



## Mission in unity

### A plea for concerted approaches

#### Lukas Vischer (1998)

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#### ● The issue

We have come together to reflect on the state of the Reformed churches around the world. We are all aware both of their vitality and of their deep divisions. In many countries Reformed churches bear a significant witness. Many stories could be told about renewal and outreach. Though church membership has decreased in some parts of the world, especially in industrialized countries, the past decades have generally been a period of considerable growth. The Reformed churches continue, however, to be deeply divided. In almost all countries their witness is diminished and paralysed by internal conflicts and splits. Reformed churches live in contradiction with themselves and with their witness to God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. Increasingly, their inability "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" becomes a source of embarrassment both for themselves and for their witness in the ecumenical movement.

Ten years ago the John Knox Centre began to address the issue through a series of consultations and other initiatives. A summary of the history of this project you find in the volume *From Seoul to Debrecen* which was published in preparation for the 23rd general council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1). The project was a systematic attempt to raise the consciousness of Reformed churches and to find ways to develop new approaches to the unity of the church. At one of the consultations the suggestion was made to work on a "Handbook of Reformed Churches Worldwide", ie a survey of *all* Reformed churches around the world. After several years of sustained efforts the manuscript of this handbook has now been completed (2). For the first time, detailed information about the multitude of divisions and ramifications among Reformed churches is now available.

The conclusion is inescapable. Though the vision of the one church bearing witness to God's gift of reconciliation strikes a cord in the hearts of many Reformed Christians, the Reformed churches today are not one family. Rather, they are a multifaceted movement which includes a wide range of churches with little connection among themselves and especially with little

commitment to seek and establish the communication required to give expression to the catholicity of the church.

Every age since the Reformation has contributed to this picture. A close reading of the Handbook immediately brings out the fact that present divisions are rooted in different moments of history -they are in many respects a "fossilized" legacy of the past. But it would be an error to assume that divisions are exclusively a heritage of the past. In many ways the history of dividing continues. Though many Reformed churches have prominently participated in the ecumenical movement, the past fifty years have also been a time of new disruptions within the Reformed tradition. Doctrinal disputes, political conflicts, non-coordinated missionary efforts, migration as well as power and personality clashes have led to the foundation of many new separate churches.

Very often, Reformed churches even take pride in their divisions and seek to justify them by all kinds of arguments. The minutes of the general councils of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches do not provide altogether edifying reading in this respect. There were at all times advocates of the status quo. At the general council in Pittsburgh (1921), for instance, a certain Rev JD Burrel, appealing to what he calls the "universal law of natural selection" , argues that separate development is in harmony with nature. "Protestantism", he claims, "swings out into history, not as a detached unit but as segregated clouds of star dust." Referring to the followers of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox he confidently suggests: "Let them flock by themselves and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".(3) At the following general council in Cardiff another speaker declares: "Nor have our past divisions been altogether unhappy. Secessions, disruptions, free church movements are not to be reckoned to our shame. They have largely been our glory. There was a providential reason for most of them."(4)

Of course, there is also the other line. At all times critical voices denounced the self-sufficiency of the Reformed churches. In every century initiatives were taken to restore the unity which had been broken. Many rifts which seemed incurable have been healed. Though the 19th century was also a period of new divisions, it was even more a time of new insistence on the unity of the Church. Though the missionary movement gave rise to separatist efforts, it primarily promoted a spirit of transconfessional collaboration. Around the middle of the century the ecumenical movement began to take shape - stimulated by the experience on the mission fields and also increasingly perceived as a necessity by the "sending" churches in the North.

Let me just mention one of the outstanding figures of that time - Philip Schaff (1819-1893), a theologian who, born in Europe, moved in the 1840's to the United States to teach at Mercersburg seminary. Soon after his arrival, in 1844, he challenged the division of Protestant churches in a famous speech (5). Accused of "Romanism" by "integrist" circles in his church he had to defend himself before the synod. It took many years before his leadership was generally recognized among Reformed churches in America. Schaff was among the founders of both the Evangelical Alliance and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

But at no time were ecumenical efforts strong enough to overcome the trend toward division among Reformed churches. In fact, the commitment to the ecumenical movement became itself a source of further splits, especially in the 20th century when the ecumenical movement increasingly began to have structural implications for the churches. The issue of membership in the WCC caused bitter debates in many Reformed

churches. The foundation of the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC), established in 1948 to counter-act the activities of the World Council of Churches, was largely due to the initiative of people of Reformed origin and was responsible for many splits in Reformed churches in subsequent decades (6).

Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that there is almost no country today with just one Reformed church. Reformed churches exist side by side, often without even being mutually aware of their existence. The consequences are that the Reformed churches are unable to bear a common witness at the national level; that they have difficulties relating reliably and constructively to other churches; and also that they convey a strangely confused picture of themselves at the international level.

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### ● **What are the deeper reasons for these divisions?**

Why is it that Reformed churches so easily divide? Why is it that other churches, exposed to the same pressure, are capable of greater resistance to the forces of division? Philip Schaff, in his polemic speech, identified two factors -rationalism and sectarianism. Reformed Christians tend to place too great an emphasis on pure doctrine. They tend to regard communion as the result of teaching and proclamation. Consequently, teachers and their teaching can easily lead to tensions and even conflicts. Though this observation is certainly valid it is only part of the truth. Philip Schaff was aware that the inclination toward divisions is ultimately due to a weakness in Reformed ecclesiology .Reformed Christians do not sufficiently recognize that the church is God's gift, preceding every response from the human side. The church of Jesus Christ was before we came to believe in his message. It was before the Bible was written and doctrinal standards formulated. It was before we began to respond through our evangelistic and missionary activities. Through baptism we have been incorporated into a communion which has been alive and will continue to be alive apart from us. The church is not primarily a voluntary association of believers sharing the same conviction but the pre-existing communion which provides the place for our personal itinerary of faith. With Calvin Schaff pleaded "the idea of the church, as the pillar and ground of the truth, the mother of all believers".(7) The same idea can be found in the Heidelberg Catechism where we read: "I believe that from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life; moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it (54)."

The precedence of the church finds expression in worship and in particular in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The church is in the first place a worshipping community. The Eucharist signifies God' s constantly renewed gift of communion. As we receive the gifts of bread and wine, we are reminded of our dependence in all things on the presence of Jesus Christ. Despite Calvin's intentions and hopes, the Eucharist did not become a regular part of Reformed Sunday worship. Part of the "rationalism" denounced by Schaff may have its roots in the absence of a strong eucharistic spirituality.

These considerations are no doubt pertinent. I would add three more factors which contribute to the "fissionability" of Reformed churches.

In the first place, I mention the strong emphasis on the local church in Reformed ecclesiology. For Reformed Christians the primary expression of

the church of Jesus Christ is "in each place". The biblical passage most frequently quoted in Reformed writings on the church is Mt 18.20: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them." Because of Christ's presence each local church is *the* church in the full sense of the word. Each local church is responsible for the proclamation of the word and for everything which is needed to organize its life. There is strength in this vision. It implies a strong sense of responsibility on the part of all members; they share a calling which can only be fulfilled together. The danger is "localism", ie the self-sufficiency of each local church. In principle, each congregation is part of the larger communion. The local church is not a monad but is called to contribute to the common life and witness of the local churches. The local churches form a communion. Through synods and councils they seek to agree on the major issues they are called to address at each level of the church's life. But undeniably, the system functions only to a limited extent. Though they are able to speak with one voice at the national level, at least in some countries, they have never developed ways and means which would assure co-ordination of efforts at the international level. There is a strong sense of "sovereignty" within each national church. They tend to work on their witness in society without taking cognizance of the witness of other churches. The sense of sovereignty is also the reason why missionary work is primarily regarded as the task of each national church or of agencies within each national church.

Closely connected with the aspect of national identity or "localism" is the cultural factor. Most Reformed churches have deep roots in the ethnic and linguistic traditions of their country. Because of their strong emphasis on the proclamation of the word, many Reformed churches have had a decisive influence on the development of national languages and in connection with this, on the national literature. In certain countries, especially in Europe, Reformed churches have become the guarantors of certain national cultural traditions. Problems arise especially when people migrate. Reformed churches tend to protect their cultural heritage in foreign lands by setting up separate ethnic churches. In many cases the existence of separate Reformed churches is due to linguistic and cultural factors. Only in very limited ways have Reformed churches succeeded in accommodating different ethnic and linguistic groups within one and the same church.

Finally, I mention the Reformed aversion to structures endowed with the authority of decision-making. The Reformed tradition is known for its strong emphasis on the significance and role of synods. The Westminster Confession attributes to synods the authority to "determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience. ..to receive complaints in cases of maladministration and authoritatively to determine the same; which decrees and determinations, if consonant with the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word (30)." In principle, therefore, provision is made for authoritative decision-making. But the practice is different. Decision-making processes can easily be mishandled and lead to tension and disruption. Even more important, Reformed Christians, guided by a basically individualistic spirituality, show little respect for structures of authority. Often they ignore them or openly refuse to accept their decisions; often they are prepared to withdraw from the communion if their point of view fails to prevail.

