

## A FUTURE FOR THE REFORMED MOVEMENT WORLDWIDE?

By Clifton Kirkpatrick

All over the world we have recently completed a wonderful celebration of John Calvin's 500th birthday. We have also celebrated the witness of the Reformed churches, to which his movement gave birth half a millennium ago. God has done incredible things through this movement, and many of them have been celebrated in major events in places as diverse as Geneva, Paris, Seoul, Accra, Stellenbosch, São Paulo, and Montreat, North Carolina. In all of these locales—and many more—the focus has been not so much to glorify Calvin as to celebrate and reclaim his legacy, which has shaped our movement for these last five centuries.

During these celebrations we have focused on how Calvin's vision revolutionized Geneva by welcoming refugees, building a church centered on Word and sacrament, shaping a church order of shared leadership, reminding all of the sovereignty of God over all of life, and opening the Bible and its witness to Christ as the Word of God to all the people. It was a heady time in Geneva in the sixteenth century, but the revolution that Calvin led there did not stop at the walls of the old city of Geneva.

Throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, this Reformed vision spread out across Europe. Using the Academy, Calvin's great educational innovation, and based on Calvin's *summa theologica*, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, leaders were trained who took the Reformed movement and the Reformed vision of the church to Scotland, the Netherlands, Hungary, and many other parts of Europe. In the eighteenth century, that movement spread to North America, and in the nineteenth the seeds of the Reformed tradition began to be planted all around the world through the modern missionary movement. These seeds of the Reformed tradition, enriched by cultures all around the world, gave birth to a global Reformed movement.

However, when the World Alliance of Reformed Churches was born in 1875, it was exclusively a European and North American family, based on the demographics of the Reformed churches at that time, yet even more on the cultural blindness of our forebears, who failed to appreciate the dynamism of the Reformed movement in the global South. Even when construction was begun on the Reformation Wall to honor Calvin's 400th birthday, it was simply assumed that any depiction of the global spread of this Reformation movement would focus on leaders from Europe—with one representative from North America!

As we have now come to Calvin's 500th birthday, we are well aware that this Reformation is truly a global phenomenon, whose center and heart are now in the global South, where two-thirds of the world's 80 million Reformed Christians now reside. Though there are huge differences based on culture, resources, and political context, the Reformation movement that Calvin started in Geneva has made a major impact on all parts of the world and created a church community that has been a vehicle through which the gospel has been shared and God's justice upheld in vastly different corners of our globe over these 500 years. There is much to celebrate, and we have done that this past year!

But what of the future of our movement? Is the Calvin Jubilee the final or penultimate chapter for a Reformed tradition that has enriched the world for the last half a millennium but whose best days are behind it? In many parts of the world, that is a real and deeply held question. Or are these 500 years merely a prelude that has allowed the Reformed movement to be planted all around the world for the "mighty acts of God" that will be lived out through witness of Reformed Christians in the twenty-first century and for centuries to come after that? Is there a dynamic and redemptive future for the Reformed tradition?

That question is at the heart of this book. Over the last six years, it has been my unique privilege to serve as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and, among other things, to visit at some depth with Reformed Christians in all parts of the globe. It has been a wonderful experience and, often at the same time, one that has led me to be deeply troubled about the prospects for the Reformed tradition and its witness as we

move into the twenty-first century. I have come away from that with evidence that might lead one to believe that the best days of the Reformed tradition are behind us and with evidence to fill me with excitement that our best days lie ahead.

I want to use this essay to look at both sides of this question—to look deeply at the troubling signs that might make us doubt the vitality of the Reformed tradition and at the signs of strength that should fill us with hope and lead us into the future with confidence. Hopefully, at the end of this exploration we will be clearer about the things from which God is calling us to repent and change and about the foundations of strength on which we might build our witness in the twenty-first century and beyond. I am convinced that God has a future, an exciting future, for Reformed Christians, but only if we face squarely our signs of weakness and build on our strengths.

