



## Lukas Vischer: Mission in Unity

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

World Alliance of Reformed Churches (ed.): *Reformed World*, vol. 47 No. 1, March 1997, 33-39.

### 2. Historical Context

The Mission in Unity Project was launched by Lukas Vischer, moderator of the Theology Department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the John Knox Center Geneva in 1988. The 1997 WARC General Council in Debrecen declared the project to become one of WARC's priorities.

### 3. Summary

If Reformed churches complain that progress in the ecumenical movement is slow, the grumble rebounds on them: Many Reformed Christians are strongly committed to the search for unity in the ecumenical movement, yet they are apparently incapable of maintaining the "bond of unity" among themselves. The 1989 WARC General Council urged member churches to re-examine their relations and seek to overcome the dividing lines. In particular, it urged mission societies to include more consistently in their activities the criterion of unity. Every division has its own history and profile. Top of the list come disagreement about doctrine and order, spiritual and ethical issues. Often enough, theology serves to cover political or material interests or personal ambitions of strong personalities. Planting splits through mission and migration continues today.

Why do *Reformed* churches split up so easily? The message of the Reformation could give rise to the misunderstanding that fellowship follows automatically from faith in Christ. Discipleship of Christ, however, includes a "discipline of communion". The celebration of the Lord's Supper constantly reminds us that the communion of the church was there long before we became integrated into it; it cannot be put at stake on account of the personal opinions, interests and visions of its individual limbs. A further reason lies in the Reformed tendency to emphasize the local church. Even if this leads to a strong sense of responsibility and participation, the witness required today presupposes a fellowship which cuts across the boundaries between people, nations, languages, races and classes.

How can the present divided state be overcome? There is need for reliable information about Reformed churches in the same country. A WARC "Handbook of Reformed Churches World-wide" is intended to meet this need. There is also need to reflect theologically on the fact of division; differing theological schools can split a church. And: people need to get engaged in prayer and new initiatives. WARC itself has no power of authority. Steps towards new forms of communion must be instigated by the churches. But WARC can serve as a mirror held up before the churches to make them aware of their divided state and its implications for the wider family. It can contribute to improving the communication among the churches and share with them initiatives which have been taken in certain countries. It can help to put the right partners in touch with one another, e.g. missionary societies; and it can share the fruits of Reformed theological thinking with the "universe" of Reformed theological schools. – The issues arising from the Mission in Unity project have to do with the *credibility* of Reformed witness today. Are we to remain the prisoners of our history? Or are we capable of a witness pointing to the power of the Gospel to reconcile and bring together?

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## Mission in Unity

Lukas Vischer

### More and More Fragmentation

The Reformed churches live in a glasshouse and must not throw stones. If they complain that progress in the ecumenical movement is slow, the grumble rebounds on them. For they are, after all, deeply divided among themselves. There is hardly a country where several Reformed churches do not exist side by side. To some extent this is an inheritance from the past, but some of the divisions are of recent making. Reformed churches constantly succumb to the temptation to solve their internal tensions and disagreements by splitting up. On the one hand, many Reformed Christians are strongly committed to the search for unity and common witness in the ecumenical movement, yet on the other, they are apparently incapable of maintaining the 'bond of unity' among themselves. Divisions among Reformed churches are such a frequent occurrence that they are not even felt to be a novelty. Admittedly, in the past two decades unions have come about in some places between formerly divided churches—the union between the two Presbyterian churches in the United States, for instance, or the rapprochement between two Reformed churches in the Netherlands, or the union of the Black and Coloured Reformed churches in South Africa. All in all, however, there has been little change in the overall picture. The general trend continues to be towards division.

For a long time the Reformed churches did not seem unduly troubled by this contradiction. 'That's the way it is,' was the comment, often accompanied by an almost complacent smile, as though the tendency to division were a regrettable but nonetheless distinctive characteristic of the Reformed tradition, perhaps even the sign of a particular vitality. Recently, however, there has been a change. Awareness is growing that division cannot simply be tolerated. If the Reformed churches want to bear a common witness today, ways have to be found to put an end to the continuing fragmentation.

A first step in this direction was taken even before the 22nd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Seoul. In 1988, a consultation on mission and unity was held in the John Knox Centre in Geneva.<sup>1</sup> At the centre

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<sup>1</sup> *Mission and Unity: The Reformed family and its mandate*, John Knox Series 6 (Geneva: Centre international réformé John Knox, 1989).

of the debates was the question: 'How can we form, across national boundaries, one communion committed to the missionary mandate given to the apostles?' The General Council itself (1989) took up the challenge. In an open letter it urged member churches to challenge the boundaries of division in their midst. In each country, the churches should re-examine their relations and seek to overcome the dividing lines. In particular, the General Council urged mission societies to include more consistently in their activities the criterion of unity. The John Knox Centre has continued efforts in this direction since then. In 1992 a conversation took place with representatives of Reformed mission societies and, in the following year, a larger consultation attempted to analyse in greater depth the situation in three particular countries—Brazil, Korea and Nigeria—and, on that basis, to draw up recommendations to all Reformed churches.<sup>2</sup> In 1995, at a further consultation, attention focussed on ethnic factors in the life of the churches.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why are the Reformed Churches so Divided?**

The reasons are as numerous as the divisions themselves; every division has its own history and profile. Top of the list come disagreements about doctrine and order, about spiritual and ethical issues or political orientation. The majority of Reformed divisions originate, at least ostensibly, in disputes of this nature. But in most cases several factors are involved at once. On the face of things the disagreement seems to concern a theological question, but in reality political or material interests are at work in the background. Often enough, theology serves to cover much less noble motives! Not infrequently divisions can also be traced to the personal ambitions of strong personalities. Lust for leadership is one of the most formidable obstacles to the unity of the church.

