Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity

Ideas for the 21st Century

edited by Shirley J. Roels
foreword by Setri Nyomi

The Calvin Press • Calvin College
in association with
the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Fostering Communion and Justice: Twin Roles for the Church

An Interview with the Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay

Shirley J. Roels: The church is a communion of varied people and groups. But what is its role in contrast with the role of other related organizations, institutions, and groups, particularly as the church engages in global culture? The World Communion of Reformed Churches has twin emphases that it believes are mutually reinforcing, one on communion, and the other on justice. Let’s think together about these two emphases of the church for its members and society. First, let’s talk about the church’s role in fostering communion. What are some of the essential aspects of how the church cultivates the communion of the saints, as only the church as Christ’s body can do? Yes, there are other groups like para-church ministries or Bible study fellowships, but are there some ways in which only the church can foster communion?

Jerry Pillay: I think in the first instance, talking about communion and justice, inasmuch as we in the WCRC say, these are closely related and interrelated, and you can’t quite do the one without the other. Yet it must be true to say that a lot of people think differently about that. I have found that in circles where I travel, there are people who tend to separate communion and justice and see those two separate entities somewhat coming together for the common good. But biblically speaking and theologically thinking in my mind, these things are very seriously integrated. You cannot do the one without the other. So it is a bit of a struggle. This is where the conversation takes place. I’ve been saying to the WCRC as well that even in our programs and the way we present what we do and

The Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay is the general secretary of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. He was elected as president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in June 2010. Subsequently, he was interviewed by Shirley J. Roels of Calvin College concerning the global roles and responsibilities of the church.
how we talk about these two things, we’ve got to be clear to not separate them, because I do see a tendency to do that. I think it comes from the whole concept of even understanding mission, for example. Mission is often not considered in its holistic way, and even if it is, people tend to compartmentalize it. So we have a social stream and we have a spiritual stream. We have the deed and the word. I think ultimately we like to believe that they go together. We talk about it in different blocks, and that’s understandable. I think it’s because we’ve been theologically trained this way and we read the Scriptures in that way. I would like to think they are related and integrated.

Communion is the old aspect of koinonia and fellowship and walking together. The Bible speaks immensely about this. It’s related to the concept of community; and the Scriptures in the Old Testament and the New Testament speak about a community. In the Old Testament, the whole concept is of ekklesia, the called-out community, the people of God. The concept of community is also seen in the Trinitarian concept of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together. So biblically speaking, these concepts actually are found for us even in Scripture; and Jesus calls people into community. The communities are called for coming together to work together, to fulfill God’s purposes together. One of those purposes is justice. It is the proclamation of the kingdom. This is where the difference comes in, because I read the task of mission as the proclamation of the kingdom of God. And for me, the concept of the kingdom is a holistic concept. It serves justice, righteousness, peace; all of these things are what we have to work towards in terms of us participating with God, and God bringing about God’s kingdom.

So that’s how I see the integration of all of these things. It’s a singular concept but yet has different facets to it; and justice is integrated to the fullness of it. Therefore, the WCRC speaks about the fact that we come together, the communion aspect. We are coming together, and the question is, why are we coming together? We are coming together to worship God, which includes going out to transform the world in the name of God. So that is why those two concepts are linked. You can’t just talk about the koinonia of the fellowship of merely coming together. The fellowship must extend then into transformation, bringing about God’s new world.

So therefore for me, those two streams are very seriously integrated in terms of the full action that we ought to live out as people of God. Does it make sense?

SR: Yes, it makes sense to me. Part of it is that when the community comes together, the community needs to be nourished—

JP: Absolutely.

SR: —and needs to be taught, and needs to be shaped to be ready to be able to go out.

JP: That’s biblical. You come together to actually be nurtured; you are quite correct. And all of that actually takes place but it doesn’t stop there. You come in, you get all of these. You come in and you’re edified, we both are, and the purpose is to actually build you up so that you may go out and continue to live the way God calls you to live. The WCRC is talking about a new vision statement, for example. We’re saying that the task—our task—is to live out this communion. The call is a gift in itself. Unity is a gift to us given to us by God. But we have messed up the unity and our call. Our vision is to actually say, Can we really live this unity out? Can we really live this justice out? That’s what we see as our vision, to live it. God has given it to us but we now are commissioned to live it out.