## **REASONS TO DOUBT THE FUTURE OF THE REFORMED TRADITION**

### **A Radically New World**

The writer of the book of Revelation expressed his hopeful vision in the words, “Behold, I make all things new” (21:5 KJV). In imagining a totally new world, I wonder if he had any idea how dramatically things could change in the twenty-first century. It took 1,500 years from the beginning of the Common Era to double the sum of human knowledge, but now we double the sum of human knowledge every year. It is a time of incredibly fast change, where yesterday’s verities no longer apply a year later. Ours is a movement deeply rooted in tradition, and yet we are in a time of incredibly fast-paced change, where adherence to tradition is not highly valued and where organizations that do place a high value on tradition often get left behind in the global marketplace of ideas.

Although Calvin brought radical change to Geneva, he was careful to build on the foundations of the apostolic faith, the church fathers, and the clear tradition of Scripture. He sought a well-ordered and disciplined world and did not seek to fundamentally overthrow the civil magistrates. The era in which we live—the era of economic globalization, instant communication, radical individualism, and a growing divide between the rich and the poor—would be exceptionally strange to Calvin, and it is often exceptionally strange to his heirs: us!

Change is all around us, especially in the church. A Christian world that we assumed to be Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Orthodox has been overturned in a few short years so that now the Pentecostal and charismatic churches form the second largest Christian group worldwide (after the Catholics). Patterns of worship and music are totally different than a generation ago. New technologies are changing how we worship, communicate with one another, and organize church life. Independent megachurches with no organic connection to any part of the wider Christian community are now flourishing in every part of the world. And the patterns of instant communication give us no excuse to ignore the vast injustices of our age.

Presbyterian and Reformed churches, faced with this incredible pace of change, often respond to all of this change by the standard rejoinder: “We’ve always done it this way.” Calvin was a master at connecting the gospel message to emerging technologies, such as the printing press in his time, and we need to do the same. Many of the churches in the global South have made great strides in expressing Reformed life and worship in the cultural forms of their context, but far too many of us are still having difficulty relating to the new (and multiple) cultural forms in which our people worship God.

What has concerned me most as I have visited Reformed churches in almost every part of the world is that, almost without exception, the average age of participants in Reformed church congregations is older than the average age of that culture—and of many in the Pentecostal and evangelical megachurches. With the power and the challenge of the gospel, we must find fresh ways to reach out to new generations, and if we are to do that well, we must learn to communicate, worship, social network, and deal with the worldview emerging in our time.

### **Loss of Membership and Vitality**

Although there are no universally verified global statistics, based on country-by-country statistics and observation, it is clear that Reformed churches are at best holding static and at worst declining in numbers. In the global North, most of our churches are clearly losing members. In my own church our membership is half of what we had in 1960, a pattern not limited to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) but widely shared by churches in North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan.

While many of our churches are still growing in the global South, their growth is clearly being eclipsed by Pentecostal, prosperity gospel, and independent megachurches. Even our churches known for evangelism, spiritual vitality, and church growth, in places like Korea, have reached a plateau, and the years of rapid church growth seem to have passed. In other cases that we should never forget, our churches are not growing because they are facing active persecution or various forms of discrimination or because they are in cultures where Christians are fleeing. All of this makes it hard to grow the church and maintain a vital witness. One of the main reasons that we have global bodies like WARC and REC is to stand in solidarity with our churches in these situations.

Even more important than numbers is the lack of energy and spiritual vitality in too many of our churches. A few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting with our Reformed member churches in Germany. While there, I had the opportunity to visit the “seminary” in Wuppertal, where all Reformed ministerial candidates spend a year developing Reformed pastoral skills after finishing their theological studies at the universities. It is an excellent program. However, what stunned me there was that none of the students in that program expected to be able to work as a pastor after finishing the program. With the declining number of members in the churches and declining financial support, new ministers are simply cannot be employed. This dynamic is causing great distress among those called to ministry and those in the churches. In North America, many of our churches, as they have lost members, have become focused on survival—and thus lost their passion for mission.

