



Coming Together

On a cold February day in 2006, eight people of faith changed the course of ecumenical history.

Representatives of two worldwide Reformed organizations met in Grand Rapids, Mich., to discuss a closer relationship. They came on behalf of their respective organizations, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC).

What emerged was not two related groups but a proposal for one new Christian body: the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

Those who were there that day say a power greater than their own creativity was involved.

“It really was the Holy Spirit at work in Grand Rapids that started this movement,” said the Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, president of WARC.

Fittingly—or perhaps providentially—Grand Rapids will be the site of the first meeting of the World Communion. The WCRC’s Uniting General Council will convene June 18-28, bringing together some 1,000 delegates, guests and volunteers to celebrate the historic merger.

The WCRC will represent approximately 75 million members of 230 denominations from 107 countries, including various Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian and United churches.

Key leaders say the union makes sense for both theological and practical reasons.

“This is a hope and a dream of a very long time, that we really could be coming together as a Reformed community,” Kirkpatrick said. “The

Reformed family has gotten this image of being a family that divides.”

The new communion should inspire Christian unity beyond its own members, adds the Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, WARC general secretary.

“In a world which is characterized by fragmentation and self-centered individualism, a Christian move toward convergence is a very powerful witness,” Nyomi said from his Geneva, Switzerland office. “Through this communion, Reformed churches can renew our commitment to a strong fellowship that celebrates our oneness in Christ and exposes the scandal of division.”

The union will be more efficient financially and exert greater influence globally, said REC president the Rev. Peter Borgdorff.

“There is power in numbers, and (our) voices should be strengthened,” Borgdorff said.

A unified church voice is needed more than in a world of conflict and injustice, added Henriette Hutabarat-Lebang, a WARC vice president from Indonesia.

“We tend to forget that it is precisely in the midst of the darkness and the brokenness of the world that Jesus earnestly prayed to his Father, ‘that they may all be one,’ ” she said.

The communion joins WARC, a larger and older body of 214 churches, with REC and its 41 churches. Historically more conservative, REC increasingly has cooperated with WARC on social concerns. Many REC churches are also WARC members.

In recent years, “People started to wonder, ‘Why are there two?’ ” said Rich van Houten, REC

general secretary.

In Grand Rapids that February day, he adds, "Together we came up with something new."

Powwow to be Highlight

For a Native American minister from Grand Rapids, next June's Uniting General Council (UGC) will do more than launch a new ecumenical organization.

The Rev. Mike Peters says it also will bring back an old teaching about a Lakota Sioux girl who was taken up to the heavens and taught a drum dance of healing between American Indians and whites.

Peters hopes 1,000 dancers winding through Grand Rapids's Ah-Nab-Awen Park will do just that for UGC native peoples and church leaders from all corners of the globe.

"We're bringing the drum back with one purpose: to signal unity to the world," says Peters, who is helping plan the event. "It could be the start of a spiritual awakening."

It certainly will be the start of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), a union of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council. Some 1,000 church members and visitors are expected to come to this bastion of Dutch Reformed faith to officially launch the new ecumenical body.

The powwow in the park will be a highlight of the 10-day gathering where delegates will elect officers, adopt a constitution, hold worship and attend workshops.

The Uniting General Council's theme is "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace." Organizers are working to ensure that theme resonates with the delegates' experience in Grand Rapids.

"The main thing here is the experience of unity—for people to gather the sense that we have put some of our disunity behind us," said Rich van Houten, local conference coordinator and REC general secretary.

Delegates may sense unity by worshipping in local congregations and dining in church members' homes. Host committee member the Rev. Anne Weirich wants to provide the same kind of welcome WARC delegates received in Ghana in 2004.

"It really brings to life this oneness in Christ we have in a remarkable way," said Weirich, a Presbyterian pastor. She also is recruiting congregations to help pay expenses of delegates from the global South.

West Michigan was a logical site for the UGC, organizers say. The Grand Rapids-based Christian Reformed Church is the only North American denomination in both WARC and the REC, and the proposal to unite was hatched at Calvin College.

"I can't imagine a better place to have it in the United States than Grand Rapids," said the Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, president of WARC.

Several committees are arranging everything from lodging and meals to medical services and a closing banquet. About 500 volunteers will help run a conference budgeted to cost \$2.2 million.

"It just amazes me the number of logistics involved in hosting that many people," said the Rev. Peter Borgdorff, host committee chairman. "It will truly be a global event."

He has invited leaders from the Vatican, World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies as well as state and federal officials.

But the UGC will pay special attention to the poor and dispossessed. A top agenda item will be the Accra Confession, a WARC statement of justice that rejects "profits before people."

A strong Native American presence will provide a reminder of the church's historic role in marginalizing Indian culture, the Rev. Peters said.

"This whole 10 days is about healing and reconciliation," he said. "I'm really believing this is a God moment."