Structures are particularly ineffective at the international level. None of the international associations of Reformed churches is in a position to take

representative and binding decisions. True, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches offers in principle a platform for open debate and a framework for collaboration. But the resolutions of the general councils carry little weight with the member churches, and the organizational structure of the Alliance is too weak to provide effective co-ordination of the life and witness of the Reformed churches. general councils excel in formulating a plenitude of resolutions. But as a rule they remain pious wishes because the member churches are unwilling to make available the means which are necessary for their implementation.

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### ● **The role of mission agencies and similar institutions**

The role of mission agencies has been repeatedly considered in the framework of the Mission in Unity Project. Representatives of mission agencies have participated in all consultations, and in 1993 a special meeting was organized to discuss the implications of the Project for the work of mission agencies (8). The report of the Basel meeting calls for "a new discipline of mission" and proposes to mission agencies four common commitments.

There can be no doubt that there is an essential link between the way in which the missionary mandate is carried out and the unity of the Reformed churches in each country .The lack of co-ordination among mission agencies in the past is one of the main reasons for today's divisions among Reformed churches. Though the understanding of mission has considerably changed since the 19th and the first half of the 20th century mission agencies continue to hold a key role for the future of the Reformed churches. Through their activities they can unwillingly contribute to solidifying the status quo. But they can also become conscious agents of a movement towards new forms of unity and common witness.

Missionary efforts in the past were undertaken by agencies in particular countries. Though they were in touch with each other and were able to work together in emergency situation.- I am thinking especially of arrangements made during and after World War I -their efforts led to the foundation of separate churches. In some countries these churches united at the moment of autonomy and independence. In others the separate existence of the churches continues to this day. Nigeria provides a striking illustration: altogether eleven Reformed churches, with different missionary roots, co-exist side by side with little contact.(9) Other examples could easily be added. The missionary outreach has indeed contributed to multiplying the "segregated clouds of star dust".

Of course, the situation has significantly changed in the last decades. Since the end of World War II most mission societies have re-thought the nature of their activities and have given themselves new structures. New ways of sharing between "mother" and "daughter" churches were developed. The dominating role of mission agencies was reduced. The relationship between the "sending" and "receiving" churches was conceived and structured as a community in which each partner contributes its gifts and in which power is shared. To a certain extent important decisions are now made together. Different models have been adopted. In 1971 the churches around the former Paris mission set up the Evangelical Community for Apostolic Action (CEVAA), a "community of churches committed to mission in every place". In 1977 the former London Missionary Society and the Congregational Council for World Mission were transformed into the Council for World Mission (CWM). In 1996 the Basel Mission re-organized itself as "an intercultural and international Basel Mission Fellowship united in Jesus

Christ ..doing God's mission together as a community of solidarity which would be deepened by equality of all partners". Other examples could be given. Almost all mission agencies of Reformed or Evangelical background which have originated in the last century are working today within the perspective of "mutuality". (10)

The principles underlying this new orientation are based on a new understanding of the universality of the church. They represent the attempt to respond to the vision of a worldwide communion of local churches promoted by the ecumenical movement and especially by the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, the question must be raised whether the new orientation adopted by mission agencies is radical enough to overcome the divisions among the Reformed churches. The difficulty is that the efforts at reorganization remain within the presuppositions of the colonial era. The new associations are built on the network of relationships established by the various mission agencies. The traditional mission agencies do not any more exercise the same dominating role as in the past. But they remain nevertheless the organizing principle of the new "community of churches". Within the worldwide communion of churches they represent "sub-connections". In some countries, unwillingly, they contribute to the perpetuation of divisions. In some countries, they are involved with different churches as partners and contribute in this way to keep them separate. (11)

There are other problems. The new communities of churches as a rule include the churches which have resulted from the 'classical' missionary movement. They hardly relate to churches which have more recently come into existence. There are churches which continue to do missionary work along the perspectives of the past. There are individuals or groups of Reformed or Presbyterian inspiration who are independently founding churches in various parts of the world. There are, above all, the new transnational missionary initiatives of younger churches, especially in Korea and Northern India. How can they find proper recognition? How can a minimum of collaboration be established? In the last few decades a large number of new small Reformed churches have come into existence. Their witness is generally ignored, and there are no means within the Reformed family to integrate them into the wider Reformed family. Let me mention the examples of two countries. Many mission agencies maintain relations with the Church of Bangladesh. But what about the two Presbyterian Churches in the area of the Hilltracts which have been founded in recent years and which report that they have no relations with any missions agencies? Through various initiatives a wide range of Reformed and Presbyterian churches have been founded in Uganda. Who is in a position to provide them with a common platform?