This loss of energy and spiritual vitality was recognized as a serious problem for Reformed churches from various parts of the world when we gathered for the 24th General Council (2004) in Accra. The spiritual energy, hospitality, and passion for mission that we found among Ghanaian Presbyterians was a wake-up call to many of us who have come to be known in our cultures as “God’s frozen chosen.” Out of this awareness, we adopted, for the first time in the history of the alliance (WARC), a major commitment to worship and spiritual renewal as a core calling and major program in our life together. We desperately need renewal in the power of the Holy Spirit, renewal that touches our souls, energizes our emotions, renews our worship and prayer life, and sends us out with a new excitement for Christ’s mission.

### **Fragmentation of the Body of Christ**

In 1552, in a letter to the English reformer Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, John Calvin exclaimed that he would cross ten seas to promote the unity of the church. Unfortunately, Calvin’s passion for the gift of communion and the unity of the church has not been replicated by many of his followers. For too many in the Reformed tradition, our movement has not only been about reformation (Calvin’s intention) but has also become an excuse for fragmentation of the body of Christ.

A few years ago, when we were developing the Mission and Unity Project in WARC, Lukas Vischer did a study of Reformed divisions and found that of all the world’s Christian traditions, none were as likely as the Reformed to divide the church. He found that we have 17 different Reformed churches in Nigeria, 84 in Korea, and more than anyone can count in the United States. In a church tradition where we are not bound together by a pope or bishop or by an understanding of the church controlling the integrity of the sacraments, we have found all kinds of (unbiblical) reasons to divide the church: disagreements over theology or the interpretation of Scripture, ethnic divisions, immigration patterns, and power struggles between factions. And more often than not, when we divide once, it often is not long before the body that splits off divides again. We are just like the

church in Corinth that Paul so powerfully exhorted: its members are the body of Christ and as such belong to one another. Our fragmentation weakens our witness when we cannot speak with one voice, leads us to distrust one another, and gives a negative witness to God's purposes of unity and reconciliation in the world.

A good example of this trend toward fragmentation is in my own country, where we have Presbyterian churches because the Scots organized them and Reformed churches because they were organized by the Dutch. Long beyond the time when Scottish or Dutch identity was influential or even reflected in our membership, we are still divided. We also have new denominations, like the Korean Presbyterian Church in America, growing out of more recent immigration. We certainly have many splits in the Presbyterian family growing out of differences in theology and biblical interpretation.

Another place where these divisions in the Reformed family are evident and are harming our Reformed witness is in Kenya. In 2008, following the electoral crisis in Kenya when it looked like ethnic violence might destroy that nation, I was asked by the World Council of Churches to lead a Living Letters Peacemaking delegation to visit and support reconciliation in that nation. One of the main reasons I was asked to lead that group is that one of the major fault lines cutting through the center of that crisis was between Presbyterian and Reformed Christians. I quickly discovered that, because of their respective mission histories, Presbyterians were in vast majority Kikuyus, and Reformed Christians were overwhelmingly Luos and Kalenjins. Presbyterians and Reformed were on opposite sides of the ethnic fault lines behind the killing and burning taking place in Kenya. Fortunately, those churches rose to the occasion and led in the cause of reconciliation, but how tragic that the ethnic divide that was threatening the nation was mirrored in how we had divided our Reformed family in Kenya into two communities. This is not the only place in the world where dividing Reformed Christians into separate churches based on their ethnicity has threatened the fabric of society, as the case of South Africa demonstrated so well.

God is indeed calling us as Reformed Christians to follow Jesus' last prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that "they may all be one, . . . so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). From the local congregation to the national level to the world community, we are being called to reclaim our unity as Reformed Christians so that we might share in Christ's great plan for the reconciliation of the world. One of the great signs of hope in bringing together WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council is that we might model to the world and to our churches that God is calling us to unity and communion, and thus to a much more effective witness to God's peace and justice in the world.

Indeed, there are a number of good reasons to ask if the movement of Reformed churches has a vital future in our world. We must take seriously these realities that cause people, including our own, to question whether God still has a purpose and a ministry in store for Christians of the Reformed tradition.

## **REASONS TO BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE OF THE REFORMED TRADITION**

While there are great challenges facing our future as Reformed Christians, there are also great sources of strength among us. One of our greatest problems is that as we focus on our problems, we too rarely look to the strengths that God has given us as a source of inspiration and hope for our future.

### **A Theological Vision Second To None**

The Calvin Jubilee has proved to be a time of blessing for the global Reformed community. The blessing has not primarily been because of the celebration of Calvin but rather because this has been a time in which the Reformed community has reclaimed its core values and its vision of our common calling. There has been far more interest in the Calvin Jubilee than I expected, and it has been very good for Reformed Christians.

I picked up a hint of this interest and enthusiasm three years ago when I visited with the presidents of the theological seminaries related to the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. They felt that the Calvin Jubilee

could be a defining moment for Mexican Presbyterians and expressed their hope that this would be a time when Reformed churches around the world would move forward with a Calvinist revolution in the twenty-first century. I was quite surprised when I first heard this suggestion. It was hard for me to think of any place more different from sixteenth-century Geneva than Mexico City in the twenty-first century. These colleagues knew well Calvin's shortcomings as well as his strengths. They ministered among a highly expressive, joyful people; yet after a global search, we in WARC were never able to find even one picture of Calvin smiling, to use in our Jubilee celebrations.

However, they were right, and this has been a time in which Reformed Christians have sought to reclaim their common ground in the Reformed faith. In Reformed churches around the world, there has been a high resonance for giving priority to three aspects of Calvin's legacy:

- His appreciation of the gift of community
- His commitment to justice in response to the sovereignty of God
- His passion for life and the creation

The core elements of Calvin's legacy are at the heart of our Reformed theology, which is life giving, is the source of our strength, and serves as the basis for faithful mission in our time. Among those core elements are the following:

- Making the word of God available to the people as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ
- Building a church on the foundations of the Word and sacrament
- Caring for the well-being of the human community as our vocation
- Understanding that we have been elected to live our lives to the glory of God
- Organizing a community of shared leadership among ministers, elders, and the people of God in leading the church

These theological themes are at the heart of the gospel and are the life-giving foundations for Reformed Christians. This is a great strength for us all.

### **Leadership for God's Justice in the World**

Reformed Christians know instinctively that we have been chosen by God to be about God's justice in the world. It is no accident that the major confessions of the twentieth century affirm so powerfully the power of God and the witness of Christ over against the forces of evil in our time. Barman, Belhar, and Accra are all Reformed confessions that articulate a clear stand for fullness of life and against the powers of evil found in Nazism, fascism, and apartheid. They make it clear that to stand against these evils is not only a social justice concern but also a matter of the integrity of the Christian faith and witness in our time.

Everywhere I have visited, I have found our member churches actively engaged in the struggle for justice, often at the risk of their own lives. I give thanks to God for the witness for justice, peace, and human rights through our churches in Colombia, in the Philippines, in Taiwan, in Romania, in the Sudan, in South Africa, in Madagascar, in the Middle East, and in so many other parts of the world. I am delighted that through the alliance (WARC) we have been able to share in these courageous witnesses for justice.

On a global level, we have made a major contribution to the future of the world and to the church ecumenical by our joining together in Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth. The Accra Confession, which emerged from our last General Council yet is part of a long-term commitment of WARC to break the bonds of injustice, has often been controversial, but it speaks the truth, a truth that the world desperately needs to hear. This call to challenge the empire of our time to build an economic system that lessens rather than increases the gap between the rich and the poor, that ends grinding poverty for billions of people, and that creates a more just world—here is the heart of our calling. It is also a challenge for us to care for the earth, to stop its pollution and exploitation, and to care for those most negatively impacted with our abuse of the planet.

I am pleased that so many of our churches have affirmed the Accra Confession and joined in the Covenanting for Justice process. It is our signature commitment to the world. I am also pleased that we have been joined in this endeavor by ecumenical partners like the World Council of Churches, the Council for World Mission, and the Lutheran World Federation, for this is a concern that is truly ecumenical in nature. I am also gratified for so many regional efforts that have furthered this commitment and made it come alive.

If anything, the call of the Accra Confession is more urgent now than six years ago. Although many debated our strong actions in Accra, the global financial crisis and the exacerbation of global warming have shown to the world that we are right and reminded us all of how urgent this call remains in our time. It is a matter of great strength that Reformed Christians can be united in such a noble cause in our time. We are standing for something important!

### **An Inclusive People of God**

Though our vision is sometimes ahead of our practice, more often than not the Reformed community has been in the leadership to make the church a truly inclusive community of Christ. We come from a tradition that from its earliest days has stood against hierarchy and exclusion and for the priesthood of all believers and shared leadership in the governance of the church, and we have particular challenges in our day to live out this Reformed principle. For the last twenty-five years, WARC has been strongly committed to a genuine partnership between women and men in the church. Efforts such as the Scholarship Program for Women from the global South have made a special contribution to this effort. This commitment has engaged us on the front lines of the struggle for gender justice, for the ordination of women, and for shared leadership across all barriers in the church.

Over the last quarter century, we have had a sea change in the reality of women being recognized for ordained leadership in our churches. While we still have a few churches that do not yet ordain women and many that do not yet have ordained women in equal numbers to men, the vast majority of our churches welcome both women and men to all ministries of the church. This is a major step forward and an important witness to the church ecumenical, embodying the promise of Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Following Calvin’s example, Reformed churches in many of our countries have also sought to show signs of being an inclusive community in many other ways. Like Calvin in Geneva, many of our churches have welcomed immigrants, worked for justice for immigrants, and sought ways to welcome immigrants from other cultures into the life of our churches. We have also continued the struggle to break down barriers of race and class in the Christian community. The growing number of churches in our fellowship that are embracing the Belhar Confession and its call to eschew racism in the life of the church and society is a real sign of hope.

Though we are still divided on how we view sexual orientation in our commitment to building an inclusive community, we have seen many in our fellowship welcome people into leadership in their churches regardless of sexual orientation, and we have all shared the commitment to stand together for human rights for all people, whatever their sexual orientation.

As a community that over the last six years has sought to allow Jesus’ promise “that all might have life in fullness” (John 10:10 alt.; our theme in Accra) to come alive in among us, Reformed churches are in many places at the forefront of a movement to transform our congregations into truly inclusive communities of Christ. This is another strength, not unique to Reformed churches, but very much part of our ethos and our future.

### **Reformed, Therefore Ecumenical**

One of our great strengths is what we do not claim to be: *the* church. As Reformed Christians, we know in our souls that we are only one part of the church: we cannot be whole, or faithful to Jesus Christ, unless we seek to

restore the unity and wholeness of Christ's church. Because of that commitment, we have always invited all baptized Christians to join us at the Lord's Table and have always recognized their baptisms.

Some years ago, Robert McAfee Brown wrote an article for the *Presbyterian Survey* in which he summed up our ecumenical commitment: "I am Reformed; therefore, I am ecumenical." To be Reformed, according to Brown, is by its very nature to be ecumenical. From its very beginning, WARC has seen itself not as an end in itself but as part of a broader ecumenical movement. That is why our churches have always been leaders in the World Council of Churches, in their National Councils of Churches, and in all major efforts for Christian unity. We have also been churches that have naturally entered into union with other churches, and today we count among our members in WARC a good number of national churches that are actually union churches. It is no accident that so many of the great ecumenical leaders have arisen from the Reformed tradition.

We live in a time in which unity and reconciliation with other religious communities (both Christian and other faith) is urgent for the peace of the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most of our major wars and conflicts are occurring at the confluence of ethnic and religious conflict, which makes our propensity to be ecumenical and to pursue reconciliation with people of other faiths all the more urgent. This is how we carry out our programs in WARC, and it is a great strength that I have seen at work in our member churches in all parts of the world.

### **Vital Christian Communities**

While our theological vision, our commitment to justice, our struggle to be inclusive communities, and our Reformed propensity for ecumenism are sources of great strength and hope for our future, our greatest strength is in our hundreds of thousands of congregations, where the gospel is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated, the community is nurtured, and the people are going forth in mission. I have had the privilege of being in hundreds of those congregations in all parts of the world; with few exceptions, I have had my faith in Christ strengthened as I have been in these communities, where the signs of the Holy Spirit are abundant. Friends, our churches are alive with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is our greatest strength.

The most important part of my personal spiritual journey has been the opportunity on many occasions (especially in the global South) to be with congregations in settings (like Sudan, Pakistan, or Cuba) where there was great suffering and the very fabric of human life seemed to be at risk. Yet in these very places I was welcomed as a brother in Christ; I found among these people, who seemed to have no good reason to believe in the goodness of God, a faith in Christ and a spiritual presence that I could not understand but for which I could only give thanks to God. Those situations made me know that the suffering love of Christ really is the most powerful thing in the world. These experiences brought me closer to God and are some of the greatest gifts I have ever received. It also renewed my commitment to be one in Christ with these brothers and sisters and to join them in a mission so that no one would need to live in a situation where one might question whether there is reason to believe in the goodness of God.

It is amazing how different our hundreds of thousands of congregations are from one another yet how, even in their diversity, they show the strengths of the Reformed tradition in their life and witness. Churches as different as the Yolo Church in Kinshasa, Congo; the Presbyterian Church in Lar in the Sudan; the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea; the women's church among the Maya Quiche Indians in Guatemala; the First Presbyterian Church in Havana; the Great Church in Debrecen, Hungary; and my local congregation, Springdale Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky—all seem, on the surface, to have hardly anything in common. But if you probe a little more deeply, you will find that they all share a love for Christ and neighbor, a vision of the best dreams of Calvin, a commitment to justice, a sense of being an inclusive and welcoming community, an ecumenical spirit, and a place where the Holy Spirit is at work among the people. The same could be said of thousands of other congregations in our fellowship.

## CONCLUSION

We are at a turning point in the Reformed tradition. In Grand Rapids we will be launching a new chapter in our life together as we become the World Communion of Reformed Churches. At the same time, we have reached an important historical milestone, the 500th anniversary of our movement. This is the time for us to claim the best of our heritage and to be open to the radical new things that God may have in store for us in the years ahead.

I believe that there is a future—a vital and exciting future—for the Reformed movement in the twenty-first century. However, we cannot overlook too easily that there are serious problems in our common life that we must address with repentance and commitment to change. God does intend for us to master the technology, culture, and ethos of our time as we reach out to a new generation. God intends for our churches to be vital and growing churches. And God surely intends for us to give up our divisive and fragmenting ways and join the movement for unity and reconciliation in the church and the world.

As we do that, we have major strengths and resources in our life together that we need to celebrate and reclaim and that can give us the strength for “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) for the gospel in our time:

- A theological vision, growing out of Calvin’s legacy, that is second to none
- Leadership for God’s justice in the world as part of our Reformed DNA
- A desire to be a truly inclusive and welcoming community of all of God’s people
- An ecumenical spirit that seeks reconciliation with all people of faith
- Thousands of vital congregations, where the gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered, the community is nurtured, and the people are going forth in mission

It is critical that we address our shortcomings and build upon our strengths for the future of our Reformed movement worldwide: that is exactly what I believe God intends for us to do. I want to close by illustrating that through an insight I gained from one of the books that impacted me most in my early walk with Christ. It was the little volume by C. S. Lewis titled *The Screwtape Letters*. In this book, the character Screwtape (the devil) writes letters to his agent, Wormwood, about how to tempt Christians and draw them away from God’s work so that Screwtape can have his way in the world. What struck me when I read again these fictional letters was how the vast majority of the strategies that Screwtape proposes to Wormwood are, in one way or another, strategies to make Christians doubt themselves, focus on their shortcomings, and distrust their fellow Christians—and never build on the strengths that are at the heart of our community. For Screwtape, it is clear that if Wormwood can do that, the devil could have a field day.

Friends, I think we in the world Reformed community are being called to say a loud and strong *no* to Screwtape, Wormwood, and all of their contemporary colleagues; we are called to reclaim our unity in Christ and our confidence in God and one another. We have challenges to face, but God has given us incredible gifts and strengths in the World Communion of Reformed Churches on which to build, and we need to be doing just that—building on these great gifts of our Reformed tradition and reality to shape our churches for the twenty-first century, truly being “‘churches reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.”