There are also other reasons. In some countries, migration and mission are responsible for the proliferation of Reformed churches. The horizon of Reformed churches tends to be bound by the national context. They feel, argue, decide and act as national churches. So, when members of one church migrate to another country it seems quite natural to them to found a church 'in their own image'. To take the example of the United States, a good many of the different Reformed churches there go back to the arrival of immigrants from different

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<sup>2</sup> *Mission in Unity: Toward deeper Communion between Reformed Churches world-wide*, John Knox Series 8 (Geneva: Centre international réformé John Knox, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> *Mission in Unity: Ethnicity, Migration and the Unity of the Church*, John Knox Series 9 (Geneva: Centre international réformé John Knox, 1995).

backgrounds—Scots, Dutch, German, and more recently, Hungarians, Koreans and Chinese. Although they all shared the same Reformed tradition, they were not able even in the second and third generation to come together in one Reformed church.

And the same applies to the missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. In many countries it led to the founding of several Reformed churches. Because each sending church carried out 'its own' mission separately, the churches which sprang up also remained separate. Nigeria and Mozambique are good examples. What might have been achieved without too much difficulty in the early days has meanwhile become practically impossible. Now that each of the Reformed churches has its own history, they have a long way to go if they are to come together.

Planting splits through mission continues today. In some countries, Reformed missionaries are at work without much consideration for one another. Albania can be cited as an illustration. Ten years ago, the communist government officially declared Albania to be an atheist country. After the fall of communism, missionaries in many countries felt particularly attracted by this country. Today, more than 150 groups, a good many among them Reformed, seek to establish evangelical communities. So far, only timid efforts have been made to co-ordinate initiatives and to work towards a truly Albanian church. If no measures are taken now, these communities will either die or develop into separate denominations.

Today's Korean missionary efforts deserve special mention. For two decades, thousands of Korean missionaries have been at work in almost all countries of the world. Their commitment and zeal for the cause of the gospel are exemplary and impressive. But, on the whole, the same unfortunate process as in the 19th century is being reproduced. Only in a small minority of cases are agreements made with existing Reformed churches. Instead, new 'Korean Presbyterian' churches are founded and, because the Korean missionaries belong to already divided churches in their own country, their efforts lead to the establishment of several new churches. Is this really necessary? Do we really have to repeat the errors of earlier periods?

### **A Challenge to Reformed Self-Understanding**

Why is it that Reformed churches in particular so easily fall prey to the temptation of division? It cannot be simply a matter of outside circumstances. Other churches are no less exposed to pressures of division but seem to possess greater inner resources that enable them to maintain unity. Why do Reformed churches split up so easily? It cannot, either, be simply a matter of moral

deficiency. The reasons lie ultimately in a distorted understanding of the church. The great discovery of the Reformation—that salvation is granted by grace to all who believe in their hearts and confess God’s love—went hand in hand with a radical criticism of the medieval church. Any claim by the church to be the mediator of God’s gracious presence was emphatically called into question. The communion of the church was seen as part of the response to God’s gift of grace. The liberating message of the Reformation could therefore easily give rise to the misunderstanding that the fellowship follows automatically from faith in Christ. In fact, it is anything but automatic. It is part of God’s gift—and must be cultivated and cared for by the members of the church. The body can only develop if the individual parts are prepared to be incorporated into the whole. The discipleship of Christ includes a ‘discipline of communion’. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper constantly reminds us that the communion of the church was there long before we became integrated into it and cannot be put at stake on account of the personal opinions, interests and visions of its individual limbs.

A second important reason for division lies, as we have seen, in the fact that the Reformed have an inadequate understanding of the universal nature of the church. They tend to emphasize the significance of the local church. Christ’s presence—this was the conviction of the Reformers—is independent from the hierarchy. ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.’ From the beginning the Reformed have thus placed great importance on the authority of the local church. They are less universally constituted than other churches. The emphasis has obvious strengths. It leads to a strong sense of responsibility and participation in the local church. But the witness required from us today presupposes a fellowship which cuts across the boundaries between people, nations, languages, races and classes—not just as a pious wish but in practice. The words of the creed ‘I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church’ need to be fleshed out. The ‘theology of the local church’ needs to be supplemented by a ‘theology of the universal church’.