Despite considerable efforts at restructuring relationships, a concerted approach to "mission in unity" in each country is far from assured. To achieve this, further efforts at coordination would be required. Lines of communication between the missionary institutions of *all* churches would need to be established.

Can the World Alliance of Reformed Churches offer the platform for such coordination? The answer to this question is far from obvious. In order to become an effective instrument of "mission in unity", considerable changes in both perspectives and structure would be necessary.

The Alliance was founded to strengthen the unity and the common witness of the Reformed churches. To facilitate world mission was one its main purposes in the early days. The first constitution explicitly states that the Alliance was "to entertain all subjects directly connected with the

evangelization of the world, such as the distribution of missionary work, the combination of church energies, especially in large cities and destitute districts". The spirit of the missionary movement could be felt at general councils and guided the work in between Councils. Reports on both foreign and home missions, very often also on the mission to Jews were prepared for each Council. Speakers regularly addressed issues connected with the progress of mission. At an early date, a number of churches which had come into existence through the missionary movement were admitted as members of the Alliance; in particular the Presbyterian Church in Korea.

At the same time, the Alliance consistently supported the movement towards church union. The initiatives in India and other places were commented upon at general councils, and later the Alliance, in contrast to the Lutheran World Federation, adopted the policy that united churches could become full members of the Alliance. In 1970 the Alliance united with the Council of Congregational Churches, the only transconfessional "union" which has ever taken place at the international level.

At no point in history was the Alliance a strong body capable of effective operational activities at the level of individual countries. The fact was lamented at every second general council. At the general council in Pittsburgh, for instance, Rev RC Reed was asked to offer a critical assessment of the performance of the Alliance. He declared that the Alliance had helped to create a new atmosphere among Reformed churches, but that it had failed to do enough "for the welfare of the churches". (12)

A turning point in the history of the Alliance occurred after World War II. The World Council of Churches was about to be founded. The Alliance decided to give unconditional support to the new ecumenical venture. A study on the calling of the Reformed churches was commissioned. It concluded that the supreme purpose of the Alliance was not "to promote world Presbyterianism as an end in itself but to make the Reformed tradition the servant of God's redemptive purposes through the wider agency of the church universal... We are charged by God to see to it that the resurgence of denominationalism which is manifest around the globe shall not become sectarian... Let Presbyterians be, in the best sense of the word, ecumenical Presbyterians." (13)

Accordingly, it was decided to move the headquarters of the Alliance to Geneva and develop close working relations with the World Council of Churches. "What is the task of a confessional alliance as ours?", asked Henri d'Espine at the general council of Princeton in 1954, and gave the answer which was shared by the whole leadership of the Alliance: "To strive to become superfluous!" Everything which could be done jointly with other churches in the framework of the World Council of Churches should therefore not be done separately.

From then on issues connected with the mission of the church disappeared from the agenda of the Alliance. The hope was that new common departures would become possible within the framework of the ecumenical movement. Churches in the north but even more in the south would grow into a wider unity and bear a common witness to the kingdom of God.

It is obvious that this hope did not materialize. Despite the efforts of the WCC, divisions among the churches persisted. The WCC served as a platform to reformulate the understanding of mission. The harvest of the ecumenical reflection on the meaning, purpose and adequate structures of mission is certainly impressive. The WCC has developed a coherent vision of "mission today". But the vision was not strong enough to change the

situation in individual countries. When the participation in the ecumenical movement widened in the sixties to include the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, the agenda became even more unmanageable. The WCC was less and less equipped to deal with the particular issues of internal Reformed divisions!

An unsatisfactory situation arose. Since the Alliance had opted for the support of the WCC, the pressing concerns of the Reformed churches remained unattended. There was no international agency left to promote the overall unity of Reformed churches, to address issues they were facing, and to intervene in situations of crisis. More and more Reformed churches joined the Alliance - their number more than doubled in the decades since World War II - but there were no ways and means available to give consistency to their fellowship both internationally and within each country.

I am not pleading, of course, for a return to confessionalist positions. The developments of the last decades have opened new perspectives among the traditions claiming the heritage of the Reformation. Dialogues at the international level with Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, Methodists and others have shown that the divisions among the churches of the Reformation can in principle be overcome. New departures have in particular become possible between Reformed and Lutheran churches. The Formula of Agreement whose adoption will be celebrated later this year by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and three Reformed Churches in the United States opens new perspectives of collaboration also in the field of mission.

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### ● Next steps

What then could be the way forward? Let me offer a few tentative reflections based on reports of previous consultations organized by the Mission in Unity Project.