SR: But the WCRC is an organization, an association of a large number of denominations around the world. If someone asked how it is positioned in terms of its contributions in comparison to the local congregation, what would you say? Does this vision work differently at the local level? Obviously, the local congregation should also be concerned about the communion, both in its coming together and its justice aspects.

JP: That’s precisely the point. Because one of the things that we are asking now at WCRC (and I want to say that this is a question for most ecumenical organizations today) is, how do we actually impact the pews? Because long term, I think that we see ecumenism as a movement trying to actually impact the church out there and thinking about the churches as local congregations. True ecumenism takes place in a local congregation. And if we are thinking that ecumenism takes place with ecumenical bodies outside there, then we’ve missed the mark. That’s why it doesn’t enjoy a greater degree of success, because it is on the ground, where the local people work and meet and fellowship and seek justice, that the rubber hits the road, where real stories of ecumenism are actually found. So that is why there is this big quest now to talk ecumenical language in the pews, so to speak. Quite frankly, I must say that real and true ecumenism these days, if it’s going to have any significant effect in the world, must come from the pew. Actually, it’s not going to come from church leaders, because church leaders are too restricted with territory; and we sometimes have a very serious protectionism about what we believe and our doctrine, church polity, and order. But the normal person, the common person sitting in the pew, doesn’t have those particular restrictions and is not necessarily playing church. The common person is talking about faith in a real-world experience, and I think that’s what ecumenism is
about, faith in a real-world experience. How can we be the people of God? Wherever we are contextually based, how do we become the people of God in this experience? Those are the critical questions of modern times, and these are the questions for which people in the pews today, particularly young people, want answers. So they, in my thought, are actually going beyond ecumenism, if you know what I mean. We tend to think of ecumenism as one church talking to another church, as one body talking to another body. Young people think of ecumenism as people in God’s world—a faith movement.

SR: The people in the local church are the ones who get up in the morning and go into the world and shape the world, hopefully following the template and the design for God’s kingdom, but they are also the people who meet others who are not Christians and provide the signs of hope and purpose that are in their lives to other people who are looking for them.

JP: Exactly. If we are to reach out to the different sectors of people of other faiths, in the world, it is people in the local church who are already doing this. So therefore, I think we need to give more time and energy to that, and the question needs to be asked, How do we actually build these folks? How do we prepare them? I think that part of our problem even in our theological training and Biblical teaching is that we seek to prepare them more to be church people rather than to be kingdom people.

SR: Now, how would you distinguish between church people and kingdom people? Unpack that a little bit.

JP: It’s the ideals in terms of values. When I’m interested in my people at the church, I’m trying to train them to be good Christians who come to church every Sunday, read the Bible, who will give to the church. It’s all church, church, church based. I’m not saying that’s wrong, but I’m saying it’s incomplete. We have to say, as you say, we build them up here, and we teach them here. But our teachings must not just focus on how you can be a good person in terms of being a good member of this church. The real task of the church is to prepare them for the world, because the real purpose of the church is that it exists not for itself but for the world if we understand it biblically. Biblically, the church is probably the only organization that ought not to be living for itself, for its own selfish benefit. It lives to make an impact on the world, mainly to transform the world in the love, grace, power, and presence of Christ.

So that is what I mean by theological training and focus, that our task somehow is not to exclusively focus on making people good church people. I’m not saying anything is wrong with that. I’m saying it needs to be extended beyond that. To be kingdom people means, how do I place in them the values of what it means to be a person in the world relating to the issues and struggles that we face, relating to a religiously pluralistic society of people that we meet. So that even when I teach them, I’m going to teach them in a way that says, okay, we believe in the uniqueness of Jesus, but we should engage with respect what other people are believing and saying. I often find that people from the pews can sometimes get offended when you speak insensitively about other faiths, for example. They’ll come up to you and say, “Is that the right way to think about it?” It’s only because they are experiencing something different in the marketplace, so to say.

SR: Because when they go into the marketplace, they’re talking to people from all different faiths, and they’re trying to create a common sense of relationship and understanding with people from all different faiths.

JP: How does this work? That is the question. So, getting back to the matter of communion and justice, that is what I’m saying. They seem to lead, working into people’s lives and actually extending themselves. Getting back to the question about the church, the church has a vital role to play. The role of the church is to actually nurture, to establish, to build people in the faith; to teach them sufficiently and to prepare them to meet the challenges outside in the real world.

SR: So the church has very important worship and teaching—

JP: Functions to it. Very important.

SR: As well as the justice function.

