this conceptual framework can be improved. Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wrc.eu.

After we have received your feedback, we will revise the concept papers in accordance with what we have heard before they are submitted to the discernment of the General Council.

INTRODUCTION

1. In 2017, the General Council met in Leipzig, Germany, celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In the spirit of the theme “Living God. Renew and Transform Us”, the General Council interpreted the Reformation as an “exercise in theological empowerment.” All Christians should be able to discern God’s will for the world and act accordingly in their witness to the coming Kingdom.
2. The Council emphasized God’s renewal of Church and world, calling the WCRC to take up the Reformation’s “unfinished business” in theological work. The tone of the contributions was self-assured and optimistic: Theology could and should be an instrument of renewal and transformation.
3. Contextual shifts, however, beg discernment and definition. All over the world, political processes are co-opted and delegitimized by financial and techno-media power players. Armed conflicts and culture wars are becoming more and more intense. Theology itself has become a weapon to legitimize violence and justify oppression. Thus, the Church’s proclamation and witness for liberation and justice are losing their moral significance.
4. The theme of the 2025 General Council, “Persevere in Your Witness”, responds to these experiences. Perseverance is a practice of faith in situations of distress. Perseverance distinguishes between progress and hope, building on often neglected spiritual resources. Perseverance transforms communities into caring bodies of mutual encouragement. Perseverance acknowledges trauma but also recognizes promise wherever there is a chance for life-enhancing engagement. Perseverance in witness lives out mission from the margins. It does not originate from positions of power and influence but from the persistent engagement of local communities.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF PERSEVERANCE

5. Perseverance is a central theme in the Reformed traditions. The church historian Heiko A. Oberman described the first decades of the Reformed movement as the “reformation of the refugees.”¹ People were persecuted because of their faith. They lived as refugees in often very fragile conditions. John Calvin and other reformers wrote hundreds of letters

¹ H. A. Oberman, *John Calvin and the Reformation of the Refugees*, Librairie Droz, Geneva 2009, p. 186.

to comfort and encourage believers to persevere in their faith despite all the adversity that they experienced.

6. It is in this context that Calvin developed his theology of the wounded God who feels the pain of wounded people.² God has created human beings in God's image. Whenever God looks at a person, God sees Godself in them and rejoices in their dignity and beauty. And if a person is wounded, God is wounded too: "It is then the same as though God heard himself, when he hears the cries and groanings of those who cannot bear injustice."³
7. As Christians, we persevere in witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ. "The perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them" (Westminster Confession). We learn from the Reformers to fathom divine grace, appreciating it is not our own strength or confidence in our witness to shape the world that allows us to persevere in a world full of strife, injustice, violence, and despair. Rather, it is God's perseverance in commitment to us, assuring us that God is not finished with God's creation -- individually, communally, planetarily, and cosmically.
8. God is faithful and "the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). God's unfinished and ongoing generative work is announced in election and creation; it is made manifest and experienced in bearing life and birthing incarnation; it is extended and continued in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Both, the initial gift and the promise of its ever-greater fulfilment call us to repentance from the temptation to identify our own ecclesial and political, material and spiritual achievements with the work of God.
9. We are thrown back upon God's mercy. God's perseverance and commitment to us preserve us in worship and work, listening and discernment, acting and praying together. God's patience creates time and space where we, too, can practice perseverance and courage, cultivating hope in what is not seen and amplifying beyond us the gifts we have received into visible reflections of God's grace for all the world. God's perseverance preserves us against hopelessness and despair, calling us to attend to the signs of God's ongoing work towards the fullness of life, even as it inspires, enables, and compels us to cry out to God: "Do not delay further, make haste to save us!" "Come, Lord Jesus!" and "Veni, creator spiritus!"
10. Let this be our perseverance in witness, as we are preserved in witness through God's perseverance: God's perseverance inspires, enables, and compels us to reflect the Spirit's abiding with and indwelling in an unredeemed world; God's perseverance inspires, enables, and compels us to reflect the Father's free and unwavering election to a love that creates and sustains through disappointment; God's perseverance inspires, enables, and compels us to reflect Christ's priestly, royal, and prophetic office in prayers of intercession, practices of mercy and justice, and calls to repentance, renewal, and ongoing Reformation together.

² Cf., Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Injustice," in: *Hearing the Call. Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 114-132.

³ John Calvin, *Habakkuk Commentary* 2:5-6.

11. For us as human beings, God's perseverance is comfort, judgment and calling at the same time. It assures God's presence even in the most desperate situation. It makes it abundantly clear that hurting people is fundamentally wrong. And it confirms the Christian commitment to justice. These three aspects give reassurance and direction for Christian perseverance.
12. The notion of justice must be emphasized because perseverance has also been misinterpreted in the Reformed tradition. All too often, people called for perseverance to stifle resistance. Wives have been called to persevere the abuse of their husbands, women and girls have been subjected to rape and violence, enslaved persons have been manipulated to give in to their fate, and workers have been pressured to consent to economic exploitation. The General Council theme, therefore, interprets perseverance in the context of justice. Perseverance does not call for quiet endurance but for persistent witness informed and inspired by God's presence in the groaning of creation and the cries of wounded people.

DOING THEOLOGY FOR PERSEVERANCE IN WITNESS

13. This concept paper engages with the Reformed traditions to gather theological resources for perseverance in witness. It follows the four verbs that describe the self-understanding of the World Communion of Reformed Churches: Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing, and Being Reformed together.

DISCERNING

"END-TIME ESCHATOLOGIES" AND "PERSEVERANCE"

14. In the face of the multiple, overlapping, and escalating crises we face, it is easy to lose hope – if by hope we mean the confidence that things will become better in the near or even distant future. Theologies of hope, indeed, seem to have run into historical and structural disillusionment. There are perspectives of eschatology focused on so-called "end times" which have been on the rise both within churches and in many societies at large. Sometimes, they hold their own promise of radical transformation, often through exacerbations of violence rather than alternatives to it. But even outrage and indignation at some point give way to hopelessness, despair, and resignation. We feel this locally, societally, and globally, and people and communities of faith are not immune to that.
15. Alternatively, the call to "persevere in witness" is a Reformed perspective on eschatology which is one of chastened hope. It reminds us that God's promise lives despite all appearances and gives us courage in the face of overwhelming tribulations. It issues a caution against naïve optimism and belief in progress as much as against despair and resignation. It reminds us of our and the whole earth's need for renewal, which we ourselves cannot bring about through our own powers. It calls us to repent from Christian triumphalist identifications of our work with God's Kingdom. Yet it also insists that God is faithful, that God perseveres, and that we are called to witness to God's work among us wherever we see it, amplifying it and actualizing God's promise as we proclaim that God is not finished with this world.

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF DISCERNMENT

16. Our traditions call on members to seek a heart of discernment, both as a personal and corporate responsibility of baptism. Seeking wisdom is not regarded as arising from in-

stant epiphany but from the methodical embodiment of perseverance in spiritual disciplines, embracing the Holy Other within our midst.

17. The Northwestern Synod of the United Reformed Church in the UK describes the spiritual nature of discernment as follows: “We believe the way to explore what God may be calling us to do is by a process of discernment, that is, listening for and recognizing the voice of the Spirit to guide us in our decision making.”⁴
18. Within our Reformed ecumenical relationships, we recognize that the faith and unity of the Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. As we act to bear witness to Christ, we seek the underpinning wisdom of God’s Spirit. Our corporate discernment is shaped by careful naming and critiquing of our current global contexts and the contexts of every age. In this task, perseverance in our witness also entails opening ourselves to ongoing formation and Reformation by God.
19. Our tools for critiquing context include prayerful reading and reflecting upon the scriptures within prayerful community. We encourage grappling with difficult questions within faith-fueled relationships of respect. In this, discernment is both an act of vulnerability and Reformation. As we read in the Epistle to the Romans: “Do not conform yourself to this age [...] that you may discern what is the will of God. (Romans 12:1-12)
20. The WCRC takes up this call and strives to discern both the signs of the times and God’s call to action, guided equally by its commitment to justice and to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

LOVE, JUSTICE, SIN AND REPENTANCE

21. For more than 30 years, people in our Communion have discussed the relationship between love and justice. In this conversation, the WCRC’s focus on justice was criticized as an ethical reduction of the faith because it was seen as incapable of expressing God’s salvation. This dispute is unfortunate because, as our African siblings have kept reminding us, the biblical witness of God’s justice encompasses both, justice and the righteousness of human beings in all their sinfulness.
22. In the New Testament, justice and righteousness are expressed by the same Greek word, “dikaiosune”. Biblical texts like Isaiah 1:17, Amos 5:24 or Luke 18:1-8 provide the key to understanding this consonance: The concepts of justice and righteousness both describe right relationships: Between God and human beings, among humans, and between humans and non-human creation. Justice and righteousness are broken when right relationships are replaced by power and abuse. Jesus and the Old Testament prophets call such abuse sin.
23. The basic African Ubuntu philosophy of “I am because we are” expresses this unbreakable connection between love and justice. The emerging Filipinx American theologies of kapwa underscore the inextricable link between the individual, family, community, nation, globe, and planet Earth (ground, oceans/streams, air). Breaking relationships is a huge offense to every community. Restoring broken relations is, therefore, the highest calling in all relationships: with God, our fellow humans, and nature. God’s Holy Spirit restores broken relationships. In justifying sinners, God is not only declaring us righteous but also sets right the relationships that form human life.

⁴ Northwestern Synod of the United Reformed Church in the UK, [<https://nwsynod.org.uk/discerning-together-2/>].

24. It is, therefore, of great and fundamental importance that any articulation of our Christian faith should begin and end with a community. This is because the God that we worship does not live in isolation but always lives in community, as exhibited by the Trinity (one God in three persons) or as the “king” of a “kingdom” in Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God. What this means for us is that any Christian theology that does not begin with and end with or within a community is foreign to our Christian faith and will definitely follow a misleading path.

DOING THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

25. The central concern of theology is “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word” (Gustavo Gutierrez). Doing theology is to discern the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in communities and peoples who are marginalized, victimized, and “disinherited”.(Howard Thurman),
26. Doing theology in context means that the struggle of a community for justice is accompanied by a process of critical reflection from perseverance in the following of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, and in this concrete sense in theopraxis: active prayer and prayerful action for justice, caring for the orphan and widow, the cries of the abused and oppressed for freedom and deliverance, the weeping and waiting of many who lost loved ones in places of war and violence and who seek cessation of hostilities, the desire for refugees to find protection, the plight of the hungry – the real lives of God’s children in our common humanity are living theology, are doing theology as each and all are image-bearers of the living God.
27. Doing theology in context is expressed in diverse ways in multiple settings. Doing theology in context includes: accompaniment on the journey, community organizing and prophetic protest, public advocacy, relief work, restorative justice for victims of gender-based violence and their perpetrators, corporate worship in which prayers for God’s world empower and inspire God’s people for action, convening of conversations and confession, and reflection upon these activities and reflection upon the living God who moves in every human activity.

ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHIES AND SPIRITUALITIES

28. Indigeneity connects perseverance with place. Indigenous philosophies and spiritualities offer perspectives on embodiment and connection with creation. Often, indigenous identity is linked to responsibilities within creation. Spiritual sanctity is described in highly contextualized kinship relationships with land, water and stars, reminiscent of Abram. Historically, urbanization and mechanized cultivation practices have disconnected much of the world’s population from the awareness of kinship with the natural environment. Yet, a yearning remains for the sense of heaven experienced in the wonders created by God.
29. With the repudiation of the doctrine of discovery comes the responsibility to re-evaluate mission history and ongoing relationships with indigenous peoples. For many indigenous peoples, the pain of climate catastrophe is also experienced in their very bodies and lands. Climate justice and hope of redemption are shared points for collaboration and learning, representing an emerging stream of interfaith theological discovery.

CONFESSING

PREVIOUS CONFESSIONS AND WHAT WE LEARN FROM THEM

30. The 27th General Council of the WCRC theme, “Persevere in Your Witness,” takes up the theological substance of central affirmations of the Reformed confessional tradition. It affirmed the prophetic-apostolic statement that crowns the Barmen Declaration: “verbum Dei manet in aeternum - the word of the Lord endures forever” (Is. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:25). This verse expresses the indestructible and liberating permanence of God’s word that sustains the Church’s witness to the promised Kingdom of justice and peace for the whole of creation.
31. The confessions of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra call for the Communion of the WCRC to recognize and confess its complicity with various idolatrous powers. It calls for conversion to a liberating koinonia, which confronts the powers of injustice and engages in God’s mission for justice, peace and the well-being of the whole creation.
32. Several General Councils have confirmed the significance of these confessions as guides to discern the “signs of the times” and to respond in witness as the Spirit leads. In this tradition, the World Communion of Reformed Churches sees itself as a confessing church that confesses that Christ is God’s perseverant claim on all areas of life against lordless powers in politics, religion, culture, and the economy.

