

## The Alliance in dialogue, 1970–2003

Alan PF Sell

For more than thirty years the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has been involved in international bilateral dialogues with other Christian world communions.<sup>1</sup>

It is entirely appropriate that in the interests of good stewardship of resources, and before taking further steps, we should pause and reflect upon the journey so far. We need to thank God for the progress made in deepening relations with our friends of other Christian traditions, and we need honestly to appraise ourselves to see whether we have done all that we might to harvest the fruit of the dialogues to date.

The motivation in all of our conversations with other Christian world communions is the desire to manifest that unity in Christ into which God has, by grace, already called us, so that the church truly becomes a sign of the ultimate reconciliation of all things (“the whole inhabited earth” – not just the churches) in God. Calvin declared that “there is no other bond of church unity than the fact that Christ, the Lord, has reconciled us with God the Father and has gathered us out of the dispersion into the communion of his body, that so we may grow together through his word and spirit into one heart and soul”.<sup>2</sup>

However much our Reformed history has been blighted by inner-family secessions (a fact that makes our protestations of catholicity to our dialogue partners less than fully convincing), at our best we have understood that the Reformers did not set out to create new churches, but to reform the one church of Christ according to the word of God.

It is not surprising, then, that during the Prague 1956 executive committee of the World Presbyterian Alliance John A Mackay felt able to call for a meeting, first held in the following year, that developed into the annual meeting of secretaries of Christian world communions.<sup>3</sup> In these gatherings the secretaries and other participants laid a foundation of personal relationships and mutual knowledge of the several communions on which the future dialogue programme could be built.

A spur towards bilateral dialogue came from the second Vatican council, which prompted the Roman Catholic Church to reach out in conversation with other Christian families.

The first phase of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue ran from 1970 to 1977, while conversations co-sponsored with the Lutheran World Federation also began in 1970.<sup>4</sup> From that time to the present the Alliance has been a partner in international bilateral dialogues with eleven Christian world communions.

## Dialogue in question

The path of bilateral dialogue has not always run smoothly. Let us address at the outset some questions concerning the ways in which dialogues are conducted.<sup>5</sup>

### *Representation*

Some have queried whether the Alliance's dialogue teams adequately represent the family as a whole and particular categories within it. Clearly, the Alliance could not sponsor dialogue teams in excess of two hundred members so that every member church participated directly in every dialogue: a measure of mutual trust is called for.

As to "the family as a whole", our Alliance turns upon the fact that in one way or another (whether by sixteenth-century origins or later missionary or revivalist activity) we find our roots in the Bible as recovered in a major wing of the European Reformation. But this leaves ample scope for variety. Whether we think in terms of liturgy, polity, attitudes towards classical confessions, or ethical stances, there are considerable differences of theory and practice among us<sup>6</sup> – to such a degree that some of our dialogue partners have been known to wonder with whom, precisely, are they in dialogue?<sup>7</sup> When recruiting a dialogue team we need to ensure that at least some members are thoroughly conversant with these diverse tendencies.

As to the representation of "particular categories", Jane Dempsey Douglass has lamented the paucity of women in Alliance dialogue teams.<sup>8</sup> Strenuous efforts have been made over the years of dialogue to rectify this, but it is easier said than done. One relevant consideration is that a number of member churches (not all of them in the developing world) do not at present ordain women, still less entrust them with theological teaching. Indeed, some of our more prominent western member churches have admitted women to the ministry only a few decades ago, and few member churches, large or small, did so before 1917. My impression is that, happily, the situation is improving in many places, and that more and more member churches are, on the biblical grounds that Dr Douglass specifies,<sup>9</sup> coming to understand that our oneness in the Christ who breaks down barriers (Galatians 3.28) entails the seeking of justice for all in the fellowship, in order that the gifts granted to all by God may be fully exercised.