JP: I would talk about the mission, because the mission is a mission to the world; and the mission is a broad one for me. The justice function is a part of it, understanding what worship is all about, and all of those things. It’s broader than just, say, justice: it’s mission. We have a mission, we have a task. In Christ, we have a task to reach the world, so the mission part is very, very significant to the whole thing.

SR: Now here’s where it becomes challenging. Let’s just focus on the theme of justice in the church. There’s always a discussion in the church, asking, If the church necessarily is part of Christian mission and cares about justice, what is the particular role of the church? Some people would say that the church should focus on articulating foundational Christian themes that are based in Scripture and the traditional theology of the church, and then leave the policy specifics and strategies for actually accomplishing a sense of justice to other forces or people positioned
differently in society. Other people think the church should have a more direct hand or more direct response or say on specific issues of policy. When you think about that?

**JP:** Well, I think for me honestly it is not one or the other. The answer is both. I would start off by saying that when Christians start to think about justice, we need to go back to our terms of reference and we must think about it biblically speaking and theologically. What does the Bible have to say about it? The concept of justice is a loose concept used by people out there very loosely, and it becomes quite subjective in terms of what is justice in one place and what is justice in another place. We need a biblical focus of what justice is all about, and it must be seen and interpreted from what God stands for. It’s clear in the Old Testament, it’s clear in the New Testament what God stands for: just relationships, the poor, the needy, the orphaned, the widows, fighting unjust structures, oppressive policies, those are the themes. So the concept of what justice is all about needs to be very, very focused in terms of what is, biblically speaking, our understanding of justice. I would say unpacking certain biblical themes in Scriptures is important. For me that is the starting ground. To begin from any other place is not to be a Christian. You can just be a justice worker, you know what I mean? You can be an agent for something good and there’s nothing wrong in that. But I think what makes us uniquely Christian in our approach to dealing with issues of injustice is the fact that we’re there because of God; we’re there because Jesus teaches us that we’ve got to work for these things. We’ve got to work for shalom—we’ve got to work for justice—and we’re there because of him. If we’re not there because of him, then we’re just another NGO [nongovernmental organization] on the road. That’s why I take a different approach, because I believe we’re not an NGO. We’re a faith-based people who are involved in what we do not only because we are startled by what we see and affected by what we see, but more so, we are affected because we see it through the eyes of Jesus. So we must never denounce our Christian foundation in what we do as we respond to the world issues.

But the second part of that, policies and strategies and all of those things, is important. For me, that would be the prophetic role. The prophetic role of the church, when we see a policy that is unjust, is a responsibility to make noise about it, to say to the authorities that be, “This is not fair;” “This is not justice,” “This protects certain people and it exploits other people.” We cannot be silent about those things. So the role of the church is both, to teach what the Bible tells us about justice and, in the same breath, to speak out against injustices. That will be policy formation, policy challenging, and so forth. Jesus did it. He fought against the structures of the Pharisees. He took them to task about the things that they were doing and the policies that they were maintaining. He spoke openly against it, and I believe that we too must be the example of the church, following Christ in that context.

**SR:** Now here’s where it becomes even more challenging, namely, when we get into the specifics of policies. This is not to suggest that Jesus didn’t live in a complex world. He did. But we live, in many ways, technologically and socially in terms of structures, in an even more complex world. Some people would say that when we get into such levels of complexity the church needs to rely on Christian researchers and natural scientists and social scientists to help understand the root causes of problems and ways to address them. People divide in terms of who should be doing what, namely, what’s the proper role of someone who’s in the ministry and the theological arena of the church, and what’s the role of the Christian researcher or scientist. Should we divide those roles, preferring that people with different expertise have different roles?

**JP:** Well, that’s a good question, and I think more and more these days we need to actually try to look into that. I can give you an example. At our last UPCS A General Assembly, we were talking quite specifically about environmental issues, and there was a statement put out on environmental policies. Someone stood up and said, “We shouldn’t be talking about these things, we’re not qualified to make these kinds of statements. How can we as a church?” And my response to him was a very simple one: “Do you think the people who actually have been putting these things together, working for government”—because he claimed that it was a government’s responsibility—“don’t those government people sit in the pews in your church every Sunday? So why do you say they belong to government? And why do you separate faith from what work they do in government?” Governments can sometimes give you biased perspectives and I understand that. You’ve got to read in between the lines, but don’t for any moment discount the fact that those people are faith-based people, whether they’re Christians or of another faith. Very often they don’t leave their faith behind when they’re talking about these issues. So I think there’s a lack of understanding that people and individuals, scientist or not, professionals or not, when they come to something, bring their faith with them. I believe government may actually manipulate what they have to say in the end to suit policies. But I do believe that these are God’s people. I believe that the gifts that they have in terms of being these professionals are gifts that God has given them. Just as I’m a Christian and I have gifts, and my gifts are given to me by God, these people have God-given gifts. So yes, I think we need to actually say what people have to of-
church talks about those bills, so they gain consensus and discussion with the task is to inform us immediately about what bills are coming out, and the Church Council of Churches as an ecumenical body); they have sent people and man Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the SACC (the South African Council of Churches as an ecumenical body); they have sent people and are paying people specifically to be their watchdogs in Parliament. Their role. But is there a logical hinge point at which it would make sense for the church to draw on people who have specific expertise but are Christians to address some of these challenges?

**JP:** My answer to that is absolutely yes. I think that part of the problem is that the church is too ready to be critical of things rather than provide alternatives. We’re good to criticize government, we’re good to criticize approaches that do not work, but we’re not good enough to participate in structures that talk about what can work. And I think we need to engage fellow Christians on a given variety of subjects whether global immigration, environmental issues, parliamentary issues. We must, so we don’t come to the party too late, because we actually are talking about these things and we understand them from faith-based experience and reasoning. So I would say yes to that, and I think it’s only better for us to actually engage from that perspective because when you’re able to think about something quite clearly and offer that contribution, people know that you’ve thought about it. Very often we get caught unguarded because we’re not prepared for it. So I think the church needs to prepare itself well. Inside Africa, for example, we have some churches like the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the SACC (the South African Council of Churches as an ecumenical body); they have sent people and are paying people specifically to be their watchdogs in Parliament. Their task is to inform us immediately about what bills are coming out, and the church talks about those bills, so they gain consensus and discussion with other people and say, Hey, they’re talking about doing this; what does the church have to say about it? Very often, government cannot get away quite easily, because we are talking about it and we are going back to them and we are saying, sorry, we have disagreements with you. So I believe that is really something that has to happen. We must strike at the opportunities.

**SR:** Earlier we talked a little about the church’s responsibility in a prophetic role, but now we are really talking about the church’s responsibility in almost a priestly mediating role, perhaps a prophet, priest, and king framework for providing leadership and solutions, although it’s not a perfect analogy.

**JP:** Yes, it’s the church shaping and developing. It’s participating in shaping and developing, not just being critical from the outside but using opportunities to actually speak about things from the inside. Now saying that, not in a lot of environments do churches get those kinds of privileges. In South Africa we’re quite blessed by that because of our history. The church has been involved a lot in the transformation of society and still continues to play that role. In other parts of the world it might be difficult. But it is a church which needs to seize the opportunity to be that priestly order, to be the ones that shape and channel and develop people’s thinking, to ensure that principles (now this is the key thing, is that we have to offer, principles and values, the Biblical values that we have) need to be taken into consideration and offered to people who are setting up policies, working on aspects in terms of developing societies.

**SR:** That would be true about principles, policies, and values in conversations with government but also conversations with business entities and—

**JP:** Broad scale, absolutely.

**SR:** —and other groups in civil society.

**JP:** Absolutely, because every system and every body or every unit or every different kind of entity will require values, and there’s our opportunity to help shape those values.

**SR:** So when we consider the big picture of the 21st century, our position in it, along with all the tasks and responsibilities of churches that are members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, what’s your hope for what the World Communion of Reformed Churches will contribute?

**JP:** I think the first key thing is unity. We can make a greater impact in the world if we are united. Now unity is not uniformity for me. It’s not
all of us saying the same thing and believing the same thing, but unity is speaking in the strength of one voice, of saying, “This is what we see, this is what the church believes about it, this is what we call for people to do.” So we need that. And unity means embracing all of our diversity. Our churches, our member churches, denominations, are different. We emphasize different things and each of these things are contextual in experience. But what we do then is to speak about the broad frame of values and principles saying publicly, “This is what we believe.” Sometimes I believe that we are not effective enough because we don’t agree. We just talked about communion and justice. While some of us see these as integral to each other, others like to separate them. The separation on all of those things comes from our own particular societal experience of them, and therefore we want to say, “Now, what we really should bring is the biblical qualification of what the Scriptures say about this.” So if we can have one voice about what Scripture says on these things and if we can agree on values and principles, that says this is what the Bible teaches, that would be a great. Think about what impact we could make into the world if we speak with one voice. So I think coming together—and that is the first task of understanding what it means to be the WCRC—we are part of the Reformed tradition. But then we are different churches, Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed. If we can come together and try to capture that one voice from a biblical point of view, then we would have done well. It’s a big task in itself. But we’ve got to pray and continue to pray that these things happen.