TESTING NEW WAYS TO BECOME A CONFESSING CHURCH

33. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WCRC conducted a comprehensive discernment process that provided space for sharing experiences of mourning, hope and witness. We met every two weeks, and each time, another region or network would introduce liturgies, theological reflections and responses to the pandemic. We named the process: “What Does God Require of Us? Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing and Being Reformed in Times of COVID-19 and Beyond”. It was an intense experience that brought the Communion together in times of need.
34. The pandemic produced ‘a care crisis’ (Oxfam) and ‘a moral and political crisis’ (WHO). Even so, it also revealed more broadly ‘the entrenched structural, institutional, and systemic economic, social and political inequalities, and the incessant, comprehensive war against the poor and the vulnerable, globally and nationally’ (Allan Boesak). In the face of these conditions, Juergen Moltmann already spoke thirty years ago of ‘a God crisis.’ Allan Boesak suggested the term ‘Global Apartheid’ to name the condition that the pandemic revealed in such a tangible way.⁵
35. These conflicts require theological work. The WCRC should reemphasize its confessing tradition and develop new ways to speak to fundamental conflicts in the language of confessions.

WITNESSING: THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CRISES

36. For the WCRC, theology is a central form of witness. It actively engages with the religious underpinnings of systems of oppression and aims at the liberation of people and the world. Here, we present some significant examples that should be deepened and extended in the theological work of the Communion.

⁵ WCRC Working Paper (2021): “What Does God Require from Us.” Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of Covid-19 and Beyond, [https://wcrceu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-01-21_COVIDandBeyond-WorkingPaper-EN.pdf].

FUNDAMENTALISM

37. Religious fundamentalism, which violently closes down the interpretation of religious texts and establishes their claims and beliefs as infallible and absolute, is a tangible feature in today's geopolitics in many parts of the world. Religious and ideological traditions around the globe are prone to manifest fundamentalist inclinations, as the recovery of the supposedly "pure" nature of the belief system is a strongly intuitive factor, often charged with an aggressive and disqualifying emotionality towards those who believe and think differently.
38. The present-day Christian fundamentalism is constructed on misleading theologies of the magisterium of the Bible. The exclusivity that is hereby transferred to the Bible leads to its sacralization. The principle of *sola scriptura* loses its openness to the Holy Spirit and becomes encoded in the language of the letter (2 Corinthians 3:6).
39. Confronted with hardened fundamentalisms, we emphasize that the Reformed principle of *sola scriptura* derives from its commitment to *solus Christus*: Scripture is the place to which we self-critically turn as communities of faith because it provides unique and authoritative witness to God's word become flesh in Jesus Christ, and because the Holy Spirit has worked faith through these scriptures in many believers. In our communal processes of discernment of the meaning of Scripture, the Church confesses its need to be *semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, reformed and to be reformed again by the Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and through the *testimonium internum* of the Holy Spirit in us.
40. Fundamentalism is not only confined to religious communities alone. Market fundamentalism is now articulated as a belief that the domain of the market should be expanded to its fullest extent, as markets are considered the most rational and efficient method for distributing resources. Our Reformed traditions call us to challenge this claim.

NATIONALISM & AUTHORITARIANISM & RIGHT-WING LIBERTARIANISM

41. In the wider global context, we see a pervasive and egregious rise of majoritarian supremacies such as white supremacy and other related 'supremacies' built on the intersectionality of location, race, class, caste, gender and sexual orientation. Democratic systems are turning into 'elected autocracies' where authoritarian and coercive leadership is manifested in particular state and foreign policies.
42. Nationalism is often couched in ideologies of 'us v. them,' including forms that elevate Christianity into an identity marker. Christianity is not an identity that some possess, and that is superior to others. It is a witness to God's grace poured out freely to all people. Nationalist rhetoric conveniently uses deep-seated xenophobic stereotyping of communities to close or narrow down border controls and indulge in hyper-bigotry. The ideology of toxic nationalism, especially spreading across urban spaces, has endangered forms of local democracy. The insider-outsider vocabulary continues to dominate political discourses where people who are perceived as outsiders are seen as a threat to national security. Such a pattern is pervasive in different parts of the globe where power has threatened well-being.
43. The supremacy tendencies that pervade nationalist assertions need a constant dismantling as mandated by the Accra Confession. This confessing and dismantling task is all the more urgent when emerging hegemonic forces like right-wing libertarianism appropriate religious language and identities, for example by claiming for themselves the extraordinary support of the 'forces of heaven', while promoting a perverse concept of free-

dom that calls for processes of ‘creative destruction’. The thus revealed “resistance to form” characterizes the phenomenal configuration of “the demonic”, according to Paul Tillich’s classic definition, in its historical unfolding.⁶

DIGITALIZATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

44. The effects of technological innovations have been highly ambivalent. Recent crises heightened awareness of the impact and flow of global communications. Previous ecumenical focus on elective and forced migration was challenged as pandemic responses highlighted the risks, limitations and speed of international travel. Simultaneously, international cooperation, collaboration, competition and conflict characterized progress (and obstacles) in making breakthroughs. Many people have the chance to communicate digitally, while others are isolated due to a lack of connectivity. Indeed, experiences of physical, mental and spiritual isolation were ultimately determined by both, the access as well as the lack of access to technologies.
45. Today, drones deliver both swords and plowshares, sometimes in the same convoy. Once the person wielding weapons or farm implements is physically engaged in the action with their own blood and sweat. What often remains are tears. In an automated environment, responses are programmed, rather than discerned. Advances in artificial intelligence further complicate our definitions of rights and responsibilities. Chatbots are used to write essays and prayers. Patients seek medical diagnoses by looking for their symptoms on the internet. Robots “miss the corners” when they vacuum our homes and workplaces. Photos are manipulated by the instruction - “make me look more beautiful”. We ask Siri how to go home.
46. In this context, theological questions are multiplying and need attention by churches and ecumenical organizations: What are the moral and spiritual implications when technology is used remotely, without the haptic (physical) experience of embodiment? What are the benefits and risks, not just to bodies, but to souls? How does our understanding of faith-fuelled choice and discernment sit alongside the reality that some actions no longer originate from human decision-making nor are subject to spiritual discernment?

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

47. All people are created in the image of God. Sadly and tragically, the full dignity and worth of what it means to be human is commodified or reduced to particular cultural roles, codes, and images of what it means to be “man,” “woman,” “girl,” “boy.” Toxic images of masculinity and femininity are internalized by self, culture, society, and systems, which spiral into hate and violence against others perceived as different or regarded as needing “to be saved,” and can even be internalized into self-violence
48. Even as the WCRC and other ecumenical partners have, for years, adopted #Thursdays-InBlack as a global campaign to raise visible awareness and commitment to pray for and work towards a world free from gender-based violence, we, as the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the General Council lament the state of the world where gender-based violence runs rampant and is unabated.
49. Gender-based violence, as any form of violence, is about the misuse and abuse of power. We hope that the WCRC will affirm the gender identities of all God’s children and assert the commitment to persevere in working towards a world where the dignity and

⁶ P. Tillich, (1969) *What is Religion?*, ed. and trans. J.L. Adams (New York: Harper & Row), p. 73.

worth of all God's people are recognized in every place and in every context and where all are given the resources, opportunities, and conditions to flourish in God's shalom.

BEING REFORMED

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN DIVERSE EXPRESSIONS

50. To be Christian means, first, an affirmation of the One who bestows on us a narrative identity. It relates our self-understanding as Church to the central story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This central narrative determines who we are and who we are called to be. The first-order questions concern the understanding of the Gospel. Second-order questions invite us to consider our Reformed identity.
51. If one asks: What is Reformed identity? Many Reformed people may find this question awkward. The truly important question is what Christian identity is today: "What are we called to be?" Being Reformed is primarily a way of being Christian.
52. What does it mean to be a Reformed Christian? The Christian faith, as the Reformation rediscovered, is eccentric. The centre of churches does not rest in their own identity, institutions, history or even confessions of faith but in Christ. Christian congregations are called to be open to continuously being re-formed by the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit and re-oriented toward the Holy One. The Gospel describes God's own orientation to the world God loves. Demarcating and celebrating boundaries between denominations denies this fundamental eccentric identity.
53. In diverse contexts, various aspects of the Gospel are accentuated. The shifting centre of gravity of Christianity from heritage influences to emerging communities impacts and enriches the Reformed church family. The classical configuration of Reformed basic insights, even seemingly core-principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, will be questioned and reinterpreted by churches in different social and cultural circumstances, with different backgrounds, facing their own challenges and seeking their own responses. It is to be expected that Reformed heritage will be transmitted into the future in forms that decolonize Europe-centeredness and integrate contextually-experienced revelation.
54. Witnessing God's work in Christ gives rise to many forms of Christian existence, even as it claims individuals in comprehensive and integral ways. It comprises attitudes, thoughts, hopes and fears, ideals, ideas about the world, belief in God, in Christ and the coming realm, spiritual and moral practices, and ways of organizing the Church.
55. It is impossible to articulate uniform characteristics across the Reformed world. Listening to voices that try to discern distinctive traits of the Reformed church family today, as she is gathered in the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we might come up with following:
56. Reformed churches share an approach to *Scripture* as testifying to the Living Word, and bind themselves to the whole of Scripture, to be read and understood in the concrete context of lived and embodied faith in Jesus Christ. Binding here means: trying to discern in mutual listening and learning what is truly central in the Bible, so the Living Word becomes enfolded in our human lives. Grace, justification by faith, in Reformed tradition inextricably connected with doing justice in the world, reconciliation between God and humans, and between humans, equality of gender, class and race, social responsibility, the priesthood of all believers – these are some central insights in the whole of Scripture, always open to adjustment, deepening, and sharpening of the senses in the heat of the day.

57. Reformed churches insist on the *sovereignty of God's grace* and on an intrinsic relation of justification and justice: the unconditional love of God effectively intervenes in the dominant power relations in the world. We are accepted, recognized, included and owned by Christ despite who we are. There is no one system or power that can take that God-given claim about one's dignity away. No matter what society normalizes or how it puts one down, this inner eccentric identity can enable one to live with dignity and purpose. With this new identity comes a sense of hope for a different future. It empowers people to follow Christ and to enact in humble perseverance the rules of God's justice for the well-being of their fellow human beings and of the earth.
58. Reformed churches believe in the priesthood of all believers. This forbids the Church from ruling over its members and silences their voices. Reformed churches cherish diversity and share an *Empire-critical posture*. When we come together in WCRC, we are reminded about who we are and the need for ongoing openness to critique. Dissenting voices in our midst remind us of our calling and identity as an ecclesial communion
59. Such voices might be those of young people who call their churches to engage more courageously with the real challenges of the world, such as the environmental crisis, global inequality, or gender justice. Such voices might be those of women, questioning social and ecclesial inequities. Being re-formed together implies here that we should learn to see things from their perspective rather than forcing ours onto them. Churches will pass the test of authenticity for young people and for women only when they walk the talk (practice what they preach). Critical voices help us to self-critically discern how we shall engage the world and witness and confess prophetically today. An Empire-critical posture shaped through exposure to internal and external conflict and controversies will nourish and guide us in future discernments. In this spirit, we approach ecumenical and interreligious conversation, confident of the importance of honing apologetics.
60. Finally, Reformed churches may understand their shared and truly eccentric character as basically an explication of the guiding principle of Calvin's theology: *Soli Deo Gloria*. This awareness may bring relaxation. It may lead us from perhaps somewhat moralistic activism toward an aesthetic attentiveness that is loving and just. Not the concern about ourselves as churches and our future, but an attitude of openness for God's calling, God's realm, and God's glory should be prior. We don't need to be afraid that this will be at the expense of vulnerable human beings and their sufferings. There is no contradiction. As Irenaeus of Lyon stated: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

THEOLOGIES OF CARE, LOVE AND JOY

61. Our Reformed faith emphasizes that we are loved and saved by God's grace through Christ and, consequently, freed to live for God's love, justice, and joy. Yet, the real existential threats that pervade our common humanity in personal, local, and global spaces elide or eclipse God's gifts for all to flourish and live into God's shalom. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume and velocity of our awareness and experience of forces and factors that contravene God's love, joy and justice for all, we, as God's people, can sometimes default to insular or myopic concerns for our own churches or our own interests and neglect our Lord's call to love neighbour and stranger.
62. As we continue to face the immense challenges of our time in so many ways and at so many levels, we must recover and recommit to living into and embodying God's care, love, and joy for the world. Such a life shaped by faith, hope, and love is grounded in God's exhibition of care, love, and joy for the world in Christ's incarnation, at the cross, in death's tomb, in the resurrection, in the ascension of the Lord, in the giving of and work

of the Holy Spirit, and in every instance where God moves and acts among us. The abiding presence of God in and through God's people signals God's ongoing and persevering care, love, and joy for all people and, indeed, for all of creation.