### **Moving towards New Forms of Communion**

How can the present divided state be overcome? In the first place, there is need for reliable and accurate information. One of the consequences of the limited horizon of the Reformed churches is that they have in the main only a hazy notion of the Reformed churches world-wide. Often, Reformed churches are not even aware of the existence of other Reformed churches in the same country. The John Knox Centre has therefore taken the initiative to produce a ‘Handbook of Reformed Churches World-wide’. It is an attempt to list and describe in one volume all Reformed churches, whether or not they are members

of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The project has proved to be much more complicated than we anticipated in the beginning. The lack of lines of communication among the various Reformed groups made it extremely difficult to get access to detailed information, but over the last months work has advanced. A first draft may be available by the time of the General Council, and we hope to publish the book in the course of next year. Such a Handbook is indispensable as a tool to promote the process of unity. Without a clear picture of the present situation it is impossible to take any initiatives.

To advance towards new forms of unity new approaches in theological thinking are required. There is, of course, an abundant Reformed literature on the church. In fact, Reformed theologians have given, relatively, much attention to ecclesiology. On the whole, however, theological presentations of Reformed thinking on the nature of the church remain general and bear little relationship to the actual life of Reformed churches today. There is urgent need to reflect more consistently on the fact of division. Why is it that, throughout the centuries up to the present, the Reformed churches have so easily split? What are the weaknesses in their theology and spirituality which allow divisions to occur? Generally, these questions are avoided in Reformed circles. They need to be squarely addressed.

An important dimension of unity is theological education. In many countries, theological schools are among the factors of division. Differing theological orientations can split a church. They can also deepen and entrench existing divisions. Exchanges between theological schools at the level of both teaching staff and students are therefore crucially important to the unity of the Reformed churches in the long term. From the beginning, the Reformed tradition manifested itself in a variety of ways and the spread of Reformed thinking to new contexts has further increased this plurality. In the light of this history it is predisposed to accommodate diverse forms in its midst. Unity among Reformed churches is conceivable only if dialogue can develop among these different forms. Theology must therefore never be confined to like-minded circles.

Careful analyses? New theological perspectives in the understanding of the church? Can they in themselves have any real impact on the state of division? As necessary as they are they will not make the decisive difference. A step beyond studies and thinking is needed. To break the trend towards division a 'movement' is required. People need to get engaged in prayer and new initiatives. New lines of communication must be established. Unity is not an abstract notion. It ultimately consists of persons prepared to serve as 'living stones' in the temple of the Spirit.



### **The Role of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches**

The main initiative can certainly not come from the Alliance. Since it has no power of authority it cannot issue directions to Reformed churches. Steps towards new forms of communion must be instigated by the churches themselves. Anything that is to have enduring status in the Reformed churches has to grow from below. Change can therefore only occur if the movement towards unity is actively supported by the churches themselves.

That is not to say that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has no role to play at all. On the contrary, no advance is possible without an international forum enabling the churches to coordinate their efforts. If the confession of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is not to remain an abstract notion a framework is required within which the universality of the church can be put into practice. The churches therefore cannot do without the Alliance. They need its service as a 'midwife' of unity.

The following aspects seem to me important in this connection:

1. The Alliance can serve as a mirror held up before the churches to make them aware of their divided state and its implications for the wider family. Often, churches do not realize the extent to which their division constitutes a hindrance for the common witness of the churches. Often, they get used to the state of division and no longer see the contradictions inherent in the present situation. The Alliance can help them to see themselves through the eyes of others.
2. The Alliance can contribute to improving the communication among the churches. By relating consistently to all Reformed churches within the same country it can help to overcome deadlocks and impasses. To take new initiatives direct encounters are required. It might be a good idea to organize in the coming years 'mission-in-unity-team-visits' to as many countries as possible.
3. The Alliance can share with the churches initiatives which have been taken in certain countries. Often, the status quo is maintained because there is no vision for an alternative approach. There are no universally applicable models of cooperation and union but there is no doubt that the experience in one place can serve as an incentive in another.
4. The Alliance can help to put the right partners in touch with one another. A good example are the missionary societies. As we have already seen, many Reformed divisions are due to separate missionary initiatives. It is therefore crucially important that the missionary societies, to the extent that they are still active, should together serve all Reformed churches in a given country. This does not happen spontaneously. A deliberate effort will have to be

made. Each missionary society represents a little international 'world' of its own and has a tendency to conceive of its activity in terms of its own history and experience. Much remains to be done in this respect. At the same time, the Alliance can seek to provide services in situations where new missionary initiatives are initiated.

5. The Alliance can share the fruits of Reformed theological thinking with the 'universe' of Reformed theological schools. They need to be made more fully aware both of the common sources and of present developments in Reformed theological thinking. There is urgent need for building common perspectives in Reformed teaching.

### **Conclusion**

The issues arising from the Mission in Unity project are more than just a 'theme' to be discussed here and there. They have to do with the credibility of Reformed witness today. Are we to remain the prisoners of our own history? Or are we capable of a witness pointing to the power of the gospel to reconcile and bring together? The General Council in Debrecen can give an impetus to a movement of healing and renewal.

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