

Reformed Ecumenical Council

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REC News Exchange

Dutch Synod Offers Critical Reflections on Baptism Renewal Ceremonies

Netherlands – The church has to be careful that baptismal renewal ceremonies do not resemble baptism or be perceived by the person renewing baptism as a re-baptism. Such perceptions would be contrary to the essence of baptism.

These sentiments were offered by Dutch synodical delegates at the synod of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN). They had a chance September 26 for a general discussion of a report that had been eight years in study and preparation. The drafters of the report will take the discussion under consideration and offer a final proposal for adoption in 2009.

An evangelical work group had put the question to the PKN's predecessors back in 2000. They remarked on a growing sense that people needed to affirm baptism, when they returned to the church later in life. People who were baptized as infants but experienced no training or church life as they grew up were experiencing faith as a new thing, and wanted a significant ritual to mark their conversion.

After some preparatory studies, the PKN synod ap-

pointed a group to study the liturgy of such a baptismal renewal, confirmation or commemoration. They proposed ways of doing it where no greater amount of water was used than in the original baptism, and where the minister remained apart from the ritual itself. Only the believer confirming his or her baptism would touch the water. A select group of three theologians who examined the ritual proposals also came with a positive recommendation.

Many delegates had difficulty with the very idea of baptismal renewal. They thought it was based on a misperception of the meaning of baptism. "God is the agent in baptism," one argued, "and humans are never the actor in the act of baptism." Others suggested that the act of confession of faith and participation in the Lord's Supper were already ceremonies where baptism is confirmed.

On the other side, some felt such remarks did not come to grips with the reality of the question in people's lives. It would be a shame, they argued, if the synod does not return to this question just from fear. Cees van der Kooi, chair of the theologians' group, said the synod must do something with this question. "Otherwise, we turn as a church back to a culture of rationality," he said. "It is more logical to

give room for these expressions."

Several delegates also noted that this discussion came in the midst of a deeper and wider discussion about the meaning of baptism taking place in the PKN. (Kerkinformatie)

Reformed Church in Japan Suspends REC Membership

Japan – At its synod October 21-23, the Reformed Church in Japan voted to suspend its membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Council. According to a letter from Yasunori Ichikawa, the chair of the RCJ's International Ecumenism and Mission Cooperation, the proposal passed by an overwhelming majority.

Ichikawa noted that the RCJ has been concerned for some years about the theological and confessional integrity within the REC. With the prospect of joining the members of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the RCJ perception of the decline of the REC was confirmed. "The union of the REC with the WARC inevitably broadens or lowers the confessional basis of the WCRC," he wrote. He added that it was inconceivable that large international organizations

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The REC Executive Committee responded to the RCJ letter, acknowledging the seriousness of the RCJ decision. They pointed with gratitude to the many contributions the RCJ leaders have made to the REC in the past decades, and said the list of such contributions would be long.

They pointed out that the new WCRC Constitution was a strong document that will have a profound effect on the new organization, and that the idea of communion would require some mutual accountability in ecumenical relations. They noted that they were grieved that the RCJ took this decision without notifying the REC beforehand. Finally, they offered to meet with the RCJ to “have a serious dialogue about the reasons for your suspension and to seek ways that we could still modify the process toward the WCRC so that you could again find a place in our fellowship.”

Attacks Plague India

India—After masked gunmen stormed through Mumbai, Christians in the country and throughout the world rushed to condemn the killings. Leaders in the country are reporting a new “sense of panic” in light of the viciousness of the attacks. The attacks have been called “evil” and they have appealed to Christians and churches to “pray for peace

and reconciliation.” The Rev. Enos Das Pradhan, general secretary of the Church of North India commented, “It is a national shame that tourists from other countries . . . have been targeted.”

Meanwhile, Christians in Orissa are rejoicing at a small concession given to them by the government of Orissa. In the past two months, violence has ravaged the area where more than 5000 houses, 200 churches, and 40 religious institutions have been destroyed because of inter-religious conflict. After a decision from India’s federal Supreme Court, the Orissa state government has announced that there will be compensation for places of worship damaged in the violence. The only catch is that the compensation will only come to those whose buildings are situated on land owned by the religious group in questions. Several village churches are built on private land not registered to a religious organization. (ENI)

WARC Calls for New Order

United States—Following a meeting of the G20, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is urging the world to consider the ramifications of a global financial crisis on smaller, poorer countries. WARC representative Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth noted that the current financial crisis “demonstrates the urgent need for a new global economic order which puts people at the center and which recognizes the neces-

sity for a broader and more inclusive discourse on the imbalance in the global power structures.”