63. God has given us life and shows us how to live life and live it well. God has also shown us how to die, with dignity and with hope. As the Heidelberg Catechism affirms, in life and in death, we belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. How do we dignify the fullness of life in every respect, and give dignity to the dying where the shadows of death are palpable and ever-present? How do we fully embody the life of Christ to neighbour and stranger alike, whose life was marked by loving service, caring for the weak and hungry, exhibiting the care, love, and joy in all that he said and in all that he did?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

Please discuss the *Theology Concept Paper*. The following questions might help you in your conversation. Please choose those that are most relevant to your situation:

INTRODUCTION

- “We live in a time that is marked by multiple crises that defy the notion of progress.”
Share examples of situations where you experienced such crises in your context.
- “Theology itself has been weaponized to legitimize violence and oppression.”
Name such incidents where theology has become an instrument of power.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF PERSEVERANCE

- “Perseverance is a central theme in the Reformed tradition”.
Share stories of times when perseverance was a significant resource in the history of your church.
- “Whenever God looks at a person, God sees himself in them. [...] And if a person is wounded, God is wounded too”.
Read passages from the Bible which affirm that human beings are created in God’s image and discuss how this influences our understanding of humans.
- “Perseverance has been misinterpreted in the Reformed tradition.”
Share examples from your context where this has happened.

DISCERNING

- “Theologies of hope seem to have run into historical and structural disillusionment.”
Share experiences where you see this happening and discuss how people have dealt with this experience.
- “End-time sentiments are on the rise within the churches and in many societies at large.”
Collect examples and discuss how one can recognize such tendencies.
- “Our traditions call on members to seek a heart of discernment.”
Look at the instruments of common discernment in your church and discuss how these instruments can help to come to terms with conflict.
- “The African Ubuntu Philosophy ‘I am because you are’ expresses the unbreakable connection between love and justice” and the Filipinx American emerging theologies of kapwa express the inextricable link of individual, community, world, and Earth.”
Deliberate the relational character of love and justice and how this special quality influences the relationship between the two.
- “Theology is a critical reflection on Christian praxis (Gutierrez)”.
Discuss how liberation theology can transform the way in which your church is doing theology.
- “Indigenous philosophies and spiritualities offer perspectives on embodiment and connection with creation.”
Discuss how indigenous philosophy and spirituality can transform the way in which your church is doing theology.

CONFESSING

- “The confessions of Barmen, Belhar and Accra call the Communion of the WCRC to confess its complicity with idolatrous powers and for conversion to a liberating koinonia, which engages in God’s mission for justice, peace and the well-being of the whole creation.”
Share experiences of where confessions have played a significant role in your church.
- Discuss the concept of “*Global Apartheid*” and consider how it could help your church to become a confessing church.

WITNESSING: THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CRISES

- “*For the WCRC, theology is a form of witness.*”
Share examples where theology has been conducted as a form of witness and discuss what would define a theology that understands itself as an act of witness.
- “*Fundamentalism*”
Collect examples of religious fundamentalism and discuss the difference in approaching *sola scriptura* in the modus of the letter and the modus of the spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). How can Scripture be a vehicle of the ongoing need for reform and transformation that the church is called to?
- “*Nationalism and Authoritarianism*”
Share examples of intensifying nationalisms and authoritarianisms and discuss how theology is used to legitimize the supremacy of particular groups.
- “*Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence*”
Discuss the impact of Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence on society, economy and warfare. Which ethical questions do arise? What are the theological underpinnings of these technologies, and how can we critique them theologically?
- “*Gender-Based Violence*”
What does it look like for religious communities to persevere in responding to gender-based violence? How might churches have a significant impact in accompanying victims of gender-based violence, in working towards justice in church and society, and in restorative justice for perpetrators of violence?

BEING REFORMED

- “*As Christians, we persevere in witness to God’s good news in Jesus Christ.*”
How can we learn from the Reformers to fathom divine grace in a world full of strife, injustice, violence and despair?
- “*If one asks: ‘What is Reformed identity today?’ many people may find this question a bit awkward.*”
Discuss why the Reformed tradition was always critical with regard to the concept of identity. Why do we see ourselves as always reforming according to God’s word?
- The section on Christian identity highlights the following points to characterize the Reformed tradition: eccentric, scripture-centred, internally diverse, empowering, Empire-critical, relating justification and justice.
Discuss these characteristics and consider how they shape the life of your church.
- “The abiding presence of God in and through God’s people signals God’s ongoing care, love and joy for all people and, indeed, for all creation.”

Collect passages from the Bible that express God's care, love and joy for people and creation and discuss how God's ongoing presence can sustain our perseverance.

P4: MISSION IS GOD'S PERSISTENT CALL TO PERSEVERE IN OUR WITNESS

We request qualitative feedback on the mission concept paper from member churches, ecumenical partners and justice networks. Please engage critically with the foundations for the justice work of the WCRC and make suggestions on how this conceptual framework can be improved. Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wrc.eu.

After we have received your feedback, we will revise the concept papers in accordance with what we have heard before they are submitted to the discernment of the General Council.

INTRODUCTION

1. We see great value in emphasizing the continuity with previous statements and foundational documents (Barmen, Belhar, and Accra) as we ponder the mission of the church in an ever-changing but unwaveringly hostile world for the vulnerable, the poor, and the excluded children of God. The “scandalous world” of the Accra Confession is now more scandalous than ever, and Belhar’s call to “stand where God stands”, namely with the poor, oppressed, the wronged and the destitute, is now more urgent than ever.
2. Never in our life time has imperialistic power expressed itself so relentlessly, overwhelmingly, and devastatingly violent as now. The church, “as the possession of God” (Belhar), sees always, and now more than ever, the events in our world “through the eyes of those who suffer.” (Accra) With deeper conviction and greater urgency than ever before, we recall Calvin’s truth, not only that the longing for justice is “implanted in us by the Lord” but that the cries of the victims of injustice, exclusion and violence are cries from the very heart of Godself. Hence, the call to mission is the call to justice.
3. If Nicholas Wolterstorff is right in asserting that God-self is wounded by every injustice inflicted upon God’s vulnerable children, then it is God’s woundedness that is the heartbeat of the Christian mission. “To perpetuate injustice on a fellow human being is to wound God; the cries of the victims are the expression of divine suffering. Thus, the call to justice is ultimately rooted in the pathos of God and in God’s vulnerable love. The call to justice is the call to stop wounding God; the call to eliminate injustice is the call to alleviate divine suffering.” It is our rootedness in this truth that helps us discern the difference between the victims of suffering and those who claim perpetual victimhood even while they continue to inflict pain and suffering upon their victims.
4. These are the fundamental truths that frame the mission of the church in the world today. What is “mission” in the presence of the empire? Empire, as defined by South African theologian Allan Boesak, is “an economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind.” It claims to have absolute power over the rest of the world as if it owns it. No challenger is tolerated. It promises peace and security by keeping the world in a permanent state of warfare that is waged to reconfigure lands and peoples unto its likeness and image in line with its geostrategies. This is sacrilegious and idolatry par excellence! What is “mission” in the presence of undeniable reality - when land theft, genocide, and

deliberate acts of extermination in Gaza right before our very eyes, on a daily basis, becomes our hermeneutical lens?

5. Consequently, we will continue to place emphasis on empire's heightened militarized presence, renewed imperial projects of neo-colonialism and settler-colonialism and the consequences of those for oppressed, vulnerable, and dispossessed persons and peoples. We should raise the question: what does "mission" look like as so many seem to have lost trust in the ability of the church to be that truthful, faithful, credible, compassionate and prophetic presence in the world? What is mission as "truth spoken to power and to the powerless" and truth spoken about power and powerlessness? And what, if the church's prophetic faithfulness is in doubt, does speaking hope to the hopeless mean?
6. In speaking of power, we do not mean the power to dominate, lord over, and subject others. That is an exercise of power always embedded in violence in all its manifestations, always an instrument of the continued disempowerment of the powerless. We speak of power as India's M.M. Thomas taught us, namely, power as "the bearer of dignity" of the people and the channel of their "significant and responsible participation in society and social history."
7. Thus understood, our mission is driven by our faith in the resurrected Lord, the One, Jürgen Moltmann has reminded us long ago, whose resurrection is God's apanastasia, God's rebellion against sin and doubt, against all that is evil, against the suffering of God's children and God's creation; against the myth that death has the last word. In this light, mission means joining God's rebellion in resistance to all that is harmful to the abundant life Jesus has promised.
8. Mission is, therefore, God's persistent call to persevere in our witness, in our marturia for the sake of God's suffering children and creation, and for the sake of Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." And we do this with what we have learned from the Palestinian people over the decades since the Nakba: their sumud – their steadfastness, resilience, and indestructible hope. Sumud is anchored in the strive of the Palestinian people to a cause of justice and of historical rootedness in this land that has seen years of suffering and persecution but continues to propel a sense of steadfastness towards achieving hope for the people on the land.

MISSION AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

9. To talk about mission, one needs to delve into the way Christianity and colonialism were the intertwined and constitutive forces of nation-building, economic expansion, and identity formation in early modern Europe. We need to understand racism as a European problem that cannot be separated from Christianity and mission. A racialized hierarchy that understands Christian Europe as superior and civilized was not a temporary corruption of Christianity in order to legitimize colonialism, nor a glitch that disappeared when the colonial era ended. Not only is (neo)colonialism continuing in many shapes and forms but both Christianity and the Western Christian self-understanding were deeply transformed through colonialism.¹ Mission and empire were mutually dependent. 'Mis-

¹ Missionaries were not just 'faceless imperialist agent[s]', rather, they actively influenced colonial policies and Christian practices and ideas, including attempts to 'convert' colonialism. Dana L. Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Vision and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914* (Grand Rapids: Willem B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 3.

sion' as an ideal, a narrative, an ideology, played an important role in the construction of European (Christian) identities in many ways.

10. This means that theological thinking was crucial in the development of colonial hierarchies and constructions of 'race'. The link between race and religion is still often overlooked, as understandings of 'race' often lead to the pseudo-scientific construction of 'race' in the 19th Century. If we want to come to life-giving understandings and practices of mission, this connection between religion and race requires our attention, as well as the intersections of class, race, religion and gender. We need to keep in mind how the histories of antisemitism and Islamophobia are connected with racialization, colonialism and mission.
11. The suggestion is not, in our commitment to reconceptualize mission, to limit our understanding of mission to its connections to European imperialism. This would again overlook /and reproduce Eurocentrism. The theologies of mission were transformed from anti-colonial movements in the 20th Century. Mission is no longer a one-way export from "the West to the rest", but was reconceptualized as a partnership between churches around the world. The theology of mission *dei* was also important in displacing the previously central Christocentric universalism, as coined by Konrad Raiser, and the previous confidence of mission societies believing they were taking the Gospel to unknown lands —unknown even to God they believed.
12. Christianity was not only spread through colonialism. Even though Indigenous and/or enslaved people encountered a violent and racialized Christianity, they 'translated' and transformed Christian practices and ideas, creating new Christianities.² In doing so, they forced colonial powers to reconsider the relationship between religion, freedom and slavery. Rather, addressing those of us who are rooted in colonial racialized Christianities: if we want to shape mission in a way that is truly life-sustaining and life-giving, we have to do the work of deconstructing.
13. This includes understanding and deconstructing privilege (in relation to mission). Especially relevant is the intersection of white and Christian privilege. Preferences and biases related to whiteness and 'christianness' continue to produce inequalities and injustices in the context of mission: for instance, in (the work culture of) institutions and organizations active in mission and/or in transforming mission and in knowledge production on mission. White Christian privilege is reproduced in how some people are heard and others are not, in the kind of knowledge that is acknowledged and in other forms of knowledge (embodied knowledge, lived experience, knowledge expressed in non-Western languages, or expressed by groups that are racialized and dehumanized) that are not or less so.
14. Christian theology has played a role in almost all settler colonial projects from North America to South Africa, Ireland and Australia. Settler colonialism as a concept has existed for a few decades. What is true for the Americas is true for Palestine; Palestine is not an exception. And yet, Palestine continues to be the exception. While no one would dare today to cite the Bible to justify settler colonialism in Australia or North America, many Christians and Jews have been doing exactly this in Palestine for almost the last two hundred years and continue to do so until this very day using Christian Zionism.
15. As defined by Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb, Christian Zionism is a Christian lobby that supports the Jewish settler colonialism of Palestinian land using biblical/theological

² Sanneh in Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism*, 4.

constructs within a metanarrative while taking glocal considerations into account. This definition is less focused on the biblical discourse of Christian Zionists, which can vary considerably from literalists to post-Holocaust theology, from very conservative to liberal. In fact, the biblical/theological rationale espoused by the majority of Christian Zionists is very vague and is based on very few, yet varied, verses from the Bible.