### *Sins of omission*

Some have felt that the dialogue reports omit matters of importance. For example, Dr Douglass regrets the absence of "awareness of women or issues concerning women" from the dialogues with the Baptists and the Methodists, and this despite the fact that women were present in the Methodist-Reformed dialogue.<sup>10</sup> This might be taken as implying either that the women participants in the latter dialogue failed in their duty, or that the men decided not to pay heed to their

contributions. Neither is the case. Each dialogue has its own terms of reference, and the Methodist-Reformed dialogue sought to address the specific question, How far, if at all, should the traditional theological differences between Methodists and Reformed (notably those surrounding evangelical Arminianism and Calvinism) continue to be church-dividing?<sup>11</sup> By contrast, there is a substantial section on the ordination of women in the Anglican-Reformed report – as might have been expected, given that “ministry” was a prominent theme in the discussion.<sup>12</sup>

Particular terms of reference mean that in any dialogue there will be many live issues that will not be discussed. For the same reason we should expect that some participants will be acknowledged experts on the technical issues concerned, while others will keep the participants anchored in reality by speaking from various regions concerning the relations of the dialogue partners at the grassroots. This, in turn, raises another representational point: the dialogue partners are not equal in size, and are unequally distributed around the world. While Roman Catholics are widely dispersed, there are many parts of the world where the Mennonites, the Disciples of Christ and the Oriental Orthodox, for example, are not to be found. It is important that at least some members of any dialogue team have personal knowledge of the other partner.

### *Language*

Often when the drafting of a final report is imminent one or more team members (almost invariably from the United States) will, sometimes to the puzzlement of participants whose first language is not English, raise the question of the language to be used in the report.<sup>13</sup> In so far as this is a plea that “inclusive language” be employed where males and females are jointly referred to, the point is widely taken. It does seem to me a requirement of the gospel that we should not use language that might be taken as implying that we are ignoring half the human race.

The less commonly agreed aspect of the problem relates to the language used of God. On the one hand, there are those who feel that to use masculine personal pronouns when referring to God reinforces patriarchy and tempts people into thinking (wrongly) that God is male. For the same reasons some of the same people substitute such formulations as “Creator, Christ, Sustainer” for the traditional trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are those who contend that especially when New Age ideas and sundry gnosticisms are prevalent it is important that Christians use language that makes it clear that the Christian Godhead is not male or female, but personal; they feel that substitutions for Father, Son and Holy Spirit result in the loss of the idea of the inner personal relations of the Trinity; and they resent what they perceive as an editorial “thought police” – especially one that originates in a land that proclaims freedom of speech in its constitution.

It would be foolish to pretend that full accord will swiftly or easily be reached across this divide, but my impression is that in many circles there is greater willingness than hitherto to grant that neither side need treat the other as outcasts, the sectarian spirit is to be shunned, care should be taken not to ride roughshod over the sincerely held, principled, views of those with whom we may disagree, and we should think twice before supposing that we can draw substantive theological conclusions from the grammatical conventions of particular languages.

### *Duplication*

Some urge that concern with bilateral dialogues somehow undermines, or needlessly duplicates, wider ecumenical work as undertaken by the World Council of Churches. This challenge has been addressed on numerous occasions,<sup>14</sup> and the general conclusion seems to be that, whereas the council is ideally placed to promote such multilateral studies as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* with a view to seeing what degree of convergence or consensus obtains among its wide range of members, it cannot speak for its individual members on the ground, all of whom belong to Christian world communions, which therefore need to be in conversation with each other as well. In other words, the bilateral programmes of the several Christian world communions are complementary to, and are not in competition with, the activities of the WCC.

### *The fruits of dialogue*

Lastly, there are those who contend that after all the effort the results have been few. I should like to address this through a consideration of the form, content and reception of dialogue, and then offer some concluding reflections.

### The form of dialogue

To a considerable degree the balance in the several reports between theological reflection and practical suggestions is directly related to the degree of historic and current proximity of the partners in dialogue. The Reformed have closer historical and geographical links with some of their dialogue partners than with others.

With their friends whose distinctive life originates in the European Reformations – the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Mennonites and the Baptists – they have so much in common that thoroughly practical recommendations for closer relations are feasible. The same applies to such later arrivals on the ecclesiastical scene as the Methodists and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): indeed, in some cases unions of various groupings of these six traditions have already occurred.

