



# World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

## Reformed Identities – A Global Perspective

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To the General Assembly of the Reformierter Bund in Germany

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### Salutation

Greetings from the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

We congratulate you in this Assembly. We in the WCRC are grateful to God for the close working relationship we have with the *Reformierter Bund* including the fact that we share close working space in our offices.

### Introduction

You have chosen a theme which is to us in the Reformed family both natural and challenging. The complication has a number of dimensions. Let me mention just two.

1. When we talk about identity, some people have the notion that it means we could describe ourselves as Reformed in a particular way which distinguishes us from other religious bodies or other Christian families. For example, making a clear contrast between Reformed and Lutherans or Reformed and Roman Catholics.
2. The question of identity in the singular versus identities in the plural. Is there a uniform identity that Reformed churches have and can be recognizable globally, or even nationally in one country – Germany?

Just a little reflection and research will show that these two dimensions have been a part of our lives as a Reformed family from time immemorial. They were discussed in various World Communion of Reformed Churches processes from its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The latest of the discussions was in the preparations towards our 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council when the then-World Alliance of Reformed Churches embarked on a global process under the title: “Reformed Self-Understanding: Who are we called to be?” Most of the things I share here come from the outcomes of that process which then became a major part of the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council outcomes.

I am glad that you framed your theme in the plural – Reformed identities. After all, one of the maxims which have been important for us is “*Ecclesia Reformata sed semper Reformanda secundum Verbum.*” We have no hesitation about the claim that as Reformed, we are always reforming – impacted by the different ages and eras as well as the cultural contexts and existential challenges we find ourselves in; we are one family of churches and yet we will not always do things in the same way as our 16<sup>th</sup> century forbears. Or the Reformed Church in Hannover may not always see themselves in the way the Reformed



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churches carry themselves in Vanuatu or in Anloga, Ghana, or in Buenos Aires, Argentina. So, we talk about identities.

Today, we also affirm that we share some of our identities with other Christian families. So, when we talk about what we hold dear in the language of Solus Christus, Sola Scriptura, Sola Fidei, Sola Gratia, and Souls Deo Gloria, we do not have a monopoly of these. We share it with our Lutheran sisters and brothers and some others in the Reformation family.

We also value our ecumenical leanings. We say, “To be Reformed is to be ecumenical.” Therefore, holding on to our distinctives as a badge that separates us from others is not part of our values.

## Some marks of Reformed identities

Nevertheless, we do have some things we can point to as important for who we are as Reformed. Some may be simply things we emphasize. But they are signs pointing to our self-understanding, rather than flags of distinction.

1. Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms – the way we view these as Reformed Christians include great affirmations of what we believe and how we respond to the signs of the times – whether in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 18<sup>th</sup> century, or now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of these that Reformed hold dear are as follows:
  - First Helvetic Confession (1536)
  - Geneva Confession (1536)
  - Belgic Confession (1561)
  - Second Helvetic Confession (1562)
  - Scots Confession (1560)
  - Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
  - Genevan Catechism (1541)
  - Emden Catechism (1554)
  - Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
  - Canons of Dort (1619)
  - Westminster Shorter Catechism (1649)
  - Westminster Larger Catechism (1649)
  - Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)
  - Belhar Confession (1986)
  - Accra Confession (2004)

These are in addition to the classical Apostles Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds

2. Unity of the realm of God – not secular and divine as separate entities. These are interlinked. As Psalm 24:1 states, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” It is not just “spiritual things” that belong to God – it is everything. Our view of salvation is linked with sanctification, and justification is not something that soothes the soul or some spiritual aspect of humanity – it is intricately linked with justice.



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Huldrych Zwingli was very much involved in the life and challenges of the city of Zurich on this basis. John Calvin's writing reflect this link in a wide range of things including care for the less privileged in society, responsibility for the environment, banking practices, and other social issues of his days. These are how we understand ourselves. It is one reason for which the initial form of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was not in our view something we could simply append our signature to as Reformed unless our concerns were addressed.

3. This point is also linked with our understanding of "calling." Christian life is a vocation. The study texts of our preparation towards the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, states that "Christian life is a vocation for all believers in every aspect of our life. God's call comes to us in our homes, our labour and our communities of faith." We see all life as ministry, whether as husbands or wives, children or parents, doctors, teachers, farmers, lawyers, etc. It is within this sense of all are called (priesthood of all believers) that we also acknowledge that some ordered ministries can be distinguished – deacons, elders, pastors/ministers and doctors of the church. We live out our faith in the real world, and as God's ministers called to be the light and salt of our communities.
4. We live out our calling placing value on our unity. We are united in Christ. We are not our own. We belong to God. However, we honour the fact that we operate with diverse voices in different contexts within this unity. Our saying, we are Reformed and always Reforming (*ecclesia Reformata sed semper Reformanda*) helps us navigate this path. So, in this era, we often found ourselves addressing very challenging issues in ways that honour our unity in diversity. Unfortunately, sometimes what is projected is our disunity. We do not always get it right. And therefore, we often see divisions in the Reformed family. Today, some of the issues around which we are called to pay attention to this part of our identity include human sexuality and how to address the Israeli-Palestine issue and diverse views around the thousands of people who are dying in the Gaza strip.
5. Living by the Word of God is another element of our identity. Reading of Scripture at home and in public worship is a part of our identity. The WORD made flesh in our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the written Word of God (Both Old and New Testaments) continue to be our standard, giving direction as well as guide. These shape our theological formulations and inform our social commitments. Today, we read the Scriptures in many varied ways in our contexts. Our study texts proclaim:

Today, we read and interpret Scripture in many contexts. Yet all interpretations, traditional or contemporary, liberal or conservative, by women or men, by lower or upper classes are Partial: sometimes full of insight, sometimes superficial. Therefore, many voices should be heard, because other perspectives enrich our understanding of the gospel and provide a necessary critique to any particular reading.

It is our hope that the WCRC continues to be the forum that inspires all in the Reformed family to read and reread Scripture in ways that make us relevant to our



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communities, and which place us as effective ambassadors for Christ in our communities.

6. In worship, the reading and proclamation of the Word of God remains at the centre. Even where the pulpit is placed in our sanctuaries reflect the importance of the Word proclaimed. Our pulpits are often central or elevated. The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion bring us into the family and sustain us in the family as God's means of grace. According to John Calvin in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, "Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." These marks of the church as a worshipping community remain central to our identity as Reformed. It is this background that makes the Reformed family place much emphasis on theological formation and education especially for those in ordained ministry.
7. The work of the Triune God in the lives of the church, in the lives of Christians, and in the world is of importance in the Reformed family. We express this in doxological language – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. It is God's grace that liberates us in Christ – not our works. Christ in grace liberates us, setting us free to enter into right relationships with God, with fellow human beings and with all of God's creation. God is sovereign. God's mighty and powerful nature could be frightening, but for the choice God made to give us that deep parental love that liberates us from frantically wanting to save ourselves. This is the sense in which we can understand the doctrine of predestination. God's prevenient love chose us as subjects of that love. It is not human beings who chose God. Any human attempt to parse this into human philosophical categories of free will verses determinism miss the point and leads to endless debates. This is what some Calvinists do, putting bus into the slippery slopes of confusion. We continue to live the lives God has called us into because of the presence of the Holy Spirit with us, the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit enables us to live in ways consistent with our calling.
8. Freedom and responsibility. The freedom we have in our relationship with God frees us to accept ourselves and others as people with gifts and limitations. The study texts I have been referring to indicates:

Freed from sin, we are freed to live in relationship with God, ourselves and our neighbour. This calls us to live responsibly as individuals whose lives are congruent with our calling. This means analysing critically, speaking clearly and acting boldly on issues that adversely affect the fullness of life that God promised.

Thus, we can point to many examples in the last 100 years of how we have exercised this freedom and responsibility including:
  - a. In the 1930s the Reformed were found among the Confessing Church in Germany and had a major hand in crafting the Barmen Declaration



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- b. The 20<sup>th</sup> century vicious oppression of apartheid in Southern Africa and the role Reformed churches throughout the world played in unmasking it and how the emerging Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa gifted us with the Belhar Confession.
- c. The increasing adverse effects of the death-dealing hold of empire, the collusion of military, political, and economic powerful forces, has brought the world into an economic and financial architecture in which lives of millions are compromised and our dear planet Earth is in danger of imploding. This has led the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches to come up with the Accra Confession.

## Concluding Remarks

As Reformed, our self-understanding is that our identities have some commonalities which include:

1. We are called to live lives of gratitude to God for His love and for our salvation.
2. We are invited to be in a mutual loving and mutually caring communion as Christ's disciples. "By this, shall all know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13: 35).
3. We are called and transformed to be God's agents of transformation in a broken world.
4. We cannot stay silent in the face of evil and suffering in the world. Otherwise, we are complicit in perpetrating the evil.
5. We are justified by faith and called into participating in God's project of mediating justice in the world – fostering right relationships between us and God, us and other human beings wherever they are, and us and nature – others beyond the *anthropos* with whom we share the world in which we live.
6. In our identity, we affirm our unity in Christ even as we acknowledge our diversity. In this spirit we hold onto our affirmation that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. And so, we do not hesitate at all to engage ecumenically. In the German scene you know this very well as many of you live and operate in United churches. We in the WCRC know this very well when we value United and Uniting churches who are our members.
7. The Reformed heritage is a worldwide movement. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, the biggest organization in the Reformed movement, brings on board more than 230 member churches in 108 countries covering more than 100 million individuals. Together we strive to discern the will of God together, read the signs of our times, and engage in transformative actions in accordance with God's mission.

Yes, from time to time we raise questions about our identity, as if we were not so sure of ourselves and our identity. That itself is healthy part of who we are. It is a process that yields clarity in our self-understanding. So, I once again, congratulate the *Reformierter Bund* for making it the theme for this year. May God bless you in this Assembly.