

REPORT OF WARC-REC MEETINGS 1998 - 2002

Section 1: Introduction

The Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches are two of the instruments that serve the Reformed family worldwide. In 1998 they decided to engage one another in meetings to assess their current relationship and consider the possibilities of common actions of cooperation. There was first a preliminary meeting in October 1998 followed by longer and more substantive meetings in January 2001 and October 2002. Much of this report reflects the minutes of those meetings.

In these discussions, we talked about our visions and priorities especially as we look at the next 25 years. Participants believed that Christian World Communions would continue to play an important role in the ecumenical movement as houses in one village, and expected some moving together of the interests of REC and WARC. We touched on the importance of mission for our constituencies, serving and strengthening our member churches, and providing space where churches realize and affirm their unity with one another.

From these discussions the two teams appreciated the new levels of trust and mutual respect developing between the two organizations.

Section 2: Identity and ethos

A sound theological basis of existence and operation is important to both WARC and REC, although throughout the history of both organizations each has found meaning in placing different emphases.

Theology and biblical interpretation

From recent documents and actions, REC articulates a traditional Reformed stance but with a positive attitude toward contextuality as providing a good contribution to the understanding of scripture. Interpretation of scripture is generally Christocentric. Scripture is deemed to provide sufficient knowledge for salvation. Interpretation should be within the fellowship of believers and under the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

WARC in its recent documents and actions affirms a traditional Reformed stance and puts much emphasis on the context (for example apartheid, economic justice, etc.). In this way WARC focuses on applying theological reflections on the sociopolitical situations faced by its members and the cultural and religious contexts in which we live. As a result of its ecumenical engagements, bilateral theological dialogues have been important. In recent years, there has been a call for interreligious dialogue in the face of our contextual challenges. Current critical issues of discussion for WARC includes Reformed identity, spirituality (including worship and liturgy) and spiritual renewal. In its reflections WARC recently engaged in a process of searching for the meaning of being reformed, and the meaning of mission and evangelism in our contexts today.

These demonstrate some points of convergence as well as differences in emphases. The question of Reformed identity was a deep one, which affected the study of spirituality, especially in the face of challenges from the Pentecostal churches. WARC and REC may need to look together at the meaning of Reformed identity. In this venture, WARC may start from culture and then look for scriptural insight, while REC will begin from scripture and seek cultural applications. Such a study could be at the heart of both organizations and could promote and strengthen Reformed unity.

Confessions

REC has historically attached much importance to the confessional basis of membership. WARC does not, but is not indifferent to confessions. Both REC and WARC agree that questions of confession form a part of Reformed identity. In the early twentieth century WARC chose not to require that its members adhere to particular confessions. However, its membership committee requests a confessional statement which it evaluates in addition to seeking assurances about mission, inclusiveness, and participation in justice, peace and the integrity of creation. REC has a confessional basis as an entry requirement, but is flexible about how the confessions appear in the member church's organization.

Mission, evangelism and uniqueness of Christ.

REC expressed fears that WARC may be moving towards a definition of oikoumene that compromises the uniqueness of Christ. The WARC delegations indicated that this question has not been officially addressed and noted that there is a wide variety of positions in the membership of WARC. There are many whose view of the uniqueness of Christ is close to that of REC, and there are others whose positions are different and may even be viewed as syncretistic. While WARC has a common firm basis in the Reformed tradition, it makes room for such diversity. It was also noted that some within the REC constituency view WARC as too close to the World Council of Churches.

Section 3: Converging interests in programmes

1. There are possibilities of engaging in some bilateral dialogues together. REC has started to participate in the WARC-Pentecostal dialogue and is interested in continuing. REC also expressed interest in the WARC-Roman Catholic dialogue. In both of these, it is recommended that REC's representative becomes a full participant and not an observer.
2. REC expressed interest in WARC's covenanting process on economic justice and ecological degradation, and hopes to participate in some way.
3. Youth work. While WARC emphasizes youth empowerment and REC emphasises leadership development and renewal, it is felt that this is an area in which both WARC and REC can develop close collaboration, especially now that WARC has a Youth officer.
4. Partnership of Women and Men. WARC has done some major work in gender awareness and leadership development that includes promoting women's ordination and pointing to more just and inclusive gender roles and decision-making processes. REC has generally respected the views of its members on these questions. WARC invited REC to encourage its members to join their gender workshops.
5. Theological Education. WARC staff explained their scholarship programme -a programme of endorsement -which tries to move the member churches to a conscientious selection programme for future leaders. REC explained its leadership development agenda, and the hope for more collaborative work in theological education. REC also has the library and textbook programme. This programme serves to develop library and educational resources for the newer and smaller seminaries and Bible schools affiliated with their member churches.
6. Mission in Unity. This is the joint programme sponsored by WARC and the John Knox International Reformed Centre. Given its focus on stimulating mission and fostering the engagement in such mission in a coherent, united manner, REC has expressed interest in working together in this area. This may include having REC represented on the steering committee of the project.
7. Countries going through difficult circumstances engage the attention of both WARC and REC. In recent years Indonesia has been one such country.
8. Though approached from different perspectives, both REC and WARC have some interests in addressing religious pluralism. REC shows continuing concern with religious pluralism, including the question of dialogue and witness, and with theologies of race and ethnicity. WARC is developing an interfaith approach to addressing some common life issues that affect many in communities all over the world.
9. Assembly/general council. There is interest in attending one another's assemblies.
10. In all these, WARC and REC need to consider inviting each other to their different meetings.

