

A Message from the Colloquium on the Accra and Belhar Confessions

Stony Point, New York, USA, January 15-17, 2010 (Martin Luther King Day Weekend)

To the Delegates to the Uniting General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and member churches of the Caribbean and North America Area Council of WARC.

From participants of the Colloquium on the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth and the Belhar Confession (which is being considered by several North American churches).

Grace and peace to you in the indwelling Spirit of love and justice, known to us in Jesus Christ.

Summary

Colloquium participants recommend support for the themes of both Accra and Belhar statements of confession of faith, seen as complementary treatments of race and class divisions in the church. We encourage members of the North American Reformed Churches to give attention to the Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids this summer. This message lifts up our discussion of power and the empowerment of women in relation to the racism and poverty that challenge the democratic ethos of our tradition. We urge the new World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) to continue its covenanting, witnessing, and confessing heritage. We encourage reading the Accra statement or confession in the current “great recession,” affirming its stand against idols of de-regulation, unlimited consumption, and unlimited compensation for some. The words of the Belhar Confession came alive as we prayed at the news of the grievous earthquake in Haiti: “the church must stand by people in any form of suffering and need.” The group supports generous aid for re-building Haiti, cancellation of debt, and opening of US and other agricultural markets. With regard to the Kairos document recently put forth by Palestinian Christians, this also was seen, in the light of Accra and Belhar, as a witness to be considered in the Uniting General Council’s discussions.

1. This memorandum is written to recommend continued attention to the prophetic message of the 24th WARC General Council, meeting in Accra, Ghana, entitled, “The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth”. It also recommends support for the Belhar Confession, under consideration already by several WARC member churches in Canada and the United States. This Colloquium, or structured conversation, was designed to explore complementary elements in the Accra document and the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, and to relate both of these to the North American and Caribbean context, where matters of race and economic justice are closely intertwined. This conversation was not designed to yield a formal statement, but to help participants and those reading the papers presented (and to be published on-line) understand the meaning of confessing Christian faith and challenging idolatries in the current economic crisis.
2. We begin by encouraging members and congregations of our Reformed Churches in Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States to celebrate through local events and acts of fellowship and shared conversation the Uniting General Council to be held in Grand

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Rapids, hosted by Calvin College, on June 18-28, 2010, using the Accra and Belhar Confessions as part of their reflection on the shared mission of our churches.

3. In shortest summary of the Colloquium discussions, power was seen to be embedded in any consideration of race; repentance, restitution and more just relations in any treatment of reconciliation. Thus Accra was seen to address economic realities implicit in Belhar's justice commitment, as well as realities of power politics that also threaten the church's unity, and hence also call for resistance. Without claiming predictive power for Accra, its prophetic critique of the unsustainability of anti-regulatory or neoliberal capitalism is vindicated in considerable measure by the current worldwide economic downturn and the rewards still going to powerful economic interests, even those of bailed out banks and insurance companies in the US. (Clearly there is growing strength in China, India, Brazil and other developing or countries of the South that do not follow the strict de-regulatory model, although enormous poverty still exists in those contexts.)
4. Invitations to the colloquium were issued in the name of the Covenanting for Justice working group of Canada and the United States, with the support and endorsement of three committees of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and participation of ministers and members from eight churches: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Reformed Church of North America, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ, and the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. One of the papers presented reviewed WARC's engagement with justice issues since the Seoul General Council of 1989, through the 1995 gathering in Kitwe, Zambia, and particularly the "processus confessionis" initiated at Debrecen in 1997. That process included a consultation at Stony Point in January of 2004 that several of this colloquium's participants attended. We urge the delegates to the Uniting General Council to look ahead in proposing new stages in the narrative of the Reformed family as we face all church-dividing issues, racial, economic, and otherwise, and as our communion seeks to expand the horizon, vision and joyful engagement of every member and congregation.
5. This message from the participants is meant to be part of the larger conversation about the Accra Confession endorsed by the 24th General Council. It recognizes that our Reformed tradition itself is a continuing conversation that reflects the democratic ethos and ethical commitments linked so firmly to John Calvin's example in last year's 500th anniversary celebration of his birth. Because of the linkage of race and economic justice, it was appropriate to hold the colloquium on the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. The words of the Belhar Confession came alive as we prayed at the news of the grievous earthquake in Haiti: "the church must stand by people in any form of suffering and need." This tragedy underlined part of the Caribbean context illuminated by Belhar, one of historic enslavement, colonialism, neo-colonialism, white racism, environmental degradation, and the extreme poverty that is in substantial measure traceable to the former identified realities.
6. Discussion of the "we" in the confessions led to greater awareness of how a dominant group's "we" can silence other views and deny others' perceptions. While the group is

