



world council of churches



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WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

In 1970 the WARC was formed through the merger of two older Reformed bodies, the Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian System, founded in 1875 in London, and the International Congregational Council, which had first met in 1891, also in London. In 2002 the WARC included 215 Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United churches in 107 countries, with an estimated 70 million plus communicant members. Three-quarters of these churches are in Africa, Asia and Latin America; many are minority churches.

Early attempts of the Presbyterian alliance to formulate a single confession for its member churches foundered on the rock of liberal-conservative conflict, and the WARC remains a federation of churches without a common confession. In 1982, however, it declared a status confessionis on racism and apartheid and suspended two white South African churches from membership; the suspension of the Dutch Reformed Church was lifted conditionally in 1997.

The Reformed tradition generally sees every church as a particular expression of the one universal church of Jesus Christ; each community of faith contributes to the life of the whole.

Through its "mission and unity" programme, the WARC promotes the unity of Reformed churches. The WARC fully supports the growth of the WCC, participates in annual conversations with other Christian World Communions, and since the late 1960s has organized bilateral and multilateral dialogues with Christians of other traditions and people of other faiths.

In 1877 the Presbyterian alliance, then composed primarily of North American and Anglo-Saxon churches, defended the rights of Native Americans in the USA. Ever since, the WARC in both its branches has repeatedly expressed its commitment to human rights. In 1987 it was the first ecumenical organization openly to protest human rights violations by the Romanian government. It has been involved in efforts to re-unite Korea and in the struggle for democratization in such countries as Malawi, South Africa and Taiwan.

The WARC promotes the full partnership of women and men in church and society, since 1992 through its "programme to affirm, challenge and transform" (PACT) and since 1997 through a department of partnership.

A major contribution of the Reformed tradition to Christianity has often been its deep interest in theological reflection. In 1983, with its study on covenanting for peace and justice, the alliance initiated the WCC programme on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Studies in the 1990s focused on Christian community in a changing society, Christian-Muslim relationships, the challenge of the emerging ecclesiologies to church renewal, and Reformed faith and economic justice. On this last subject, the 23rd general council in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1997 mandated the alliance to begin a processus confessionis, a "committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction".

A further concern in the 1990s was Reformed identity, which today is broad and somewhat blurred. WARC membership now ranges from John Calvin's Consistoire of Geneva to the Uniting Church of Australia and the united churches of North and South India. Some churches are guided by one or more early Reformed confessions, while others revise their confessions as they believe the times and the Holy Spirit dictate. While most of the member churches would agree that scripture is the final authority on matters of faith and practice, their interpretations of scripture range from the literalist to

the liberal.

Such pluralism also incorporates wide cultural and contextual differences, further complicated by many member churches being minorities, not only religiously but also culturally and ethnically. The challenges which the alliance faces to celebrate diversity and unity, particularly in a world where political and economic realities preclude stability and are rife with injustice, demands of the WARC much flexibility as well as a firm grip of the Reformed dictum: *ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda* (the church reformed but always being reformed).

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