Common member churches' points of view

In 2002, REC and WARC sent a joint letter to their common member churches asking them to respond to two questions:

Why did you join both organizations?

What current value do you perceive for your church in each organization?

Based on the responses received and the team's general knowledge of their member in common two conclusions were drawn from the responses:

1. Each member church has needs they feel both organizations are meeting.
 - a) Closer fellowship in the smaller REC and yet belonging to a bigger expression of the Reformed family in WARC.
 - b) Ability to operate from a confessional base in REC and thus engage in intensive theological discussions on a common base.
 - c) Ability to apply Reformed faith to some broader cultural, social, political issues through WARC which is inclusive of a wide scope of the Reformed family.

2. Belonging to both organizations gives access to a wider scope of resources

We also heard a hope that REC and WARC would work cooperatively and possibly even merge in a way that would preserve the strengths of each organization.

Section 5: Recommendations:

From our discussions, the responses from churches and the informal conversations with many in our constituency, we came to the following recommendations:

1. That both organizations affirm the following conclusions as a result of this process:
 - a) We should continue our conversations, though a merger is not on the horizon.
 - b) We have to work in closer cooperation for the benefit of WARC and REC constituencies, and in order to meet the needs of our member churches more efficiently.
2. That given the challenges facing the world today, WARC and REC engage in studies together. These studies can consist of each organization identifying individual theologians and experts in other related fields and have them engage in a three-year process culminating in a written document - a resource to our member churches. The first studies can be on:
 - a) Church and state
 - b) Religious pluralism
3. WARC appreciated the fact that REC graciously moved its general assembly dates to 2005 in respect of the dates for WARC's general council. In view of closer relationships:
 - a) We recommend that for WARC's general council of 2004, REC sends a team (including its general secretary), and that for the REC general Assembly of 2005, WARC sends a team (including its general secretary).
 - b) In connection with the general council/assembly, there is a separate recommendation on a six-member joint steward team (see 4d below).
 - c) Since the general assembly of REC will take place in Europe, there is a need for close cooperation with WARC's European Area committee to facilitate the understanding of the Reformed scene in Europe. We recommend that REC invite some officers of the European Area council of WARC to the 2004 REC executive committee in the Netherlands.
 - d) We recommend that WARC invite member churches of REC which are non-members of WARC to the 24th general council as observers.
4. From the 1998 meeting it was clear that one area in which WARC and REC can cooperate is in connection with Youth concerns. While REC emphasizes nurture and leadership development, and WARC emphasizes empowerment, we detect a common vision and potential for working together in equipping young people for active participation in our churches and ecumenical organizations. We therefore suggest:
 - a) the development of closer relationship between staff in the area of Youth
 - b) that REC and WARC have representatives in each other's youth gatherings
 - c) that both organizations develop together strategies for the greater participation of young people in the life of the church (e.g. in Europe where youth seem to be fading away in many Reformed churches)
 - d) that REC sponsor three young persons to serve as stewards in the 24th *general council in Accra, and WARC sponsor three of their Accra stewards to serve as stewards in the 15th general assembly of REC in the Netherlands. These six should see themselves as a special project team for both gatherings.
 - e) that where possible WARC's Youth office send representatives to the review and renew consultations of REC.
5. The work that WARC has done in gender justice was discussed. We therefore request that WARC share its gender awareness and leadership development manual with REC once it is published, and that REC considers discussing its use in its upcoming assembly.
6. That at the WARC general council meeting in Accra the WARC and REC teams convene a meeting of the common member churches to discuss the value of belonging to both organizations, this report and other related matters.

7. That WARC and REC exchange executive committee minutes with one another.
8. That a new joint commission be established to continue the work begun by these teams and monitor the progress of cooperation.