16. The emphasis of our definition is on the lobbying aspect of Christian Zionism: not on what people *believe* but what they *do* based on that belief. The Christian Zionist narrative is always embedded within a metanarrative so that those who espouse it do not see themselves as engaged in pure political lobbying but rather as agents of a grand plan from which they read and interpret both scripture and history. Alongside the metanarrative, Christian Zionists are always connected to glocal issues and considerations, thereby combining their ideas with struggles and fears in specific contexts. It is this that makes Christian Zionism so dangerous.
17. Finally, Christian Zionist support for the Jewish colonial settler has less to do with “head knowledge” than with “heart knowledge.” As such, it cannot be fought by a counter-biblical/theological argument or rational reasoning. The metanarrative changes depending on time and place, and glocal considerations vary depending on the context, but what all Christian Zionists have in common is an emotional attachment to the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine. In this approach, the hermeneutical key to understanding Christian Zionism is not so much the biblical hermeneutics but rather the lobbying in support of settler colonialism.
18. The history of the last hundred years shows clearly that settler colonialism has been the dominant Jewish political discourse and practice. Alternative Jewish voices like those of Martin Buber, Marc Ellis, Ilan Pappé, Santiago Slabodsky, Atalia Omer and others were and continue to be side-lined and silenced. Still, we praise God for the courageous voices of hosts of a younger generation of Jewish voices crying out “Not In Our Name” as across the world, they set themselves against the misuse of their religion to support land theft, ethnic cleansing and genocide in Palestine.
19. Settler colonialism experienced a kind of reinvention in the post-Cold War era when anthropology and indigenous studies scholars felt that the term postcolonial was inadequate to describe contexts where colonization was not yet over but continued to constitute an ongoing reality, “a structure rather than an event”, meaning it never ends. The main feature that distinguishes settler colonialism from classical or neo-colonialism is the fact that settler colonialists come to settle in an occupied land permanently, exercising state sovereignty and juridical control over the indigenous land while ultimately aiming to eliminate the native people. The natives become extraneous while the settlers are cast as natives.
20. To do so, settler colonialism developed different mechanisms, ideological constructs, and social narratives. The indigenous land is described as *terra nullius*, empty or barren land that is just waiting to be discovered, thus becoming the private property of the settlers. The native people are depicted with racist constructs as savage, violent and dangerous, while the settlers are portrayed as the civilized and brave pioneers. To defend the settled property from the savage, a police state is created and is granted extraordinary power over the native people, including power over their civil affairs. Settler colonialism unfolds both externally (e.g. Americas, Australia, South Africa, Ireland, Palestine) and internally (e.g. India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka) and are part and parcel of modern imperial configura-

tions of state and land. Therefore, the struggle of the native peoples is not only for freedom, but also against annihilation.

MILITARIZED MISSION

21. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War, which is said to have marked the dawn of a New World Order, is nothing but another name for one single empire which has furthered the militarization of the globe as never before in our history causing immense suffering and deep polarizations between states, nations, ethnic and religious communities across the world. We are the only civilization in human history who have not simply monopolized violence on an individual state level but also allowed monopolization of violence on a global level by the empire, which is led by the USA with over 800 military bases across the world and an annual military budget worth of over 1000 billion US dollars (2023). Those states who do not fall in line with the dictates of the main driver of the empire are labelled as 'rouge states'. Democracy and human rights are defined against those states that adopt a lower degree of monopoly of violence while challenging the main driver.
22. The empire claims that militarization is for peace, but it is in a constant state of war and thwarts peaceful negotiations of conflicts between states and nations while criminalizing progressive social and political movements in the name of security. Ceasefires that uphold the Peace Paradigm are seen as threats to peace, while continuous wars that kill, rape, displace, maim, and starve people (War Paradigm) are seen as heralding peace. Security has trumped human rights and peace. Whose security? Security for the imperial geostrategy of the globe.
23. The empire needs militarization to suppress people who dare to resist, no matter whether the resistance is violent or non-violent. Militarization is the most brutal coercive method of 'resolving' political conflicts by which genocides and mass atrocities are committed against the resisting people who resist their land being reconfigured as part of the imperial geopolitical agenda. Their resistance embodies an alternative vision for the world. Such an example, is the Yemeni resistance in their refusal to go on with business as usual in the Red Sea, and their call for an immediate ceasefire awakens the world to an alternative geopolitics led by the oppressed peoples. In several ports in Australia, the peace activists launched the 'Block the Boats' campaign to stop ships going to Israel.
24. The genocide unfolding before our eyes in Gaza proved to be like a magnifying glass, showcasing the empire's tools and machinery, using settler colonialism along with colonial Christian heritage all wrapped up within a stereotypical racist projection of brown/black bodies have supplied Israel with all the toolkits that are only permitted on the 'other'. Out of the horrific attest to humanity that Gaza has unfolded of the world, it has also shown what dissenting, resisting means. It showcased the cries, the resistance and the hope of people who seek life, livelihood, land and freedom by multiple means but are seen as pre-modern, uncivilized, barbaric or even criminal/terrorist. They are reduced to rubble by lethal weapons and made invisible by the software of the media, the software that presents some lives to be grievable, while other lives are ungrievable.
25. Thus, how do churches hear and understand "mission" in the context of the triple nexus of racism, militarization and capitalism? Martin Luther King, Jr. named these as three sins (materialism, militarism and racism) with reference to the USA. How do churches engage in solidarity with advocacy movements seeking justice for Black lives (specific to anti-Black racism), and for diverse, racialized communities (Asian, LatinX, Middle Eastern)? For Muslims in an Islamophobic world? What is the nature of Christian mission with

racialized movements for life in the 21st Century, whose leaders may be suspicious of or have previously been burned by their experiences with the church and mission? What does “mission” look like in the context of both the specific and generalized dehumanization and “othering” of black and brown bodies?

26. Using the term “bodies” can be challenging to some for various reasons. For Christians, who espouse the belief that all are made in God’s image, this terminology can be particularly troubling. However, its use in the context of this paper on mission is intentional because the colour of a person’s skin is often the characteristic that determines the reception or treatment they receive. In this local and global context, churches must wrestle with this painful reality in reflecting on their mission today.
27. Despite their diversity (in skin tone, body shape and size, ethnicity, ability or disability, language, culture, tradition, religious affiliation, education, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.), people with black and brown bodies express one commonly shared experience: racial profiling to varying degrees. While this exercise in imposing racial power is always humiliating, the intensity of violence in the experience ranges from questioning their presence in a particular space (e.g. walking in a public park) to increasing levels of “security concern”, “suspicious”, “threatening”, or even “suspect” because they are Black or Brown. Borders and movement become problematic when inhabiting a black/brown body. The suffering experienced by refugees and asylum seekers of colour has significantly intensified, especially as they escape both violence and the devastating impacts of climate change, to be confronted with tightened borders and laws and regulations that are more often than not only imposed on people of colour. Some who fled the wars in heavily laden boats never reached the shores.
28. The violence of the so-called ‘war on terrorism’, and its related “global security” paradigm worked together to disproportionality normalize the targeting of black and brown bodies for maiming or death, treating them as “populations available for injury”, projecting criminality onto groups by virtue of their “otherness” in relation to normative Whiteness (The Right to Maim, Jasbir Puar, 2017). Puar reveals the ways in which maiming regimes like the Israeli state “manifests an implicit claim to the “right to maim” and debilitate Palestinian bodies and environments as a form of biopolitical control” (Puar, page 128). In the case of the US government, black and brown non-combatants indiscriminately killed in drone strikes in Afghanistan, Somalia or Yemen are dismissed as “collateral damage”. Claiming fear for their safety, police in the US shoot to kill unarmed black and brown people before asking questions. Empire’s threat-assessment lenses trained on Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and other geographies are being zoomed in on citizens of African/Arab/South Asian/LatinX descent locally, with the same intensity and suspicion. Simply inhabiting a Black or Brown body can be fatal.
29. What does mission look like in these contexts? What are we learning from ministries led by black and brown church leaders about the nature of relationships for authentic mission in solidarity with communities most impacted? What kind of relationships are disproportionately affected communities seeking with churches, if any? Are churches actively seeking to be in relationships of solidarity with affected communities? How do we engage meaningfully in mission in a context where racialized people are seen as a threat, and churches and/or Christians are perceived as part of the problem? In times of crises, the church is called to find orientation and hope in the Word of God, so how can the church orient its people in times of multiple truths and multiple answers? How can mission really be conceived of as partnership, or done through a community of churches act-

ing in solidarity with God's work already present in the world if we ignore these scandals for a presumed higher pursuit of evangelization?

30. Real partnership in mission calls for accountability of real friendship that displaces and challenges power in the "other" and in ourselves. We are calling for vulnerable conversations about how God's mission looks into the world, and serious interrogation of why our visions for God's dream often do not align. The pursuit of mission cannot be a distraction from these conversations; instead, it needs to act as a further, important impetus towards them. God's mission, as through the incarnated Christ, disrupts the status quo of society and history. Missionaries are called to join Christ's example of turning the world upside down.
31. In joining the call to turn the world upside down, and as we continue to discern the word of God in the world we live in, it is a world pursued by many rulers, and our witness of the Living God requires us to name, and resist these idolatrous systems and embrace the God of Life.
32. The history of the WCRC has been a history of meaningful engagement with member churches and with communities that are living under the brunt realities of these systems of domination and oppression, but it is also a relationship that lives and engages in a meaningful understanding of advocacy that is a central part of their church mission. Advocacy in the Reformed understanding is a theologically grounded form of Christian witness. The Reformed tradition places special emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and emphasizes that all Christians are called to active witnessing in public places.
33. The World Communion of Reformed Churches is responding to this challenge by the work done by Global Reformed Advocacy Platforms for Engagement (GRAPE) program. In line with the self-understanding of the World Communion and in accordance with the Reformed tradition, GRAPE is not a new institution but an alliance of regional networks in which the member churches of the WCRC support each other in their advocacy work on the ground and from the context. A global GRAPE platform takes up campaigns of the regional platforms and coordinates advocacy with international organizations. At all levels, the platforms are developed in cooperation with partners from the ecumenical movement and civil society.
34. On this basis, the advocacy work of the WCRC supports the work of its member churches in situations of injustice, violence, and conflict so that they can live God's mission in their context. The WCRC, therefore, does not carry out advocacy work independently of its member churches and their members but sees its mission as supporting the churches and working with them to fundamentally transform conflict situations.
35. As we seek to resist and decipher this amalgamation of dominant forces and to speak truth to power, how do we answer the question of what the mission of the church is? Answering the question becomes challenging within the realm of post-truth politics. In our time, empire has taken on a digital dimension that brings many benefits, such as improved, easier and more accessible communication and free and easy access to vast troves of information. Such is the nature of empire that we let it enter our lives taking advantage of its benefits without realizing its costs. In today's digital realm, the costs are very high, including, among other things, the way social media has enabled and encouraged the spread of fake news and is disrupting social relations. Whereas once facts were contested, now we live in a world of 'alternative facts' where lies masquerade as an alternative truth, creating alternative realities undermining public discourse and political life, dividing societies, and destroying trust. Now we also face the challenge of AI (Artifi-

cial Intelligence), which could supercharge all this and go even further creating whole new realities as it shapes and spreads its own ideas on culture, religion, economics, and politics putting people in the service of its algorithms, and the corporations that own these systems. Echoing this challenge of our times the Gospel of John recounts Jesus saying to his followers that the ‘truth will make you free’ and they respond, ‘we have been slaves of no one ... what do you mean?’ (John 8:32-33). Such is empire in its digital manifestations that we are frequently blind to its capacity to enslave us, obscuring and denying truths that will liberate us from our captivity to the forces of profit-seeking financial power that control all our lives.

CONCLUSION

36. The church believes that human beings, as children of God, are created in the image of God. That confers upon them an irrevocable, inviolate dignity. John Calvin summed it up in one sentence: “God’s children are pleasing and lovable to [God], since [God] sees in them the marks and features of [God’s] own countenance ... Whenever God contemplates [God’s] own face, [God] both rightly loves it and holds it in honour.” If what God loves and honours because in human beings God sees Godself “as in a mirror”, then any form of discrimination, exploitation, or dehumanization is an assault upon the very dignity and worthiness of Godself.
37. The church stands in need of transformation and renewal today. A phenomenon that has become especially pronounced over the last few decades and is now a considerable trend in many churches is Christian Zionism. Like the Theology of Apartheid, Christian Zionism is a “Christianised” political ideology. Unlike the Theology of Apartheid, however, Christian Zionism does not confine itself within the borders of “race”. This theology, as a serious propaganda tool in the present situation in Palestine/Gaza, is taking hold at an alarming pace in the churches and politics of the Global South with devastating moral and theological consequences for our churches. It seeks support for Israel’s Zionist ideology and its political workings across the globe. Since the Nakba, and now especially in the present genocidal war, it has been extraordinarily active.
38. In continuation with Belhar: just as the WCRC (WARC) considered and recognized, in the context of the time, the South African situation, the devastations brought upon God’s children by apartheid as a system of political oppression, social exclusion, economic exploitation and human degradation as fundamentally evil and racist and not reflective of the will of God for God’s children and on that basis declared apartheid a heresy.
39. And just as the WCRC considered and recognized the justification of that system through the theology of apartheid practised by the white Dutch Reformed churches a travesty of the Gospel and a heresy, we should insist that the WCRC consider, recognize, and declare the phenomenon of Christian Zionism as fundamentally evil, racist, a travesty of the Gospel and a heresy.
40. The question that haunts us here is this: are we brave enough? Do we have the prophetic boldness, faithfulness and steadfastness to do all this? But we stand, live, and witness in Christ Jesus our Lord, in community and in communion with our past. From the *Confessio Belgica* Article 37:
41. “Indeed, all people will give account of all the idle words they have spoken ... And then the secrets and hypocrisies of all people will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all ...