Other church groups in poorer nations are acknowledging the “painful consequences” for their poor. The Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America said that the current, failing system “promises the fallacy of saving their world by means of creating wealth and prosperity, attributing to itself sovereignty over life and demanding loyalty equivalent to idolatry.” The G20 is made up of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, the European Union and the United States. (ENI)

Ghana Churches Respond Differently to Upcoming Election

Ghana—In light of the upcoming elections, church groups have had different responses to encourage participation of their members. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana has stated that it will not change its day of worship to accommodate the Sunday, December 7 elections. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana has directed its chapels through the country to remain closed during the election and instead hold their worship services

on Saturday evening. (Christian Observer Newsletter)

Zimbabwean Christians still Searching for Solution

Zimbabwe – Months after the contested presidential election, the government of Robert Mugabe and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change still have not come to an agreement as to how to share power. Christians and church leaders both in Zimbabwe and around the world are condemning the current political situation and praying for a satisfactory resolution that seeks to protect the damaged country and its people. Zimbabwean church leaders have renewed their commitment to working together toward a peaceful resolution. After acknowledging their failures, the church leaders said that their “movement for unity must rapidly gather momentum and cascade through the church, her leadership, structures and people. Only then will the church be able to address truth, reconciliation and healing in Zimbabwe.” Christians in the country are continuing to pray asking for peace, reconciliation and the healing of the economy.

The increase in prayers follows the failure of the SADC (South African Development Community) to find an agreeable solution to the current political impasse. Religious leaders from around the world are now criticizing the rest of the African nations for their failure to ad-

dress the “growing humanitarian catastrophe” or to question the “illegitimacy of the current government.” The statement, signed by leaders from the WCC, LWF, WARC, World YMCA, World Student Christian Federation and the World Alliance of YMCAs, declared, “It is time to give priority to the people through servant leadership instead of self-serving power politics.” The leaders devoted a lot of time to discuss the continually deteriorating humanitarian situation, noting the cholera outbreak that is taking lives and the fact that many people are now existing on wild fruit.

Meanwhile, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa also drew attention to Zimbabwe in a newsletter from its executive board. The situation in Zimbabwe has passed all measures of desperation, and the only solution remaining is outside intervention, they said. The people of Zimbabwe have suffered so much that there is no way any solution can be found inside the country, even with United Nations mediation.

The DRC executive committee supported the recent South African government decision to grant 300 million Rand (US\$28.8 million) to Zimbabwe, but pressed for a deep audit of the funds to see that they went for the intended help. The results should be communicated to the South African public in a transparent way.

The executive further urged its congregations and members to help Zimbabweans in whatever way they could. (ENI, DRC)

Violence Rages Again in Jos, Nigeria

Nigeria – Following an election for local council members November 27, violence broke out when officials delayed announcing the outcome. On November 28, speculation circulated that the party backed by most Christians had won, and Muslim gangs began attacking local Christians. The rumor was confirmed when officials announced on Saturday, November 29, that the Christian-backed People’s Democratic Party had won 16 of the 17 seats on the council.

Fighting raged through the city on Saturday. American missionary teacher Denny McCain reported that all the churches near to his residence were burned. Fifty-seven people had taken refuge in his house, and another 40 in a nearby teacher’s home.

Estimates of the deaths ranged as high as 400. McCain described a visit to a local hospital as carnage, “a war scene with blood everywhere.”

Government troops appeared to have quieted the mobs by Saturday evening, arresting about 500 persons who had been roaming the streets.

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In 2004, an estimated 700 people died during Christian-Muslim clashes. The clashes have roots in the fact that the Muslim community is mainly migrants from the north, while the Christians have been the longer-term indigenous residents. Language, property, privilege and power lie beneath the religious nature of the clashes. (BBC, Compass Direct, McCain email)

Vietnam Government Grants Legal Status to the Presbyterian Church

Vietnam – The government of Vietnam has granted legal status to the Presbyterian Church of Vietnam, following their first General Assembly in more than 30 years. The PCVN, which is also the newest member of the Reformed Ecumenical

Council, last gathered in 1975, but was given permission to gather again in September, 2008. Under the new status, the PCVN will have rights for relief and mission activities, will be able to construct buildings and own property, open bank accounts, and so on. The PCVN views the recognition as a significant turning point, and will hold a special worship service December 21 to celebrate it.



A Prayer for God's Blessing for our Readers for Christmas and the New Year

Richard L. van Houten, editor. Samantha Beuker, contributing editor. The *News Exchange* is available electronically. To subscribe, visit our web site, www.recweb.org, or write to rec@recweb.org. All articles in this *News Exchange* are the responsibility of the editor. References at the end of the articles refer to published sources, which are edited for this publication. This publication is offered free to individuals and by subscription to First World institutions. For those who are able we suggest an annual donation of US\$15.00 to help cover costs. Change of address should be sent directly to the REC Secretariat. ISSN 0033-6904

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In this last issue of 2008, on behalf of the staff and Executive Committee of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, I would like to express my gratitude for your reading and responses to this newsletter. It is a service of the REC to foster communication among our members, and it reaches a wider audience as well.

As we celebrate the birth of the King, may His coming bring light into your lives and joy into your hearts.



At the end of each year, we also appeal to our friends to help us. It costs a modest amount to produce and distribute the *News Exchange*, and of course, there are costs in running an international organization like ours. Our member churches are our primary supporters, but there are always some special needs. If you wish to support our Library and Textbook Program, or our Leadership Development Network, you find information about those on our web site. You will also find ways to contribute described there (<http://www.recweb.org/index.php?section=159>).

Thanks,