**1.** To advance on the road to a clearer expression of our communion in Christ, "a *movement or process* is needed whereby the Reformed churches can joyfully, faithfully and energetically go forward with a new commitment to mission and unity" (Consultation 1991). Unity is not simply a matter of re-structuring. It touches on deep theological and spiritual issues. There is need for a common theological reflection on the implications on unity and division for our faith and witness. Appeals are not enough. Unity can only be reached "through the support of committed people" who are prepared to contribute to the advance of unity. In many cases a conversion is required. Prayer and intercession, both public and personal, are essential dimensions of the movement.

**2.** Reformed churches need to become more fully aware of one another. Today, they have on the whole only a limited knowledge of the extent of the Reformed family. Ways need to be found to promote mutual information and to share stories of the past and the present. Regular intercessory prayers will greatly contribute to increased mutual knowledge. Issues of mission in unity should be given a more prominent place in theological education. The Handbook of Reformed Churches Worldwide may serve as a useful tool in this respect. A brief commentary on the Handbook could possibly make the information more accessible

**3.** The movement needs to proceed at all levels at the same time, but primarily, of course, at the level of each country, How can the Reformed churches within one and the same country come closer to one another?

Breakthroughs can only be achieved through initiatives of the churches themselves. The first step will probably need to be an analysis of the situation. Which churches are represented in the country? What is their history? What are the factors keeping them apart? What are the chances of a rapprochement? What are the most appropriate forms of collaboration? Experience shows that the road towards communion can only be covered step by step. The first step may be the setting up of associations of Reformed churches as they exist today in Congo-Kinshasa, Chile and Korea. Closer forms of unity may follow. In some cases such associations may include churches of a different confessional background, eg Disciples, Lutheran or Methodist.

**4.** As a rule such initiatives cannot occur without being stimulated from outside. The role of both the Alliance and of regional bodies is indispensable in this respect.

**5.** Mission agencies or communities of churches represented in the same country need to establish working relations among themselves -not in order to dictate solutions but to offer a common service to the churches and to strengthen through a common effort the forces of unity in each of the churches.

**6.** To get the movement going, to guide and to hold it together, a focus at the international level is required. This consultation may be well advised to name, or to suggest the nomination of, a "monitoring group". It could be located in the framework of the Alliance. But good reasons can also be put forward in favour of a certain independence from the Alliance. The movement towards more communion will often have to deal with churches outside the membership of the Alliance.

**7.** Plans for the future will have to be tentative and modest. Projects which are too ambitious are bound to fail. Too often, especially in Reformed circles, the perfect is the enemy of the possible. At this stage, a trial period of three years could be envisaged. Steps could be undertaken in a few countries. In the light of the experience gained, plans will need to be re-considered. *Solvitur ambulando!*

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Originally published in *And the Net was not Torn*, John Knox Series no.10 (Geneva: JKIRC, 1998), pp.41-52.

## Notes

1. "Mission in Unity" in *From Seoul to Debrecen* (Geneva, 1997), pp.155-160.

2. Jean Jacques Bauswein / Lukas Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

3. Proceedings of the 11th general council, Pittsburgh, 1921 (Edinburgh, 1922), p.84.

4. Proceedings of the 12th general council, Cardiff, 1925 (Edinburgh, 1926), p.43.

5. *The Principle of Protestantism as Related to the Present State of the Church*, Chambersburg 1845; cf. David S. Schaff: *The Life of Philip Schaff*, 1897, p.106ff..

6. The declared purpose of the International Council of Christian Churches was "to give constructive testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ and to stand against the World Council of Churches", cf. *The Reformed Family Worldwide*.

7. David Schaff, op. cit. p.110..

8. "A New Discipline of Mission" in *Mission in Unity*, John Knox Series no.8, pp.33-37.

9. cf. *Mission in Unity*, John Knox Series 8, pp. 26-27 and 55-60.

10. A detailed survey can be found in a recent issue of the *International Review of Mission*. John Brown, "International Relationships in Mission, a Study Project", IRM vol.86, 342 (July 1997), pp.207-274.

11. John Brown rightly remarks: "The present partnership arrangements encourage local churches to think that they can obtain resources from a partner overseas to undertake their mission tasks unilaterally, instead of being forced to talk with their immediate local partners of a different tradition, and plan mission together. So are our international networks of mission fellowship counter-productive of mission in unity?" Op. cit., p.271.

12. Proceedings of the 11th general council (Pittsburgh, 1921), Edinburgh 1922, p. 187.

13. WARC executive committee meeting in Basle, Switzerland 1951, quoted in Proceedings of the 17th general council (Princeton, 1954), pp.115.