[The righteous and elect] will then receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be openly recognized by all, and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world. ... The Son of God will profess their names, and their cause – at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil magistrates - will be acknowledged to the cause of the Son of God.”

42. And from *Belhar*:

43. “We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them, and punishment and suffering be the consequence.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Please discuss the Concept Paper on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. The following questions might help you in your conversation. Please choose those that are most relevant to your situation:

- What is “mission” in the presence of undeniable reality - when land theft, genocide, and deliberate acts of extermination in many parts of the world before our very eyes, on a daily basis, becomes our hermeneutical lens?
- How do churches hear and understand “mission” in the context of the triple nexus of racism, militarization and capitalism?
- How do we engage meaningfully in mission in a context where racialized people are seen as a threat, and churches and/or Christians are perceived as part of the problem?
- How can mission really be conceived of as partnership or done through a community of churches acting in solidarity with God’s work already present in the world if we ignore these scandals for a presumed higher pursuit of evangelization?

P5: WORKING WITH ALL PARTENERS GOD PROVIDES

We request qualitative feedback on the concept paper from member churches, ecumenical partners and ecumenical networks. Please engage critically with the theological foundations for the ecumenical and interreligious work of the WCRC and make suggestions on how this conceptual framework can be improved. Please send your responses before 28 February 2025 to the following email address: gc2025@wcrceu.

After we have received your feedback, we will revise the concept papers in accordance with what we have heard before they will be submitted to the discernment of the General Council.

INTRODUCTION

1. "To be Reformed is to be ecumenical." For Reformed Christians, this sentence is more than a slogan. It speaks to a critical aspect of Reformed identity, one that is demonstrated in our history. The understanding that the church was always reforming according to the Word of God opened the doors for profound ecumenical engagement. The conciliar structure allowed the integration of different voices and traditions into the discernment of the church.
2. Since the end of the 19th Century, Reformed contributions have been formative in the establishment of many ecumenical bodies. Many of the united and uniting churches have Reformed churches at their roots.
3. In recent years, however, the ecumenical landscape has shifted dramatically. The centre of gravity of Christianity has moved to the Global South. New church movements and ecumenical fellowships have emerged. Today, the World Council of Churches only represents 25% of Christianity. Merely 3,5% of Christianity identifies as Reformed in the broadest sense.¹ These changes also affect the member churches. Denominational ties have loosened. Many members relate to several affiliations and move their affiliations in the course of their lives. In many parts of the world, the structures of a well-defined Christendom are in the process of ceasing to exist.
4. In this situation, the current structures are still trying to represent a reality that is slowly disappearing. None of the denominations is as clearly established as it still was even a few decades ago. All churches deal with changes and transformations. The development of our ecumenical relationships, however, is lagging behind. We still envisage denominations and religions as closed entities with very limited internal dynamics and might, therefore, miss much of the living reality happening under the established names.
5. The upcoming General Council in Chiang Mai is an opportunity to test the Reformed resources and develop them to meet these challenges. In the past, the Reformed tradition has proven to be very adaptable and able to demonstrate its relevance in new ways. This concept paper is optimistic that the Reformed openness for the Holy Spirit calling us for something new will be an important resource for our ecumenical and interreligious work under changed conditions.

¹ Cf. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, *Metamorphosen des Weltchristentums: Ökumenische Theologie in globaler Perspektive*, 35-55.

REFORMED FOUNDATIONS FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

6. As Reformed Christians, we believe the church is called to **unity**. Since the early stages of the Protestant Reformation, Reformed Christians have regarded the church's divisions as scandalous. We remember, for example, John Calvin's letter to Archbishop Cranmer, where he remarked that the division of the church "is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time... Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding."²
7. Reformed pursuit of unity is not for its own sake. We recognize that the church's unity is a gift and obligation from God, remembering Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane for all his believers, "that all of them may be one." (Jn. 17:21) Furthermore, this unity must be visible because it testifies to the Christ who, as head of the church, has conquered the sins of separation, enmity, and hatred between peoples and groups (Belhar 2).³ In this way, unity is connected to the Christ who reconciles all people and the whole of creation to God and to each other. Justice is a matter of setting things right, reconciliation sets relationships right. The pursuit of unity then, cannot be disassociated from the pursuit of justice; in Christ, "God was reconciling the world to Godself." (II Cor. 5:19)
8. Nevertheless, there is hardly a Christian tradition with more divisions and schisms than the Reformed in response to a wide range of issues, ranging from doctrinal, cultural or nationalist sectarianism to the profound dissent about the character of society (as in the example of apartheid in South Africa). These divisions, many of them rooted in injustice, have wounded our churches. Churches today are increasingly attending to the legacy of conflict and developing instruments to strengthen unity. The work is especially critical in situations when faith convictions are politicized or even weaponized to marginalize and persecute others. We persevere in this witness and commitment to visible unity so that the world may believe that Christ has already conquered the divisions and separations of this world. (Belhar 2)
9. As it is with the church's unity, a Reformed desire for **interreligious engagement** is not done for its own sake. This engagement aims to establish mutual understanding, respect, tolerance, and cooperation for the common good.
10. There is a firm foundation for interreligious dialogue, engagement, and cooperation in our affirmation that all people are created in God's image. The whole creation is the "theatre of God's glory" (Institutes 1.5.8.) and humanity, bearing God's image, is a mirror to God's glory. (Institutes I.15.4) Even sin does not erase, but only obscures, the image of God in us. Thus, John Calvin, in reflecting on Galatians 6:9-11, preaches that "God, looking on human beings as formed in [God's] own image, regards them with such love and honor that [God Godself] feels wounded and outraged in the persons of those who are the victims of human cruelty and wickedness."⁴
11. The desire to engage interreligiously is also motivated by the conviction that God's work is not limited to the church. As John Calvin has cautioned, "we should be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to God, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears."

² Letter to Cranmer (1552), Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, pt. 4.

³ The Belhar Confession, [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/CF_Belhar.pdf].

⁴ John Calvin, Sermon on Deut. 4:39, 43, as quoted in Ronald Wallace, Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 149.

(*Institutes* II.2.15) God's love and care extends to all creation and all its inhabitants. Hence, the church's witness includes "identifying with all [the land's] inhabitants, and through love and suffering, becoming the sign of hope."⁵ We persevere in witness so all may experience such love and care, and hope that "justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

12. As we explore the foundations and forward visions for the WCRC's ecumenical and inter-religious work until the 2032 General Council, we are aware that the present state of the world includes escalating violence, increasing social disintegration, and ecological destruction. We live in a "scandalous world" (Accra Confession, § 7)⁶. The situation is alarming and calls all people of good will to commit to **justice**. The world and churches are wounded, raising the need for new alliances and strategies dedicated to God's call to life for everyone. (See F.1.a. in this concept paper.)
13. The WCRC understands itself to be "called to communion, committed to justice." This self-understanding guides the WCRC's ecumenical and interreligious work. The enormity of the world's woundedness requires building alliances and partnerships, so that we together may more effectively address the challenges of our time. Hence, the WCRC has committed to "working with all the partners that God provides." This is in keeping with the Reformed conviction that God's covenant is with the whole of creation. This broader horizon shapes the Reformed understanding of unity, reconciliation, and justice.

ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS COOPERATION

14. There are many biblical, theological, historical, and practical considerations that call us to work with all the partners God provides. Our work with ecumenical partners and our work with interreligious partners are in some ways distinct from one another. Consequently, these will be set forth in separate sections even though some substantial commonalities remain.

ECUMENICAL COOPERATION

15. The Reformed approach to ecumenical engagement is rooted in God's call and obligation to unity. As God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself, so also are we entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation. This ministry is compromised if we are not reconciled among ourselves. (I Cor. 5:16-18) That is why the church's divisions are tragic and even scandalous. We are enjoined to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3-4).
16. Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ gives shape to the nature of the unity we seek. Though there are many members and a diversity of gifts there is one body. We belong to one another and are members of one another (Rom. 12; I Cor. 12). Our unity is not a static uniformity but rather a dynamic communion. The pattern for us is the embrace of difference and rejection of division.
17. In the Nicene Creed, unity and catholicity are among the four marks of the church. It is inevitable, then, that the church will ever be navigating its unity and alongside its inherent diversity.

⁵ The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan [https://english.pct.org.tw/enWho_con.htm].

⁶ The Accra Confession [<https://wrcr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TheAccraConfession-English.pdf>].

18. We believe that our unity in Christ is a gift of God, not something of our own making. This is not a unity that imposes uniformity, nor does it assume that church must take on a fixed or final form. Churches may be different in their ways of being church, but they remain churches nevertheless. We acknowledge that, as Calvin put it, "Wherever we see the word of God rightly preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." (Institutes IV.1.9.) Nonetheless, the unity of the Church is essential, even though it is not an end in itself, for unity makes possible more effective witness and work as we seek reconciliation and justice together. We commit to doing together whatever we can possibly do together.
19. Reformed Christians recognize that our unity in Christ is not only a gift from God, but also an obligation. The Triune God calls the church to reflect the love that God manifests in the inter-trinitarian communion of love. Thus, the church's pursuit of unity is inextricably connected with the pursuit of reconciliation and justice. When the WCRC was invited to sign the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ),⁷ it waited for a fuller discussion of the question, "What does justification have to do with justice?" The WCRC wrote an accompanying statement of association that clarified the connection and honored the insight that justification cannot be "divorced from the reality of injustice, oppression and violence in today's world." (JDDJ 20)
20. Our unity calls for continuous reflection upon faith and forms of being church, which anticipates ongoing reform in the life of the church as reflected in our saying, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum dei* (the church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God). Our openness to God's reforming work is part of why the Reformed are particularly committed to shared discernment processes (that may include ecumenical partners). We recognize the benefit of a wider circle of consultation for discerning needed reforms.
21. To have ecumenical partners who challenge us from and in directions that we do not expect is essential to our critical-reflection. In processes of joint discernment with people from outside our own church, Reformed Christians do not sacrifice our faith. On the contrary, we come to see more clearly what our faith requires of us.

INTERRELIGIOUS COOPERATION

22. For Reformed Christians, the conviction that God has created and loved the world draws us into the widest possible circle for care. As all creation is the "theater of God's glory;" nothing is beyond the scope of God's presence and activity. (*Institutes* I.5.8) This realization makes the Reformed radically open to finding God in the wider world beyond the church. We may anticipate the activity of God's Spirit among all peoples and in all places.
23. We also remember that all people are created in the image of God and that human beings are people first before they identify with cultures, religions, and other social categories. In a sermon on John 10:7, Calvin preached, "God looks upon Godself, as one might say, and beholds Godself in humanity as in a mirror." When people are wounded, God is wounded too. This also serves as a good starting place for interreligious engagement. We recognize our common humanity with all other human beings and God's image in each one.

⁷ Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification, [https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf]

24. The calling to "love your neighbor" is fundamental for all Christians, and it includes people of other religious traditions as well as those who do not claim a religious tradition. As Calvin points out, "The name 'neighbour' extends indiscriminately to every person, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship ... To make any person my neighbour it is enough that they be human."⁸
25. We remember the injunction to welcome and show hospitality to the stranger (Lev.19:33-34). Our interreligious conversations should manifest welcome and hospitality to religious others. Because religious identities "flow from the dignity of the human person" and are "grounded in the creation of all human beings," it is critical that religious freedom be taken seriously (*Together towards Life* 96).⁹
26. Today's world is characterized by complexity and plurality. Recent migrations have increased diversities of faiths, ideologies, and convictions in our communities. Reformed Christians believe God's Spirit brings fullness of life and can be found in all cultures that affirm life. God is active in every place with other people. As the World Council of Churches declares, "The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways and we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions." (*Together towards Life* 93) Thus, there is wisdom in non-Christian religions, traditions, worldviews, and spiritualities. The "other" can be seen as a partner in mission and not just an object of mission. As Ulrich Zwingli expressed it, "the truth, wherever it is found and by whomever it is brought to light, is from the Holy Spirit."¹⁰
27. Motivated by this hope of God working in every place with all people, we enter into dialogue with humility and openness, prepared to receive and to share good news. As the World Council of Churches has explained, "Dialogue is a way of affirming our common life and goals in terms of the affirmation of life and the integrity of creation." (*Together towards Life* 94) Our purpose is not to impose our way of understanding the world on others, but to gain better mutual understanding that will increase tolerance and respect.
28. We perceive that the work of ecumenism and interreligious cooperation has lately become even more urgent. This becomes apparent when we discern the signs of the times: the reality of a world that is wounded. These wounds are in a sense God's own wounds. "To inflict injury on a fellow human being is to wound God; it is to cause God to suffer. Behind and beneath the social misery of our world is the suffering of God. If we truly believed that, says Calvin, we would be much more reluctant than we are to participate in victimizing the poor, the oppressed, and the assaulted of the world. To pursue justice is to relieve God's suffering."¹¹
29. The woundedness of the world makes it imperative that we come together across our differences to work with all the partners God provides as we seek the common good and join in care for our common home. We can address the challenges of our time more effectively together.