Where the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, some of the Reformed may feel that they know that body only too well and do not much care for it. Even the

more tolerant among the Reformed cannot overlook the history of mutual recriminations – even condemnations. There is thus a need for the patient mutual exploration of issues on the part of these two communions with a view to better understanding, to the eventual reconciliation of memories, and, meanwhile, to such cooperation as may be possible.

In the case of dialogue with the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox, many of the Reformed find themselves on a steep learning curve, for these traditions are not well known to them. (The reverse is also true.) What assists here is the growth in mutual respect and trust that flows from the earnest consideration of such basic tenets of the faith as the Trinity and christology.

In dialogue with the Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit is naturally to the fore.

Finally, the first dialogue session between the Alliance and the Seventh-Day Adventists was an occasion for mutual sharing with a view to detecting the degree of common ground existing between parties both of whom had changed in attitude over the years and were now able to view each other with less suspicion than hitherto.

In the variety of circumstances thus described we have a key to explaining the diverse terms of reference of the several dialogues, and the fact that some reports contain more immediately applicable recommendations than others.<sup>15</sup>

### The content of dialogue

The dialogue reports provide a rich source of theological reflection upon a wide range of topics, and a number of them recommend steps that may be taken towards closer unity.

#### *Dialogues with our nearer neighbours*

Following conversations in 1970 and 1975 between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Alliance,<sup>16</sup> a full-scale international dialogue produced the report *Towards Church Fellowship* (1989). Building on such regional findings as the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973), the participants stated their common faith and urged their global constituencies “to declare full communion with one another”, understanding this to entail that the historic mutual condemnations no longer apply, that full pulpit and altar/table fellowship and the mutual recognition of ministers of word and sacrament be established, and that growth in unity through shared church life and mission be encouraged.<sup>17</sup>

*Called to Common Witness and Communion* (2002) is the report of a joint Lutheran-Reformed working group established in 1999 “to follow up the positive results” of the 1989 report

It surveys Lutheran-Reformed developments in recent years, explores what is involved in developing visible structures of communion, and describes the deepening cooperation between the LWF and WARC. It recommends that the

LWF and WARC establish a joint study project on structures of church communion, and sponsor a common history of the relations between Lutheran and Reformed churches.

There is no need, it says, for further dialogue on the classical differences which in the past kept Lutheran and Reformed churches apart. The challenge for the two Christian world communions today “is not to discuss whether communion is possible, but to help churches in our families to move towards declarations of communion, to advance in communion, and to celebrate unity as God’s gift to us all. A new set of tasks needs to be faced: to encourage churches that are in altar and pulpit fellowship to deepen their relationship, to invite churches that are not yet in altar and pulpit fellowship to move towards it, and to consider ways in which, at the world level, the two communions may intensify their common life and witness.”<sup>18</sup>

In the Anglican-Reformed report *God’s Reign and Our Unity* (1984) the quest of unity is firmly set in the context of mission, and of the conviction that the unity of the church cannot adequately be considered except in relation to the unity of humanity. The factors separating Anglicans and Reformed are discussed, the familiar themes of baptism, eucharist and ministry are rehearsed, with special reference to bishops and elders. The report contains pertinent questions for discussion, and among its nine recommendations is the following: “We recommend that where churches of our two communions are committed to going forward to seek visible unity, a measure of *reciprocal* communion should be made possible; for communion is not only a sign of unity achieved, but also a means by which God brings it about.”<sup>19</sup>

On March 5 1983, a historic service was held in Zurich Cathedral, attended by representatives of the Mennonite World Conference, the Baptist World Alliance and our Alliance, during which the Reformed repudiated and regretted the historic condemnations they had uttered against the Anabaptists and sought the help of their erstwhile opponents in fostering reconciliation and renewed fellowship. In 1984, a consultation in Strasbourg between representatives of the Alliance and the Mennonite World Conference resulted in the document *Mennonites and Reformed in Dialogue* (1986). Either side offers family portraits, the question of the historic condemnations of Anabaptists by the Reformed is addressed, and appendices on peace and justice are included. A second phase of dialogue took place in Calgary in 1989. Here the traditionally “neuralgic” questions of baptism, peace and the state were discussed in detail, with responses from members of other Christian traditions. In the recommendations the Reformed are challenged “to revive and practise that understanding of the church as God’s covenant people, within which the integrity of infant baptism is actualized”, while the Mennonites are challenged “seriously to examine their attitude towards Christians baptized as infants who wish to exercise their church membership in a Mennonite church, in relation to the questions of

the nature and mode of baptism, and in the light of the gospel which has made us one". Further recommendations urge reflection on the present state of just war theory and on "Christian participation in the responsible use of coercive power".<sup>20</sup>

