

Spirituality Section Report
Hearing the cry for life in our joy and our pain

“All of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit groan within ourselves, as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free” Romans 8.22-23.

“Won’t you help to sing these songs of freedom? For all I ever have: Redemption Song”
Bob Marley Redemption Song



The 24th general council has been faced with a deeply spiritual as well as theological and missiological task: we are being confronted by the cry for life, God’s cry for life within us and within our world and God’s cry from those who live with poverty and injustice. This council gathering invites us to experience our unity in Christ, for our being in Christ together propels us into becoming his new creation, a community that walks the way of Christ enabled by his Spirit. Thus, the council has been considering the issues that our theme and our sharing pose to Christian spirituality. Spirituality is our chief means to discern and hallow the presence of God breaking out in all things, God’s presence flowing into all aspects of our life and world. The spirituality section has explored spirituality as the gift that gives us the capacity to struggle, celebrate and feel for others in the midst of everything we face. The deeper our spirituality the deeper our capacity to face and overcome that which is unjust, celebrate the life we have, and feel for our neighbours near and far.

We have all said how much the experience of African spirituality has revealed to us a holistic and engaged spirituality. We have experienced a creative and deep sense of God’s Spirit at work in all of life and have felt this Spirit leading us to life in fullness. This indwelling Spirit transforms and sanctifies us inwardly and outwardly. The Spirit speaks with a prophetic voice that often we stifle through the many concerns of our lives and even stifle through the shallowness of our worship.

We found ourselves wondering: “Are we really providing people with the deep resources they need to live their lives and to live their lives fully in the light of God’s promise?” In the section, varying and conflicting stories were told of people who felt lifted up by the church and others who felt cast down. We heard stories of those who, during time of war in their country, found something inspiring and strengthening. We heard stories of those who were living with pain and loss and were held up and empowered by the church. We also heard stories of those confronted and excluded by mean-spirited attitudes and an unwillingness to be open to people. We are very clear how our practice of spirituality can enable healing of our personal and political hurt, soothe our memories, and enable us to move on. But we see how it can also witness to a separation of worship from life and a flattering of our egos rather than a deep engagement with the will of God for our world and lives.

We look, then, in many directions for inspiration in our spiritual life and expression. We look to the stories of our contemporaries and the stories of our time, to all the creative arts and traditions of our cultures. But especially we look to the deepest well of spirituality, the Scriptures themselves and to Christ himself whose life and love is the summation of life in fullness and the inspiration to live and struggle for it. So this is a summary of some of the implications spirituality has for our task as Reformed churches.

Key issues in our theological task

It seems that we have not sufficiently developed and honoured our understandings of the action of the Holy Spirit in the challenges of our day. We have not fully grasped and expressed what life in the Spirit looks like. It seems to us that it looks like life in fullness: life that is lived generously for others, life that sees itself

connected to the whole of our created and political order. Our discussion of spirituality revealed that we have often failed to see spirituality as wider than worship. We affirmed spirituality as flowing from all of life and connecting us to the Holy Spirit, but we are not all able to practise this understanding because we have not been open to the world beyond worship. Section discussions admitted how our theology has emphasized the head over the heart, the mind over the body; this is a theology growing increasingly stale in the diverse cultures and environments we inhabit. Our discussions ranged widely as to the nature of spirituality, but always it was difficult to leave worship as the fundamental expression of our spirituality. Yet so many of us spend so little time in worship, and the worship we engage in often fails to address the issues of our day, nor does it engage us at any deep level. We are often not expressing ourselves, our faith, or our theology at a level that moves and compels us to the struggle for life in all its fullness.