⁸ John Calvin, Commentary on Matthew, 5:43.

⁹ *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf.

¹⁰ Ulrich Zwingli, *Treatise on Providence*, 153.

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Justice", in Mark Gornick and George Thompson, *Hearing the Call – Liturgy, justice, Church and World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 118.

DISCERNING A SCANDALOUS WORLD

30. We believe that the God of life desires fullness of life for all (John 10:10). The WCRC's ecumenical and interreligious work is based on the call of the God of Life to witness and to work in our present contexts and times that all may have fullness of life.
31. We do not see "fullness of life for all" in these times; rather our times are marked by the woundedness in the world. We recognize our common humanity and discern dehumanizing forces at work in our world that need addressing together. These forces include, but are not limited to, racism, authoritarianism, nationalism, Empire, ecocide, and unjust economic systems. (See Justice concept paper.) How may we serve the God of life amid all these death-dealing realities? Can we join ecumenical and interreligious partners in resistance?
32. Our times are also marked by woundedness in the church. At times, the church has been co-opted by social/political forces and pressed into service of agendas not proper to its calling. The church in these situations risks losing its prophetic identity and its proper calling. We remember the witness of the Barmen Declaration that the church is not the State and cannot become an organ or instrument of the State (Barmen, Fifth Thesis). When religious communities find themselves in these complex situations, how can we, through our ecumenical/interreligious engagements, encourage one another to hold fast to our convictions and maintain a prophetic voice?
33. Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes a bit further than Barmen when he says, "the church has an unconditional obligation towards the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community....not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself."¹² In what Bonhoeffer called "the third possibility," the churches role may be that of a "spoke in the wheel" of an unjust government.
34. Problems of injustice are global in scale and scope and must, therefore, be engaged globally, even as they are addressed locally. We recognize a need to stand up for and stand with the wounded of our world. In this effort, we work with all the partners God provides, because we can do more together. Where can we make common cause?
35. As we commit to working with ecumenical partners, we recognize that member churches are at various places in their commitment to ecumenical work. In some places, there is deep and abiding commitment and enthusiasm for this work. In other places, vibrant ecumenism (and interreligious cooperation) takes place outside of institutional church structures. In still other parts of the world, there are anti-ecumenical sentiments. We remember that ecumenism is about people—not structures. It is about a movement in service to our shared mission—not institutions. Structures and institutions can always be reformed to better serve the people and further the movement and mission. How can we remember and rekindle ecumenism's importance, particularly for addressing global issues? How can we partner with formal and informal efforts to deepen ecumenism?
36. Similarly, there exists a range of perspectives in the Communion regarding the appropriateness and importance of interreligious dialogue, engagement, and cooperation. For many, interreligious engagement is not avoidable, particularly in contexts of heightened religious pluralism or where Christianity is a minority religion. For others, different denominations are not recognized as Christian. In such contexts, engagement with reli-

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question" in Berlin: 1932-1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 365.

gions beyond the Christian tradition is not in view. How can we gain a better understanding together of the basis for our commitment to interreligious dialogue and cooperation?

37. The present reality is religious plurality. While this has long been the case in many of the contexts of our Communion, in other locations, due to migrations, displacements, and other factors, the religious landscape is changing rapidly and becoming even more diverse. How can our ecumenical and interreligious work navigate the religious plurality in our contexts in ways that enhance mutual respect, religious tolerance, deepened understanding, and cooperation?
38. There are many places where peoples of various religions live harmoniously. However, there are other places where contempt, persecution, and violence characterize relations among religions. In some contexts, freedom of religion is in tension with matters of basic human rights or principles of non-discrimination. How can we faithfully navigate these complexities together?
39. Another reality of our time is the increase in religious extremism and violence in the name of religion. In our interreligious cooperation, how can we work together to address these challenges? In places of religious persecution and violence, churches are called to stand on the side of the weak and vulnerable. When one's own religion is the dominant religion in a particular context, how do we resist the temptations of privilege and power and challenge oppressive structures that compromise the religious freedom of others?
40. In all these contexts, the churches have a critical role to play. Freedom of religion or belief is a basic human right which we would uphold as a matter of our theological conviction that God works with and through all people. What is the best way to do that? How do we think carefully together about the places where freedom of religion comes into conflict with other basic human rights or principles of non-discrimination?

CONFESSING THE GOD OF LIFE

41. Reformed Christians acknowledge the brokenness of our Christian witness in a wounded world. We confess our complicity with sins against people and against life through justifying and sustaining life-denying systems and structures such as slavery, apartheid, economic exploitation, and other injustices. In our own Communion we have a mixed history; Reformed Christians have been wounded and Reformed Christians have wounded. Who has been wounded and how? What would healing look like?
42. The God of Life desires fullness of life for all (John 10:10). Therefore, we work with all the partners God provides as we seek to promote fullness of life. Even as we do this, we remember that this is not *our* mission; it is the *missio dei*, God's mission. Therefore, we look for the places where God is at work in the world, and we join in with humility and joy, recognizing the privilege of such participation. We can discern God's mission more clearly with the help of the wider community of partners God provides. Together we ask, what does God require of us?
43. In the Accra Confession we committed ourselves to "covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth." We look to the places of injustice as a focus for our mission with special attention to economic injustices and ecological destruction because God is sovereign over all of life and not just the narrowly religious aspects of life. (Accra Confession, 20-22).
44. Following the example of Jesus' own ministry, we commit to a "ministry at the margins." Believing that God stands with the least, the last, and the left behind, we would stand

where God stands. We would speak truth to unjust power. With the ever-evolving contexts and world events, the margins and who is being marginalized may be shifting. Can we explore together the question of where the margins are today?

45. All religious traditions have mixed histories, a fact that has marred relations within and among them all. How can we engage in the kind of critical examination and courageous confession that may contribute to reconciliation and the healing of memories? The work to heal memories can help us go forward together and work to repair the damage done wherever possible.
46. God is already out there, at work. Therefore, as we engage in ecumenical and interreligious work, we cherish a good hope for all, and we are prepared to listen and to learn from our conversation partners. Our interaction is an opportunity for mutual illumination.

WITNESSING WITH CHRIST

47. For the Reformed, the witness of the church is to participate in Christ's threefold ministry. We confess that, anointed by the Spirit, and together with those who belong to him, the living Christ is working in the world as prophet, priest, and king. The church participates in this ongoing three-fold ministry. Our prophetic witness consists in proclaiming the good news of the gospel in church and public spheres. Our priestly witness consists in intercession for all and works of reconciliation in church and world. Our royal ministry consists in resisting evil and injustice and witnessing to Christ's faithfulness and victory over all lordless powers.
48. Given our commitment to work with all the partners God provides, how do we conduct our witness in the work of ecumenism and interreligious cooperation?

WITNESSING WITH ECUMENICAL PARTNERS

49. Ecumenical engagement begins with the acknowledgement of the woundedness of all Christian traditions and is marked by continuous critical reflection. We acknowledge that none of our communions has fully realized the marks of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In our relationships across communions, we seek mutual recognition and reconciliation. We recognize that reconciliation cannot come without recognizing and wrestling with the wounds at the centre of our separations.
50. We also acknowledge together our complicity in wider unjust systems and structures that have wounded others.
51. We are confident the church can be a community of critical discourse and a safe place to engage in the much-needed moral discernment that may guide our shared witness and mission in these times. Being a community where critical and responsible discourse can flourish can itself be a testament to the depth of the church's catholicity and a witness to the wider society. It is also a potent witness to what it means to be Christian in the face of distorted popular narratives that are deemed problematic and fly in the face of Jesus's teachings in Scripture.
52. To this end, Reformed Christians should engage actively with ecumenical partners, in particular within the frameworks offered by the World Council of Churches, the Global Christian Forum and JDDJ.
53. An initiative that exemplifies this engagement is the newly established Reformed Ecumenical Office (REO) in Rome. Rome is a significant ecumenical space where several ecumenical partners, such as the Anglican Centre and the Vatican Dicastery for Christian

Unity, are present and important conversations on unity and justice are taking place. The REO, a partnership between the WCRC, the Church of Scotland, and the Waldensian Church, will introduce the Reformed voice to these discussions, foster ecumenical relations, and form alliances on issues of concern.

WITNESSING WITH INTERRELIGIOUS PARTNERS

54. Interreligious initiatives focus on building relationships with people in both closer and wider neighbourhoods. Though we differ on many things, we share a common humanity, and we are all created in the image of God. Deepened relationships may result in shared work for the common good. It is often the case that when we join in shared endeavours around peace, justice, and care for creation, interreligious relations are strengthened and deepened.
55. Our hope is for deepened relations among us. The late theologian Kim Yong-bok gives expression to this with his fusing of conviviality and the African concept of Ubuntu ("I am because we are"). *Convivencia-Ubuntu* envisions new ways of living that include the flourishing of all living beings, in contrast to unsustainable and destructive ways of living that prioritize only some human beings at the expense of other humans and other living beings. Such co-living, which constitutes a solidarity with *zoe* or life, is an important lens to appreciating the imperative for building interreligious relations and coalitions.
56. Historically, the WCRC has done much more work in ecumenical relations than in interreligious relations. We are still finding our way here as a Communion. How we go forward in this may require additional attention and fuller discussion in the Communion, and may require us to learn from member churches living in contexts where Christians are a distinct minority and for whom interreligious engagement is not optional but essential. How may we live out our interreligious engagement in ways that focus on peace, justice, sustainable relations, and the joyful affirmation of life?
57. The WCRC's approach to interreligious relations prioritizes taking concrete contexts into account and working with them is conducted following a bottom-up approach. This, however, requires us to recognize the reality that in some places, there is contempt, persecution, or violence in the name of religion. We may wonder, why is there contempt for or fear of religious others? How can we find ways of addressing that together with partners of other religious traditions?
58. The WCRC's interreligious work should be conducted in close cooperation with other partners, particularly Christian actors and organizations with extensive engagement in the matter (e.g., World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Vatican Dicasteries for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue, World Evangelical Alliance).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

Please discuss the Concept Paper on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. The following questions might help you in your conversation. Please choose those that are most relevant to your situation:

INTRODUCTION

- "To be Reformed is to be ecumenical."
Give examples of how the Reformed tradition has inspired, informed and sustained the ecumenical relations of your church.
- *"The ecumenical landscape has shifted dramatically."*
Share how churches have changed in recent years and how this has affected ecumenical relations.
- *"Current ecumenical structures are still trying to represent a reality that is slowly disappearing."*
What are the considerations in your church? Please discuss them.
- *"There is hardly a Christian tradition with more division and scisms than the Reformed."*
Share examples of division in your church or in relation to other churches and reflect on the resources of the Reformed tradition to mend the wounds.

REFORMED FOUNDATIONS FOR ECUMENISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

(PLEASE ALSO REFER TO THE DEEPER DISCUSSION IN THE CHAPTERS BELOW)

- *According to the Belhar Confession, "unity is connected to Christ, who reconciles all people to God and each other."*
Share examples of processes of reconciliation that have led to unity in your church or in relation with other churches.
- *"There is a firm foundation for interreligious dialogue."*
Discuss the Reformed beliefs that all people are created in God's image and that the whole creation is a theatre of God's glory. Consider the consequences of interreligious engagement, particularly in your contexts.
- *"We remember that ecumenism is about people—not structures."*
How can we remember and rekindle ecumenism's importance, particularly for addressing global issues?

WORKING WITH ALL THE PEOPLE GOD PROVIDES

- *"Though there are many members and a diversity of gifts, there is one body."*
Consider how diversity has changed our churches and ecumenical bodies and reflect on new models of living out being the body of Christ that have been developed in this process.

- *"What does justification have to do with justice?"*
Discuss the Reformed conviction that justification cannot be divorced from the reality of injustice, oppression and violence in today's world.
- *"There is wisdom in non-Christian religions, traditions, worldviews, and spiritualities. The "other" partner in mission and not the object of mission."*
Reflect on encounters with people of non-Christian faiths in which you have learned something.
- *The woundedness of the world makes it imperative that we come together across our differences to work with all the partners God provides as we seek the common good and join in care for our common home."*
How can we address the challenges of our time more effectively together?

DISCERNING A SCANDALOUS WORLD

- *"We live in a scandalous world."*
Discuss how the biblical concept of justice prompts our eyes to recognize life-denying systems and structures such as slavery, apartheid and economic exploitation.
- *"We believe that the God of life desires fullness of life for all (John 10:10). But we do not see the fullness of life in these times."*
How can we recognize our common humanity and discern dehumanizing forces at work in our world that need addressing together?
- *"Another reality of our time is the increase in religious extremism and violence in the name of religion."*
How can we work together in our interreligious cooperation to address these challenges?
- *"Freedom of religion or belief is a basic human right which we would uphold as a matter of our theological conviction that God works with and through all people."*
How can we reflect together on situations where freedom of religion comes into conflict with other basic human rights or principles of non-discrimination?

CONFESSING THE GOD OF LIFE

- *"Reformed Christians acknowledge the brokenness of our Christian witness in a wounded world."*
Discuss examples where the churches have become complicit in escalating violence, increasing social disintegration and ecological destruction. What could healing look like?
- *In the Accra Confession, we committed ourselves to "covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth."*
Where are the places of injustice that call us to covenant as a focus for our mission? How can we confess God's sovereignty over all of life and not just over the narrowly religious aspects of life?
- *Following the example of Jesus' own ministry, we commit to a "ministry at the margins."*
With the ever-evolving contexts and world events, the margins and who is being marginalized may be shifting. Can we explore together where the margins are and who constitutes the margins today?

THE COMMITMENT OF THE WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE: AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

PREAMBLE:

1. The World Communion of Reformed Churches' (WCRC) commitment to Indigenous People begins from its origins at the Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids in 2010. While it should not be imagined that a commitment to Indigenous people was not part of the commitment of the WARC (World Alliance of Reformed Churches) and the REC (Reformed Ecumenical Council), the commitment to Indigenous people in many ways framed the Uniting General Council. This was perhaps epitomized in Richard Twiss' statement to the UGC that the task of indigenous theology was to save the church from cowboy theology!
2. It was the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches that made a statement on relationships with First Nations Peoples, Native American Peoples, and Inuit and Metis Peoples. This statement called for repentance from cultural, economic and theological arrogance, from ecclesiological hegemony, from the way in which theology and church history have been taught and from the innumerable ways in which we have betrayed gospel values.
3. In 2017 at the General Council in Leipzig with Action 55, three specific actions were called for.
 - i. The process of developing right relations with Indigenous People
 - ii. Theological Engagement with the doctrine of discovery
 - iii. And the creation of a special working group of which a majority would be indigenous people
4. The core group that was created outlined the following process for working with Indigenous People.

OBJECTIVES

- critical analysis of unjust structures in the global context and its implications for IP
 - Engaging in decolonising liturgy and theology
 - Searching towards a transformative theological education relevant in the IP context
5. It further outlined a three-year study process across three continents, namely Asia, South and North America. Unfortunately, a combination of COVID and staff capacity issues resulted in only one of the three consultations being conducted.
 6. In preparation for the next General Council, therefore, a consultation on Indigenous People's theology is being planned for both the North and South American continents together. The following is an invitation to dialogue that emerged out of this consultation.

AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

7. It is the common experience of Indigenous Peoples across the ecumenical movement, and indeed within the WCRC and its member churches, that expressions of commitment and the desire for liberation of the oppressed are stated over and over again in documents such as this one. Invariably, large meetings come to a close, budgets shrink, and the lip service paid to Indigenous Peoples, their justice concerns, their wisdom and approaches to our collective liberation are then shelved until the next big gathering. We state this as a form of truth-telling about our experience and an acknowledgement that many churches and global ecumenical bodies have lessened capacity to engage in the work required to do the work of the past, let alone take on new work and new ways of doing work that centre Indigenous lived experiences.
8. The colonial/neo-colonial projects' impact on Indigenous People is acute, active, and a crisis. It is also chronic, systemic, and producing slow rolling crises. We include neo-colonial contexts in addition to naming the colonial project to confront the idea that colonialism is a historical event disconnected from our current circumstances. Colonialist thought persists in Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of governance and decision-making; its reach is profound and tenacious. All people – both inside and outside the Church – have been profoundly shaped by colonisation, and it is up to all of us to de-colonise and seek our collective liberation.
9. Therefore, the Indigenous Peoples that have gathered together in preparation for this General Council are not submitting a position paper as much as a request for dialogue. The WCRC and many of its member churches and other ecumenical bodies have repeatedly affirmed the specific and unique plight of Indigenous justice concerns across the globe, but Indigenous experience, leadership, gatherings, and ministries are never fully funded and always treated as ad hoc projects. The 2017 General Council stated in its concept paper on Theology: “the commitment to do theology beginning with the experiences of the poor and oppressed and aiming at their liberation;” as an operating principle.¹ Further, the General Council affirmed “a commitment to the inseparable link between communion and justice.”²
10. In its 2017 concept paper on Justice, the WCRC General Council stated that “In such a critical moment in the history of humanity and the Earth we acknowledge that the way before us can lead our paths toward a future devastated by climate change, by a paradigm of development based on destructive industries and a distorted vision shape by greed.”³
11. Our dialogues have repeatedly raised the decades of missed opportunities to engage with Indigenous churches and communities with integrity. There is a refrain, especially in relation to the Climate Emergency and the protection and integrity of all God's created order, that the churches must ‘learn from Indigenous wisdom.’ Our dialogue must first center on answering the question: “What does it mean to learn from Indigenous wisdom?”

¹ <https://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GC2017-Minutes-EN.pdf> p. 242

² Ibid..

³ <https://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GC2017-Minutes-EN.pdf> p. 248

12. American Psychologist Adam Grant once tweeted: “It takes curiosity to learn. It takes courage to unlearn. Learning requires the humility to admit what you don’t know today. Unlearning requires the integrity to admit that you were wrong yesterday. Learning is how you evolve. Unlearning is how you keep up as the world evolves.”⁴ If the member churches of the WCRC truly intend to keep their commitment to holding in tension confession and justice and centring the voices of those made most marginal by structures and systems of oppression, the churches have a lot of unlearning to do. And to do that unlearning, the church must start to admit that the euro-Christian colonial project continues to be the foundation of our destructive socio-economic systems in late stage capitalism.

THE TENSION BETWEEN THEOLOGY & JUSTICE

13. In our consultation, we discussed a lapse between “thinking” and “doing” among church organisations. That which is spoken in word is not shown in actions; the church’s actions for justice are ‘limping’ far behind its stated theology. It is time for the Church to recognize Indigeneity and how it has been lacking in the life of the Church – in its reflections and actions. Indigenous approaches to theology do not separate words from actions. Western theology has privileged abstract rationalization; Indigenous storytelling is an alternative way to do theology.
14. Perhaps patterns and understandings from Indigenous cultures can often express words from the ‘heart of Christianity’ more truthfully than the church who didn’t recognize the narratives of Jesus’ teachings (inherent, or alive) in our Indigenous ways of life.
15. Councils continue to spend too much energy on creating documents when tangible expressions of ministry are sorely needed among God’s people. The Church has trapped itself in the practice of creating/offering ‘band-aids’ rather than real solutions to God’s people.
16. The Church has created for itself the burden of creating documents, under the weight of which we labor – our theology is piled upon us, but we never get to the ‘praxis’ or bring it off the page to seek justice in the world. The Church seems to lack self-reflection on their actions, teaming up with colonialism and capitalism – while keeping themselves in power against the poor at the expense of the poor. Indigenous Peoples across the globe are always among the poorest. This is evidenced in the WCRC commitment to do theology beginning with the experiences of the poor and oppressed and *aiming at their liberation* [emphasis ours]; true liberation theology seeks not only the liberation of the oppressed but also the oppressor. The Church has not yet done the work to decolonize its own theology, mission, ministry, administration, and governance. The Church has not sought its own liberation as an oppressing foundation and presence in God’s world.
17. We ended by wondering if the Church might address the unhoused people (marginal people) with a house that can last 100 years.⁵ Wealthy people have houses, poor people have homes. Tangible answers to real problems of real people by the organization that says it exists to honor God.

⁴ [@AdamMGrant on x.com](#), 6:29am September 13, 2021

⁵ For example, see the work the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is doing with 3-D printing houses on reservation, or the project of First United Church Community Ministry Society in Vancouver providing affordable secured Indigenous rental housing in the poorest urban postal code in Canada.

18. Oftentimes, an obstacle to dialogue is a question from the non-Indigenous church: “How much is this going to cost?” or “How long do you expect us to pay for the past?” Through our invitation to dialogue, might we help the Church see through the ‘money’ to the JUSTICE? In our experience the Church continues ‘talking the talk’ but not ‘walking the walk’.

DUAL IDENTITIES – INDIGENOUS & CHRISTIAN

19. The issue is the broken relationship between the Christian tradition(s) and the cultures of the world. In reference to Indigenous Peoples, many denominations and ecumenical bodies speak of either syncretism or cultural appropriation. By syncretism, we mean the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. By cultural appropriation, we mean the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society. Cultural appropriation often occurs when one party makes a profit from the culture of another.

20. These practices still centre one capitalist theology that motivated Western European Christianity over others. It would be advantageous to find a new and different word to describe what we mean by a healthy relationship between Christianity and Indigenous spiritualities.

21. There are at least three ways of understanding the relationship between Christianity and Indigenous spiritualities. In the first instance...some Indigenous people have left Christianity seeking traditional or ceremonial ways of expressing their spirituality. Others continue to express the form of Christianity that missionaries brought to their tribes/nations generations ago. Unfortunately, this understanding of Indigenous culture as evil, originally taught (and in some instances currently perpetuated) by missionaries, has now been internalized by many older church members. Underlying such a position is the profound respect Indigenous people have for their elders. This tension can also be true regardless of age.

22. Yet many in euro-Christian churches disparage such an understanding of faith as backward at first glance. To embrace a different understanding of the relationship between Christian faith and Indigenous culture would be seen as disrespectful to the faith ways that were shared by parents and grandparents. The third approach to the relationship between Christian faith and Indigenous culture is the middle road of incorporating aspects of culture within their Christian faith. The Filipino theologian, Ansgar Chupungco, OSB, noted that Christianity would not be whole until Christ had been born in all the cultures of the world. He also observed that every culture has what it needs to express such faith.

23. The Church has historically enacted, and sometimes continues to enact, spiritual violence against Indigenous Peoples. Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission defined occurrences of spiritual violence happening when:⁶

- A person is not permitted to follow their preferred spiritual or religious tradition
- A different spiritual or religious path or practice is forced on a person

⁶ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 6: Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015. p. 96.

- A person’s spiritual or religious tradition, beliefs, or practices are demeaned or belittled; or
 - A person is made to feel shame for practicing their traditional or family beliefs.
24. Each denomination needs to engage in critical self-reflection, confession, and repentance about its history and continuing circumstances of spiritual violence.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON ISSUE(S)

25. The churches need to commit to fostering respect for all the responses Indigenous Peoples have to the challenge of balancing Christianity and Indigenous ways of being. The churches also need to commit to opening their archives and resources to Indigenous Peoples who are seeking to rebuild their expressions of faith and recover their ancestors’ stories.
26. The churches must also wrestle with cases of extreme colonialism wherein Indigenous languages or knowledge are used but the theology remains Eurocentric. This is particularly true of the churches’ overemphasis on eschatology to the detriment of social justice in the here and now. The relationship between language and culture is critical; language is the cradle of culture.
27. The churches have begun the work of changing theologies of mission from that of parent churches nurturing Indigenous “children” churches to a relationship based in partnership.

PROPOSALS/RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The churches/foundations need to allocate more financial resources to foster language recovery and instruction because cultural ways of knowing are imbedded in Indigenous languages. It is critical that such language support be enhanced so Indigenous languages are disappearing at an alarming rate in some parts of the world.
- ii. The churches need to develop resources to facilitate the transfer of Indigenous knowledge between Indigenous generations. The majority of Indigenous cultures are oral traditions, many without a written form. In a world that increasingly relies on the written word, this disadvantages Indigenous Peoples and hampers their ability to pass Indigenous ways of knowing on to future generations.
- iii. The churches also need to create educational resources, focused on the non-Indigenous church, to address the notions of cultural appropriation, syncretism, and spiritual violence. These resources should foster respect for and appreciation of the strength of Indigenous ways of knowing. These resources could include downloadable toolkits, videos, and new easy-to-understand materials.
- iv. The WCRC should assist the churches is by collecting best practices concerning reconciliation and ways of working with governments, both civil and ecclesial, from Indigenous Peoples across the globe.

COMPOUNDING SOCIAL CRISES

28. Across the world that God loves, Indigenous Peoples continue to live under the convergence of multiple social crises. In many cases, these crises result in life and death situations. Indigenous Peoples continue to be targeted with violence – even to the point of massacre. Sometimes it looks like communities under-resourced in ways that cause

death through poor social determinants of health as in the toxic drug crisis. Over the past 500+ years, the Church has contributed to:

- Trauma and intergenerational trauma – both explicitly perpetrated by the Church or silently tolerated by Christians;
- The loss of Indigenous languages and cultures
- Perpetuation of euro-Christian taxonomies of race that counted (and still count) Indigenous Peoples as less worthy, less than fully human.