united in calling for the opening of trade barriers to Haitian goods and the cancellation of the remaining portion of Haiti's debt, participants in the colloquium perceive Haiti's situation with different senses of identification and shared danger or powerlessness. The US "we" is often impatient with self-examination of our assumed right to speak, even for others; the Canadian perhaps more grounded "we" feels sufficiently privileged to take sides and call for resources to be mobilized; our Caribbean participants felt some shared vulnerability and distrust of noble promises to rebuild that have often reinstated previous inequalities and exploitation. Integrity requires us to acknowledge our relative privilege whenever we point to the enormous suffering structured into international economic relations. We confess (small "c") that our own humanity is diminished by our acceptance of advantages, advantages challenged rightfully particularly in the Accra Confession. We participants in the colloquium call on delegates to the Uniting General Council to strive for the inclusive "we," testing the identifications, hopes, and responsibilities to be shared *through* the two confessions.

7. Reformed confessions strengthen the conscience of the Church at the same time as they seek to build its unity. The covenanting for justice process has not simply been about witnessing, but about implementing the concerns of Accra: resisting the inertia of empire and war, and challenging the domination of the market over all other aspects of life. Both the Belhar and Accra statements echo the Barmen Declaration, though participants in the colloquium differed on matters of tone and toughness in the two documents. "Family resemblances" are clear, but each statement does different things, together deepening the particularly Reformed address to corporate as well as personal justice, even in the non-creedal or less confessional parts of the Reformed family. In this regard, we were pleased to have two creative Disciples theologians with us, deepening conversation and analysis.
8. Neither confession directly addresses the issue of justice for women, a crucial concern as this new body is formed. The need for access to leadership positions and recognition and openness to the perspectives of women in the WCRC was emphasized by many at the colloquium. In particular, questions about recognition and openness to ordination crystallize when two bodies with different histories on this issue unite. The WCRC should, in the view of most participants, continue to help member churches address difficult topics by drawing on both experience and expertise and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
9. Participants from different US, Caribbean, and Canadian Reformed churches found great unity and mutual appreciation, even with differing theological approaches to racism, sexism, and the need to challenge "neo-liberal" or anti-regulatory capitalism and globalization. Accra's ability to illuminate economic injustice has only been strengthened by the credit meltdown and continuing crisis of unemployment, unequal rewards, and climate-distorting consumption. A paper by Rebecca Todd Peters helpfully distinguished several kinds of globalization. Moral analysis of globalization is done in statements by the Christian Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ, testifying to the rich range of responses to Accra and the realities it recognizes.

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10. In the prophetic spirit of Accra and Belhar, many of the participants read and affirmed the brave statement by Palestinian Christians released on December 11 of 2009, entitled "*A Moment of Truth*." This is a theologically strong call for solidarity to the whole Christian community, as well as a request for understanding to Jews and Muslims. Its spirit is non-violent, as are the acts of solidarity it requests: boycott, divestment, sanctions. To seek freedom, to stand with a people oppressed: this is also the task of covenanting for justice. We ask the Uniting General Council to include consideration of this theological call in its docket. And we encourage all members of the Reformed family in CANAAC to read this document prayerfully and carefully. Have our denominations responded to this call?
11. While *A Moment of Truth's* recommendations for non-violent economic pressure will be criticized, it is important to see that they focus not on Israel's existence, but on Israel's occupation of Palestine. That 40 year military occupation creates tragedy and brings to mind too much the context of Belhar: the security or separation wall and checkpoints, the Jews-only roads, the inability of Christians to travel to worship in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the settlements encircling isolated, Bantustan-like pockets of poverty, the seeming collective punishment and then bombing of the biggest pocket, Gaza. We ourselves, especially the US Christians, acknowledge our own temptation to silence and support as taxpayers for actions illegal under international law, destructive of peace, and threatening to the survival of Christianity in Jerusalem and the West Bank.
12. Accra's call for a covenantal, earth-friendly economy encourages—in fact requires--practices of personal re-dedication to justice; relinquishing and helping relocate preferential status, wealth, and power; forming relationships of mutual support and equal regard within and beyond our communions; building sustainable communities and movements; embracing new green technologies and employment opportunities; teaching new generations of church leaders: may these communities of new practice that go beyond all statements truly reflect the Beloved Community of God named by Martin Luther King, Jr.

This statement from the January 15-17, 2010 Stony Point colloquium on Accra and Belhar in Conversation is affirmed by the following participants:

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