

Reformed groups agree on new global body: "God has called us to be part of a communion"

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The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has agreed to unite with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to create a new "global entity" that will form a constituency of 80 million Reformed Christians.

"This is a truly, truly important moment," said WARC president Clifton Kirkpatrick after the alliance's executive committee, meeting in Trinidad and Tobago, voted unanimously October 22 to unite with the REC, whose executive committee had agreed to the proposal in March.

At the meeting's opening worship, which resounded with Caribbean steel drums and traditional organ music, Kirkpatrick, the outgoing stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), had declared, "The heart of the gospel is that we are better together. God has called us to be part of a communion, part of a community."

While the PCUSA has gone through decades of theological disputes, Kirkpatrick said the Reformed churches collectively "are being called to claim the unity given in Christ." He conceded that such unity is not often a Reformed virtue. "When we disagree with one another, all too often we end up splitting." But WARC general secretary Setri Nyomi said after the unanimous approval to unite: "We will be a stronger community which serves a wider part of the Reformed family."

Nyomi's sentiment was echoed by the REC president, Dutch pastor Douwe Visser, who said that Reformed churches would now have a "stronger voice." Richard van Houten, the Michigan-based general secretary of the REC, said he was "delighted" over the agreement, which became a serious proposal only last year.

The Geneva-based WARC has 75 million members in 214 churches in 107 countries, while the REC, headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has 12 million members

belonging to 39 churches in 25 countries. Of the REC's member churches, 27 also belong to WARC.

The two groupings trace their roots to the 16th-century Reformation led by John Calvin, John Knox and others, as well as to earlier church reform groups such as the Waldensians in the Piedmont valleys of Italy and the followers of Jan Hus in the Czech lands.

The REC was founded in 1946 as a group of Reformed churches not aligned with WARC. But from the 1960s onwards some churches became members of both bodies.

The leaders proposed that the new body be called the "World Reformed Communion," but the WARC governing body has recommended further discussions about the name.

All member churches of the two existing groups would become members of the new body, with the exception of churches under suspension in either organization. The new Reformed body will also invite movements, agencies and theological institutions into active affiliation. -*Ecumenical News International*