29. As a result, Indigenous Communities across the world that God loves continue to struggle with:

- Entrenched multigenerational poverty and houselessness
- Substance use disorders and other addictions (gambling, pornography, etc.)
- Lack of access to culturally relevant and competent treatment and healing centres
- Sexual and gender-based violence
- An epidemic of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Peoples
- Adequate access to health care and mental health care
- Access to adequate food, healthy food, and our own traditional foods
- Access to traditional lands and resources
- Access to clean drinking water and homelands free of toxic pollution
- Adequate primary, secondary, and tertiary education
- Stigma associated with social crisis
- Access to culturally appropriate policing in general
- The militarization of police and armed violence perpetuated against land & human rights defenders by paramilitaries and militaries
- Over-incarceration of Indigenous Peoples
- Adequate opportunities for healing, strong community and family bonds, and economic development
- Free, prior and informed consent from state and corporate interests
- Governments who continue to resist affirming or enforcing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- Threats that result in life or death situations that far exceed norms in every context

30. These struggles are true in every region of the world.

31. Because the Church has failed to address its own liberation and the ongoing dynamics of euro-Christian colonialist thought, many times the Church has listened to the voices of Indigenous leaders who do not represent traditional worldviews or the interests of their communities: those who have not started their healing journey, those without integrity, those who perpetuate the status quo to access power or through corruption, those who still have a very colonized view of Christianity. Then the words of those leaders can be used in opposition to cries from community. And because the Church has not done the work, when communities name these challenges, the Church allows lateral violence and

Indigenous leaders to harm other Indigenous Peoples for fear of the Church being accused of racism.

32. The Church also centers written word over oral traditions and cross-cultural learning through in-person relationship building.
33. Indigenous Peoples hold wisdom for how to minister to our communities who suffer under these overlapping social crises:
 - Oral traditions need the same respect as written words. How do we bring the message that will be heard through the right lens (not one found in multiple churches) The Bible started as oral tradition starting with the eye witnesses
 - Ministry alongside the suffering begins with compassion and empathy
 - Jesus always acted. He never let his disciples go hungry. Always met the needs of the people; Indigenous Christians also feel called to a ministry of reconciliation where humans are part of God's created order, our needs are not separate from the earth; the Church needs empathy-based design in all its ministries
 - Reach out to the suffering through story (Jesus used story)
 - Indigenous cultures often call us to humility, and we call on Indigenous voices to be bold in their humility, having the courage to speak their truths and experience; We call on the Church to ensure protocols and processes are inclusive of Indigenous ways of being and working, making space and time to do its work in culturally appropriate ways.
 - Use prayers to ask for an audience with the right people. We need to be good citizens and be mindful of our own responsibilities. We need to change ourselves too. God will open the doors, we need to recognize the open door. (work to recognize God...not just wait) Sometimes we need to step in.
 - The Church needs to take seriously when Indigenous communities raise concerns about Indigenous leadership in the Church that can bring harmful theology, harmful praxis, and can continue colonial harm.
 - Unhealed Indigenous people can gain audience and speak out, but again harmful messaging, and can misrepresent actual Indigenous values and undo the healing of others.
 - Indigenous ministry needs to center the voices and wisdom of Indigenous Peoples; the people need to be consulted at all stages of ministry, from development of programs to implementation and pastoral care.
 - Ministry alongside Indigenous people needs to be founded on trust in God, and on the ability to build trust between people; treating trust as covenantal.
 - The Church needs to be active in funding and empowering solutions: funding for healing and recovery programs, offering pastoral supports, feeding communities, and taking ministry to where the people are.

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION

34. Centering the lived experience of Indigenous Peoples at the local level is key to understanding both the strengths of traditional Indigenous ways of being in the world, and also the impacts of extractivist economies that are destroying the earth and displacing people.

Centering lived local experiences is a deeply spiritual practice that helps address the climate emergency through tending to the wounds of people and the planet.

35. Indigenous Peoples are on the front lines of climate change; displacement of Indigenous communities is a result of extraction of the earth's so called natural resources, but also through displacements directly linked to climate change. Rising sea levels, changing climates, forest fires, hurricanes and other radical weather events linked to the climate emergency have already dramatically affected Indigenous communities on a global scale. The climate emergency and extraction of the earth's resources affects all aspects of Indigenous life: access to traditional foods, traditional harvesting and gathering methods, access to traditional lands, and the life expectancy of Indigenous Peoples. When the land is sick, people get sick. When resources become scarce – or when Indigenous Peoples resist further abuse of their traditional territories – the scarcity provokes armed conflicts in all regions of the world. Protection of the land continues to be a life and death issue for Indigenous Peoples.
36. And so Indigenous People also continue to be the defenders of the land – standing up to corporate and governmental interests. Holding governments accountable to uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and international and domestic environmental regulations and laws. The world has an opportunity, and the Churches have a moral obligation to actively participate in learning from Indigenous Peoples defending their lands.
37. The church has historically used the dominion narrative from the Book of Genesis to justify taking unlimited resources from the earth that far exceed the balance needed to maintain the integrity of creation. Despite the alternative creation story that calls on humanity to be good stewards of the earth, the churches have not fully wrestled with how to reconcile these competing narratives. Even the stewardship narrative sets humanity apart from the earth, and does not fully capture the common worldviews of Indigenous Peoples who see human life as intimately connected to all the earth, not saviours of the earth. And the extractivist economies based on the dominion narrative continue to drive business as usual.
38. Political, social, and ecclesial decision making needs to include Indigenous Voices at the table – not only in making decisions but in setting agendas; Indigenous Peoples should be guiding the questions asked about how then we should live. Indigenous story has much to offer in terms of upholding values that can positively impact our daily living in a balanced way. Indigenous economies and use of natural resources were regenerative by design; we need the world to harness that wisdom and follow the ways and cycles of all life in guiding our human behaviour.
39. We need to radically reinvision a way of doing business in the world that encompasses holistic approaches and justice for the whole created order. We find British economist Kate Raworth's Doughnut model of economics particularly compelling and consistent with the integrative, regenerative, and redistributive world views of Indigenous communities. We need to live within the just and safe space for humans, ensuring we maintain our social foundations and do not overshoot our planetary boundaries.⁷

⁷ <https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics>
as accessed April 20, 2024



ASKS OR PROPOSALS TO THE CHURCH:

- i. Free, Prior & Informed Consent (FPIC) – call on churches to ensure governments and corporations are held accountable to uphold FPIC as defined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁸ through:
 - Networking and amplifying the voices of local Indigenous Communities
 - Advocacy and Government Relations
 - Shareholder advocacy and engaging companies to hold them accountable to international and domestic laws affecting the environment and the lives of all
 - Divestment from equities where companies continue to ignore obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, avoid poisoning the environment, or engage in FPIC with indigenous peoples
 - Proactive investment in companies that support regenerative ways of doing business that honour the balance of all life for our mutual flourishing
- ii. WCRC – adopt the Doughnut as a model for analysing human actions that measure shortfalls in our social foundations or overshooting our planetary boundaries in its justice work.
- iii. Encourage member churches to create resources that center traditional Indigenous wisdom and stories as a complement to our written sacred texts in order to facilitate our collective learning and ability to flourish in a world that has regained its balance.

⁸ UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 2, Section 32.

LAND BACK, INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, & UNDRIP (UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE)

40. The fundamental concern of the Indigenous Land Back movement is securing Indigenous connection to their traditional lands and the rights that arise from this. Colonial displacement has removed Indigenous people from their lands and/or made their connection insecure by colonial hegemony via the legal fiction Doctrine of Discovery. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples is the first international human rights instrument that mentions land in terms of Indigenous human rights. Indigenous rights and our assumed responsibilities are embodied and lived out in our lands. Eighty percent of the remaining World's biodiversity is in Indigenous traditional lands. While indigenous territories reflect only 5% of the world's territory. It is already proven that Indigenous Peoples are the best Earth Guardians. We are what we do.
41. We bring forward the story of the Guarani-Kaiowá, because unless we center the voices of those most oppressed, those made most marginal by the ongoing colonialism of state and corporate interests, we are not seeking our collective liberation. The truth is that this story could be the story of any indigenous community at some point across time and geography. It could be the story of the people of the Cordillera in the Philippines, the Wet'suwet'en in Canada, or the Mayan Achi people in Guatemala.

THE GUARANI-KAIOWÁ OF BRAZIL STORY

42. Indigenous rights defenders in Brazil are under attack by economic powers fueled by the assumptions of the Doctrine of Discovery - that is that Indigenous people are savages and have no right to hinder colonial exploitation of land and its resources. The Guarani-Kaiowá worldview is actually expressive of heaven on earth and colonial exploitation is a savage attack.
43. Anthropological, theological, judicial, and political expertise supports Guarani-Kaiowá land back efforts. International support is needed to encourage and pressure Brazil to demarcate Indigenous land and title it to them. Guarani-Kaiowá people understand the cosmovision of their land through their culture & language.
44. *Teko* means life, the way of life of all the beings on the earth, the various biomes of their territory. Ten compound words with *teko* paint a picture of their world:
45. *Teko ha* - this is where life lives, the environment, including time and space on the traditional territory, a way of living on the land.
 - *Teko maraney* - this is life without evil, land without evil, the good life and living in harmony, living under the orientation of God/High God/Great Creator. When we live this way we live without evil.
 - *Tekoha Nhee* - this is land and life which are inseparable, the forest is an extension of our bodies. It includes our songs and ceremony.
 - *Tekonhe mba'ekuaa* - this is what is passed on from the mothers, the way we relate to all the other beings. This means to have wisdom and living our lives by it.
 - *Tekonhe'e mborayhu* - this is love we get and give to one another. When we hear gossip we evaluate it and live according to love. We calm down the atmosphere and through the fire of love, solidarity and respect for one another, the situation is resolved. This is the origin of the love for one another

- *Tekonhe'e tee* - words are very sacred words. We speak with love, teaching the young "we are not separate but one with everything else."
 - *Tekonhe'e anhete* - this is the real life. Truthful living.
 - *Tekonhe'e pora* - this is helpful life with gratitude.
 - *Tekonhe'e katu* - Life with Justice
 - *Tekonhe'e marangatu* - when you live the Kaiowa life there is grace and blessings from above. This is the spiritual life with no evil. This is what we call Sacred Living. Bem Viver! Where we can live in harmony being who we truly are.
46. This explanation of the Guarani-Kaiowá worldview is expressive of the vision that Jesus gave of the heaven on earth he was bringing through his work. This is an expression of an earthy spirituality that is a picture of what the Bible says of all nations, languages, peoples, tribes, nations, and all of creation worshiping the God/High God/Great Creator. Guarani-Kaiowá are not savages but the "other sheep and another flock not of this fold" that Jesus spoke of in Jn 10:16.
47. The exploitive colonial project is the savage ravaging Indigenous human rights defenders in Brazil. Rich corporate farmers from Agro business, utilize gun men & police forces to fight Guarani-Kaiowá people and their land back efforts. In 1910 the Brazilian government created 8 Indigenous reserves. They displaced Indigenous people from their traditional territories and divided them up. In 1988 Indigenous people fought to get their land back from the farmers but when they had built factories and other industrial plants on their lands. Indigenous people still wanted to take back their lands and began to fight for them. The Guarani-Kaiowá people's URGENT call to the church is to help them get back their sacred lands. Through sharing their struggle and maximizing their voices and calling for Social Justice.
48. To date 489 Indigenous people have been murdered, including 20 of Valdelice's Veron, own family. In the village of *TAQUARA, in the municipality of Juti, in Mato Grosso do Sul State in Brazil*, in 2003. This was one of the worst massacres. colonial forces killed the Chief's bodyguard, her nephew. They tortured him by cutting him to pieces and then burning his body. They have burned others alive as well. The colonial forces showed the Chief the torture videos of her nephew and the pictures of the pieces of his burned body and threaten her life, saying they will do the same to her. The Chief said, "If I get killed please tell people that I came here and I called out for help for my people. I feel like I may go soon."
49. It is clear to the Guarani-Kaiowá people that they have evil forces against them, as evidenced by the savagery of the colonial pressure. Other Indigenous communities look to the leadership of the Chief and her centrally located community. Her warriors are inspired by her practice of going to the forest, the *teko*, and praying to Jesus, her older brother, for the strength to fight the battle for her people's lands and their very survival. She knows that she is on the boundary of her own death but is committed to the fight for her people's land anyway. The Guarani-Kaiowá are spiritual and the colonizers are the real savages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Christian churches are moved by the life and death struggle of the Indigenous human rights warriors of Brazil and abroad, but they sometimes just want feathers and paint-

ed faces and not the brutal savage truth of what the colonial forces are still doing to different indigenous Nations around the globe .

- i. Churches need to respect the indigenous way of living more and understand that they have a huge contribution to give to society as a whole. They are inseparable from their territories, languages & culture. Churches should support the struggle and land entitlement of all indigenous traditional lands to their original owners, the indigenous peoples.
- ii. Churches should call out one another for their weak-kneed responses and do something immediately about the deaths that are happening every day on Guarani Kaiowa territory and other parts of the world, as well, **GIVE UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT** and maximize Indigenous voices to be heard at the UN and international Court of Hague as well as Church's platforms.
- iii. We Indigenous followers of Christ will do this work but we need the rest of our allies in the churches to step up to advocate for international pressure for the **IMMEDIATE demarcation, homologation and titling of Indigenous lands**, including the heart of **Guarani-Kaiowá territory, TAQUARA VILLAGE, Juti municipality, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil**. Ask for support of the United States of America to pressure the President of Brazil to sign legislation to this end and do what is right.
- iv. Church bodies and justice-advocating organizations need to financially support Indigenous human rights and land defenders to tell their “**Story Telling**” to wider audiences. They must stop using Indigenous tragedy to raise money for themselves, it must go to the Indigenous people.