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
Christianity has become a world religion. Faith in Jesus Christ is celebrated today in more languages and in more lands than any other living faith because of a seismic shift in patterns of belief and commitment. A century ago, 80 percent of all the world’s Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, more than 60 percent of all Christians live outside these regions, in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific islands. The implication is that many more lands are now the theaters of Christian engagement in the 21st century. People everywhere are experiencing personal conversion or renewal, sharing the gospel, growing Christian fellowships, and pondering their cultures. For many who now follow Christ, faith has a new salience and significance in societies where his followers were once marginal. But Christian influence and responsibility are intertwined.

As Christians, what should we do until Jesus returns? New Christian schools, seminaries, universities, community development agencies, businesses, media outlets, health clinics, women’s associations, youth groups, and political movements are rising. Yet frequently Christian activism needs theological thinking about the intersection of living, learning, and acting in the world. Such thinking is a strength of historic Reformed Christianity; and when many Christians are embracing a full gospel mandate, there is a renewed opportunity to weave ideas and actions together. The good news of personal salvation is inseparable from a vision for all things made new, frameworks for God’s reign of justice, and strategies for the full flourishing of God’s people everywhere. Reformed Christians can learn from and contribute to such a holistic future.

With this in mind the Calvin College centers and institutes along with other college leaders, in partnership with the International Association

Shirley J. Roels is director of the Van Lunen Center and professor of management at Calvin College (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA).
for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE), organized a conference in June 2010 just before the merger assembly creating the new World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The conference was designed both to strengthen the contribution of Reformed Christian faith for world Christianity and to listen to some of our global Christian partners. Based on such listening and learning at the conference, this set of resources was subsequently created to enhance our mutual understanding and deepen our conversation.

Four themes provide a focus for this volume as means to connect Christian faith more deeply to our thinking, living, and doing:

- **Living Roots for Living Water.** Every theological tradition has historical and contextual roots. Within the Reformed Christian tradition some roots are the wellspring for refreshment and renewal. How do we water the still-living roots of the Reformed tradition so that they bear fruit for many cultures? How do we encourage an open and permeable conversation about the Reformed tradition so that the great gifts of global Christianity nourish Reformed futures?

- **Translation across Borders.** All of us as finite human beings have borders, boundaries to belief, limits of understanding, and barriers to response. But we live in a world of global Christianity and multiple non-Christian faith traditions. How do we cross such borders, not only with firm faith but also with boldness and regularity to walk where Jesus walked? Some translation projects are more difficult than others. We must explore which borders should be thickened or thinned in relationship to this world, and we must learn to exemplify Christian virtues in mediating the differences that inevitably arise in crossing cultures.

- **The Covenantal Community.** In baptism we are united with Christ, baptized into his death and resurrection; and within the Reformed Christian tradition we place special emphasis on baptism as a reminder of God’s ongoing story of redemption, begun long ago but still new every morning. We are part of God’s much larger narrative, but the One who calls gives freedom to covenant with each other as we script details for the next chapter. What does it mean to be a global Reformed Christian community that responds to God’s covenant and then creates covenants with each other at this juncture in the 21st century?

- **Roles at the Table of the Church.** Participation in the church is at the core of our Christian calling. But it is one institution among many with overlapping responsibilities, and in Reformed circles these other institutions are not seen as subsidiaries of the church. We must discern wisely the fit of varied tasks with multiple institutions and distribute responsibilities effectively for the sake of the kingdom. The table of the church must provide a place for pastors and theologians and also for those with academic and practical expertise. How do we beneficially differentiate among multiple Christian organizations while staying tethered to the embodied church?

To make the most of this 21st-century moment, global Christians must be discerning and articulate about lively roots, boundary crossing, covenant keeping, and effective collaboration. In this volume speakers, essayists, and interviewees combine their voices from across many cultures in an interchange of global Christianity with Reformed faith, probing the implications for the church, the academy, and related communities of practice.

Dr. Richard Mouw, president and professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, sets the stage with his excellent speech that examines historic Reformed accents and considers fresh approaches to some enduring Christian questions. Then two commentators ponder each of the four themes above. Every pair of voices includes one faculty member from Calvin College and one Christian leader from another area of the world. Those from Calvin College include Karin Maag, professor of history and director of the Meeter Center for Calvin Studies; Janel Curry, professor of geology, geography, and environmental studies and holder of the Byker Chair in Christian Perspectives on Political, Social and Economic Thought; John Witvliet, professor of music and worship and director of the Calvin Center of Christian Worship; and Roland Hoksbergen, professor of economics and director of the International Development Studies Program. Those from far beyond the college include Paul Visser, pastor of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Amsterdam) and chairman of the Foundation for the Promoting of Reformed Missiology and Ecumenics; David Lim, president of the Asian School of Development and Cross-Cultural Studies and member of the IAPCHE governing board; Ruth Padilla DeBorst, general secretary of the Latin American Theological Fellowship and member of the IAPCHE governing board; and Jerry Pillay, general secretary of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in South Africa and president of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches. Finally, a panel of discussants rounds out this inquiry. Its members include Susan Felch, professor of English at Calvin College and director of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship; Paul Visser (noted above); José Alcántara, professor of literature at the Universidad Iberoamericana.
and president of IAPCHE; and Won Lee, professor of Old Testament in the Department of Religion at Calvin College. All of these faithful, thoughtful Christian leaders bring their faith, hopes, and thought to this undertaking.

By raising these global voices at the June 2010 conference and in this set of readings, we intend to benefit a broad spectrum of the worldwide community with Christian articulations of faith and the accent of Reformed Christianity. We humbly hope that together with the Holy Spirit's ongoing work we have spurred a conversation for this century on Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity.