An Auspicious Moment

The merger between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) seemed as if it happened in the blink of an eye for Rev. Peter Borgdorff, executive director emeritus of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Now retired from his position at the CRCNA, Borgdorff has remained active in ecumenical relations and was elected president of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, which is based in Grand Rapids, Mich. He worked tirelessly to make the arrangements for the merger meeting. Nonetheless, time flew fast.

“This feels like an auspicious moment in the history of ecumenical relations,” Borgdorff said near the start of the Uniting General Council, the meeting at which WARC and REC merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The meeting took place in mid-June on the campus of Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Just yesterday we voted to redirect the river of relationships within the global Reformed and Presbyterian family—and now today we close the book on two organizational entities that together have ministered for a combined total of more than 200 years.”

Dressed in black and red robes, Borgdorff told the 600 or so delegates gathered in Calvin’s Van Noord Arena that “there is a lot of history associated with both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council—a history filled with evidence of commitment and goodwill, blessing and testing, stories of leaders, general secretaries, long and difficult meetings, conflict and resolutions, and debates and controversies. . . .”

The CRCNA served as one of the host denominations for the merger. More than 80 million Christians around the world make up the new World Communion of Reformed Churches.

The meeting was preceded by events for youths and women and a global theological institute at Calvin Theological Seminary. The heady atmosphere of the early days was sobered by the fact that nearly 75 people, about 40 of them delegates, were denied visas to travel to the United States. The WCRC later lodged a protest against the U.S. government for the denials.

Peter Borgdorff addresses delegates at the opening of the Uniting General Council.

Richard van Houten, retiring general secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, was instrumental in helping the merger happen.

In his opening remarks, Richard van Houten, general secretary of REC, said the “road getting here was bumpy.” Van Houten was honored at the event for all the work he put in to help make the merger happen. He was also given a book, containing essays on his legacy, to mark his retirement from ecumenical work.

The Uniting General Council opened with a daylong series of events that included separate meetings of the REC and WARC, an opening worship service, recognitions of several leaders who were instrumental in the unification process, an exchange of greetings and gifts between WCRC officials and Native American leaders, and a gala reception celebrating the union.

Borgdorff called the day’s events a “construction zone”—proof that God is using all Reformed Christians to “build a new spiritual house for God.”

The new organization will combine the strengths of the REC, which has focused especially on biblical and confessional unity, and WARC, which has involved itself in issues of social justice and peace. As such, WCRC can serve as a joint witness of faith and action in a fragmented world.

Rev. Jerry Dykstra, executive director of the CRCNA, said he was pleased that his denomination could help host the event, which, he said, “marks the start of a whole new witness for Reformed churches.” Dykstra was a delegate to the meeting.

Together these two groups now represent a significant number of Reformed churches around the world,” said Dykstra. “Since the CRC is one of the churches in both groups, our participation in the merger has been critical to the process.”

As part of the weeklong gathering, on the opening and closing weekends delegates worshiped at local Reformed churches, including many CRC congregations. Members of the churches hosted them in their homes after-

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ward, meeting delegates from such countries as Hungary, Indonesia, Taiwan, Malawi, Germany, Scotland, and Australia.

Despite cloudy weather, a Native American powwow was a highlight of the week. The powwow took place on the banks of the Grand River in downtown Grand Rapids. A significant focus of the meeting was on issues related to indigenous peoples.

Also during the meeting at Calvin College, the new ecumenical organization elected officers and set the agenda for issues and topics it wants to address in coming years.

“The new organization will be able to provide a strong witness in addressing some of the great economic, social, racial, and climate challenges facing the world today,” said Van Houten. “This organization will have a new energy.”

Setri Nyomi, general secretary of WARC and now WCRC, said the gathering provided a chance for people from a wide range of Reformed churches to listen and to talk to one another in one place at one time, in an age when “there is a trend of fragmentation and division in the world.”

One issue the meeting dealt with was how to apply the Accra Confession to the lives of people in the churches that make up WCRC.

A few years ago, WARC accepted the confession at a meeting in Accra, Ghana, based on the conviction that “the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization.”

But many churches have problems with the confession. The CRC, for instance, said at Synod 2009 that it agrees with much that is in the confession. At the same time, “we are concerned that it is incomplete and must go deeper. . . . The capitalism and what it refers to as “empire.”

Rev. John Rozeboom, former director of Christian Reformed Home Missions, credits Borgdorff and his vision for bringing churches and denominations together for being a main driver behind this merger meeting.

Delegates vote for formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

“Coming together like this is an example of where the ecumenical movement is going today. It eliminates some of the visible separation and emphasizes what we can do together,” said Borgdorff.

As delegates left the meeting, Ruth Padilla-DeBorst, a Christian Reformed World Missions missionary, gave them this charge: “May we not merely celebrate that our merger increases our number, grants us greater power of convocation, or more advantageous positions in the public square. . . . Let us tear down the walls of self-defense, security, and prosperity that our greed, pride, and prejudice have built.”

—Chris Meehan,
CRC Communications

Delegates enter Van Noord Arena at Calvin College to take part in the business of the Uniting General Council.