Then also, our task is not just only to come to our fellowship, but our task is to also engage mission, and we need to say, How do we jointly work with each other for transforming the world, for making an impact in terms of how can this world be the place that gives glory to God? So I think mission is a very vital part of that. And we can work well but together, with each other, we must not forget that our task of coming together is in the first place because of that. We are stronger together, we are better together, and we can create a more significant impact in the world together. Imagine eighty million people trying to make an impact on the world, what an enormous difference that would make. So that’s the kind of picture, that’s the kind of vision, if we can come together and can work together, We’ll never agree with each other on all the things and how we would go about it. But if we can put before us the biblical values and take these values and shape the world in our (God’s) mission, then we’ve gone somewhere with it. I think it's not far-fetched.

**SR:** It’s a worthy vision.

**JP:** It is. And there are common things that we could work with: HIV and AIDS as a vaulting pad. Some countries might say, “But it doesn’t affect us more than it affects others”; but they need to ask, “How do we help the others because they’re part of this global family?” Economic injustices worldwide are an issue. How do we work with each other on these things? The WCRC has made a lot of impact on that one. I think I would be remiss if I did not say something about the Accra Confession that speaks about economic justice, distributing the wealth of the world, and living in right relationships with others and all creation. How do we actually share? That document has been well accepted, but it has also created a storm among churches as well, because one feels, hey, this is an attack on me. But it’s not an attack on you, it’s an unearthing of biblical values again, and I’m going to take it personally in my context if I feel that I’m not actually following the biblical values, How do we talk with each other, how do we engage each other? Understand this is not a direct criticism on a particular part of the world, but it is an engagement of what we believe God is saying to us as a global family.

Gender justice is an issue. The church is by no means fully in agreement on this as well. There are people who are part of the global Reformed structure who will not ordain women and do not believe in the ordination of women on any level as elders or ministers. What do we say to them? How do we impact them in terms of gender justice? You see, this is where the problem is, that much of what we want to say to the world we have to first say to ourselves. Perhaps that is why we cannot even say it to the world, because we are not comfortable saying it to ourselves. So somehow I think this body, the task of the WCRC, is to also face the issues that we struggle with, the injustices that live among ourselves, the perceptions and views that we have, to unpack that and to talk about that. That, I think, is a challenge for the WCRC, because how do we say truthfully certain things without disturbing somebody else? But should we not say them? When we are talking against issues of discrimination, oppression, what do we say? Do we say the right things, or do we say what people want to hear? But my point again is that we’ve got to go back to biblical values and we’ve got to put biblical values on the table.

Then there are a number of other matters: crime and violence in the world, interfaith issues and relationships. If you look at the world and where it’s going, and if you look at the factions between people of different faiths—I mean the tension between Muslims and Christians, for example—it is becoming quite a serious thing. There are people starting wars in countries based on these things. Some do not admit it, some do admit it. Some fight for other reasons but they claim religious reasons.
How do you understand all these dynamics? What is truthful? I think another responsibility for WCRC is to work with our ecumenical partners, to work with other faiths in trying to make peace in the world. So peacekeeping, peace making are very important facets to the work that we have to engage. All of that, and justice as part of it, matters in shaping the new world. There’s a lot of work to be done; and these obviously are going to live with us for a lifetime.

SR: But the point is to do what we can.

JP: Exactly. We can be overwhelmed with the task and say, “It’s just too much, we’re not going to make any significant impact.” Or we can be like the little boy who saw all the starfish that had beached themselves. He started to take them one by one and throw them into the sea and somebody said, “Why are you wasting your time? You’re never going to be able to put all of these things back into the water.” And this little boy responded by saying, “To each one that I put in the water, I’ve made a difference.” And I think that’s exactly what it is, that we do the little that we can do. It makes a difference even if it is little. We cannot sit back as Christians and be comfortable about what is going on and say nothing to it. Imagine if Jesus chose that. We won’t have the world, we won’t have values that Jesus left with us. We have an example that has to be followed, and faith requires that.

SR: Amen.