Key issues in our missiological task

Covenanting for life

We are churches who want to engage with the struggle for justice and covenant for life. We are hearing such distressing stories and statistics about the nature of poverty and economic injustice that it threatens to overwhelm us. The burden of debt, the determined way rich nations and corporations run the world economy for their advantage points us to a long struggle before justice and fullness of life can prevail. How can we sustain this struggle if we do not develop the spiritual resources that keep us connected to the cry for life from our God and our neighbour? Otherwise we will simply give in to fatigue, cynicism, and fatalism. We could be missing Christ's invitation to a deep sense of communion with him and with our sisters and brothers, an invitation that is discovered in worship but practised in living and enabled by the Spirit.

We are churches who want to live more gently on the earth. The degradation of the planet's resources, ecosystem and habitat could be facing us with more profound changes than the earth has experienced in millions of years. We have allowed ourselves to plunder the earth unchecked, but our increasing sense of spiritual connection with our groaning creation pushes us more and more to consider how we might change our lifestyles and our economic policies. The sovereignty of God calls us to treat the world as sacred, yet we spurn God's sovereignty and the earth's sacredness by treating so much of life as simply a commodity. Spirituality reveals to us a deepening sense of the God who cares for all living things, a care we, too, are called to exercise and sustain. But we need still to practise this ecologically responsible discipleship and see it inviting us into deeper partnership with Christ and the many who share this concern with us.

Communicating the gospel

Churches planted during the period of colonial mission are still using models that reflect Europe and North America of that particular time. 19th century European models of worship have been imposed on all sorts of cultures. These cultures are not always sure how to renew themselves and lift the burden of this heritage. Even where churches in the South are discovering their own cultural voice, many churches in Europe and North America are left with a voice that no longer speaks to many of their contemporaries, if indeed it still speaks to them. This hampers us in our evangelistic and celebratory tasks as churches. We have shared in a rich variety of spiritual expression: music, drama, prayer, images, word and silence. All need to take their place in our life of witness, worship, and biblical reflection.

We continually need to be seeking ways to help people connect with God, their humanity, their culture, and experience. This can be done out of the deep wells of Scripture, and especially from the promise of our Reformed vision that always looks expectantly to God to be acting. We do see churches finding new ways to express the promise of God, churches engaging in the struggle for justice, and churches adapting liturgical celebrations like the Eucharist to their context. All this draws on and deepens spirituality.

Loving our neighbour

We are churches who want to care for and care about those who suffer and those who celebrate. This is both a pastoral and a prophetic task. We have been moved and frustrated by the many stories we have heard about people and communities facing HIV/Aids. Healing is a very important theme in spirituality. Nevertheless, churches are not always places of consolation. We see ourselves building communities of hope, yet we often cut ourselves off from our neighbours and our communities. Our neighbours from other communities, other faiths, often have ideas and experiences to challenge and refresh us. We know how powerful concern for others and dialogue with others can be in enabling transformation and evangelism. We see churches doing

this and rejoice. We also know how risky and tiring it can be. Our spirituality needs to sustain us in this joyful duty.

The search for meaning in life

Spirituality seems to be something common to all peoples, a deeply rooted component of human identity. We know that people do search for meaning, not least when they suffer. Many young people lead their lives away from the church but do so searching for meaning and caring deeply about the issues of our world. We are reminded of the need for churches to be more readily open to these seekers. How much we can receive from children and young people, if we genuinely share together! Yet our worship can often assume that everyone is at the same place in her or his spiritual journey. Our worship needs to sit where people sit, addressing the issues and concerns of our daily lives through the rich stories and insights of our faith. It requires us to develop worship life beyond Sunday, to invite an outlook on life that is always expectant of God's presence there and a practice of justice, compassion, and solidarity that guides our work and our play and our shopping.

Key issues in our ecclesiological task

Spirituality and the Bible

We can see a danger for spirituality to be a form of self-centredness, to be a comforter at times when we need to be challenged. It can make us feel that our needs and issues are central to the world and to the reign of God. Thus our spirituality needs to be shaped by our biblical reflection on God's life and the life of the world, giving us points of reference beyond ourselves.

We also see the increasingly fresh ways people around us in the worldwide church are reading the Bible. Many of us are discovering, as if for the first time, that the Bible really is a profound resource for our spirituality. Indeed, it is our central resource. Stories that so often have been read against certain groups are beginning to be re-read and transformed by many of those thought unworthy of this task. There needs, then, to be a searching for the powerful questions to bring to our text and world, as we discern and hallow God's cry for life.

Spirituality and reforming our life

We are churches who seek to make room for the gifts and leadership of the whole priesthood of believers. We are still failing in this task, as many women, young people, indigenous peoples, and peoples with disabilities will testify. But we are reminded that if we are to achieve the Reformed vision of being a church that is always reforming it needs the diverse gifts, insights, and indeed spiritualities of the peoples who make up our churches. Once again we heard the conflicting stories of those who were finding that room was made for their particular and distinctive voice and of those who all too painfully were kept silenced. Achieving the full potential of this idea means the practice of community that makes room for new models of leadership, participation, worship, and service. We are also particularly concerned to see that discrimination rather than discernment marks our church life. We have heard how those with disability, especially, are not fully honoured in the church; people are resisting the necessary changes to enable their full participation. The Holy Spirit is at work in all people, but so many people's lives and gifts go unheeded.

Eucharist is still being used as a weapon to exclude others

Our celebration of Communion featured often in our discussions. We see it as one of the most special components of our worship, for as we share we are supposed to be drawn into mission and unity with Christ and each other. Yet we know, still, that there are churches refusing to ordain women, churches who use communion as a means to exclude others from the core life and story of the church. This is an aspect of our worship that can most powerfully equip us to resist, celebrate, and feel for others in the midst of everything we face. How can we remember Jesus at that table, on that night, with those disciples, and not be inspired to seek fullness of life? Far from allowing communion to divide us even within the Reformed tradition, we see it calling us once more into a passionate, generous, and joyful way of life together.

Challenge and opportunity of free and lively worship

Many of our churches around the world feel overshadowed by the free style of worship offered in many Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches. We heard stories of our congregations losing their young people to these churches. We wonder what there is for us to learn from these churches. Stories were shared of developing alternative styles of worship services, expressing different types:

traditional/contemporary/reflective. Sometimes these were resisted by groups within congregations, sometimes embraced reluctantly. Some felt there were dangers of disintegration if we have different services for different groups, but others felt it had worked when done sensitively. It seems that some churches cannot accept lively styles of worship, but we want to affirm that using drums is not a sin; clapping and dance are not disrespectful. But also we want to affirm the role of silence and meditation, of chanting, in fact all the modes of expression we could use. Being in Ghana and Africa excited us with so many examples of life-filled and lively worship and spirituality. We are grateful for all we have received from our Ghanaian hosts.

Recommendations:

1. WARC begin a serious study on Reformed perspectives on the Holy Spirit and spirituality to assist us [the member churches] in our journey towards life in fullness. This needs to be done within the regions but brought together into a global discussion.
2. WARC develop and document a theology of worship which honours the fullness of God, speaks to the diverse needs of our membership and communities, engages our cultures and honours and enriches our traditions, while raising up different worship models.
3. WARC facilitate processes of worship renewal within and between the regions in which we also face the questions of how we immerse our worship and spiritual life in the forms of our own culture. We especially encourage an interchange of all our creative methods, a sharing of musical, visual, liturgical, and biblical resources and approaches.
4. A practical and creative response be made to the issue of HIV/Aids: a gathering together of resources, stories and experiences to deepen our spirituality and its capacity to equip us to resist, celebrate, and feel for others in the midst of everything we face.
5. Noting again in our reflection on spirituality and worship the need to be sensitive and alert to issues of language and participation, we ask WARC to raise with member churches the issues shared here about divisive and exclusive practice at the Eucharist.
6. WARC remind member churches of the need to dialogue across theological divides within faith traditions and between them, if we are to enrich our spiritualities and our sense of Christ's Spirit at work amongst us.

We need to remember we must become examples of the change we are seeking.