

LETTER FROM ACCRA WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

Some say a miracle took place at the August 2004 meeting of the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Accra, Ghana, West Africa. At its previous gathering in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997, that church body, which embraces 218 Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, and United denominations with 75 million members in 107 countries, had chosen the theme from Isaiah 58:6, "... break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free," and asked all the member churches to consider the call to confess their faith in the God who overcomes oppression and injustice. At Accra they chose John 10:10: "... that all may have life in fullness." This time they came to an extraordinary consensus that they must challenge their church family to covenant for justice in the economy and the earth. For many it was like a conversion experience, as they testify in these opening paragraphs of the Letter from Accra:

Our most moving and memorable moments came from our visit to Elmina and Cape Coast, two "castles" on the Coast of Ghana that held those who had been captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over brutal centuries, 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died. On this trade in humans as commodities, wealth in Europe was built. Through their labor, sweat, suffering, intelligence and creativity, the wealth of the Americas was developed.

At the Elmina Castle, the Dutch merchants, soldiers, and governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door ("For the Lord has chosen Zion..."). And we imagined Reformed Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and horror of those dungeons. For more than two centuries in that place this went on.

In angry bewilderment we thought, "How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?" Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation. Those who are Reformed Christians have always declared God's sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forbears of Reformed faith deny so blatantly what they believed so clearly? Yet, as we listened to the voices today from our global fellowship, we discovered the mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those whose blindness we decried. For today's world is divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice and ecological destruction who still suffer and die.

The Letter from Accra goes on to affirm, "the world today lives under the shadow of an oppressive empire," i.e., "the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces throughout the globe that reinforce the division between the rich and the poor." "This is not just another 'issue' to be 'addressed.' Rather, it goes to the heart of our confession of faith. How can we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord over all life and not stand against all that denies the promise of fullness of life to the world?"

How will we respond to the challenge from our sister churches?