Dialogue with the Baptist World Alliance (1973-77) yielded the booklet *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue* (1984), which includes the dialogue report, the report of a group that evaluated the dialogue, a letter to the member churches of the two Alliances, some suggestions for further study and action, and reflections by a Mennonite scholar. Among the topics discussed are Scripture, the nature of the church (with special reference to wider councils and local autonomy), the church's ministry and mission and, of course, baptism. As to the last, the participants wonder

whether Christians of Reformed and Baptist convictions who are members in good standing of their churches could recognize one another as both occupying the position of those who have received and responded to the grace of God in baptism as this grace is understood in the New Testament. Such a mutual recognition could only arise from:

- (i) an agreed understanding that a complex of elements, including baptism with water in the name of the Trinity, public profession of faith and admission to the Lord's Supper, are all parts of the reception of and response to this grace of God;
- (ii) the acceptance (still problematic) that this complex of elements could find place in the life of any individual *either* contemporaneously in the act of believer's baptism, where profession of faith, water baptism and communion come together in time, or over a period of time, short or long, in which (infant) baptism, profession of faith (at "confirmation" as it is often called), and admission to communion follow one another as separable stages in a process.<sup>21</sup>

The Reformed-Methodist conversations, held in 1985 and 1987 with participants nominated by the World Methodist Council and the Alliance, focused upon those doctrinal points (grace and perfect salvation among them) that have traditionally kept the two traditions apart. The discussion of these took place in the context of the call to confess the gospel today, and the conclusion clearly stated is that "the classical doctrinal issues that we were asked to review ought not to be seen as obstacles to unity between Methodists and Reformed".<sup>22</sup>

In the light of this finding suggestions are made with a view to fostering closer relations on the ground.

In 1984 a preparatory meeting was held between representatives of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the Alliance.<sup>23</sup> In 1987 a full international dialogue session resulted in the report *Towards Closer Fellowship* (1988). The participants set down the faith that Reformed and Disciples share and pay particular attention to the nature of the church, baptism and ministry.

The paragraphs on baptism include one that is entirely in keeping with the aspiration expressed in the Baptist-Reformed report:

the difference between infant and believers' baptism becomes less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a personal response of faith made within the believing community. Personal confession of faith normally takes place either at the time of baptism in the case of the believer, or at a later time by those who are baptized as infants.<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of these discussions the participants conclude that "there are no theological or ecclesiological issues which need to divide us as churches";<sup>25</sup> and they make a number of practical recommendations concerning the way forward.

Five international meetings between Pentecostals and Reformed were held between 1995 and 2000. The stated objectives were to foster mutual understanding and respect, to identify points of theological agreement, disagreement and convergence, and to explore possibilities of common witness. The participants heard and discussed papers on spirituality and biblical interpretation, the Holy Spirit and the church, the Holy Spirit and mission in eschatological perspective, and the Holy Spirit, charisma, and the kingdom of God. The final report, *Word and Spirit, Church and World*, comprises elements from these papers and discussions.<sup>26</sup> It becomes clear that while Pentecostals and Reformed take their stand on the Trinity, and understand the church as being the creature of the Word and the Spirit, called to mission in, while not being of, the world, at certain points there are differences of emphasis. For example, some Pentecostals hold that the ability to speak in tongues is ultimately available to all believers, while many "distinguish between speaking in tongues as a gift of the Holy Spirit (not available to all) and speaking in tongues as a sign or evidence (potentially available to all) that one has been baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.8, 2.1-4)".<sup>27</sup> Again, dispensational theology has influenced many Pentecostals, and an emphasis upon the second coming of Christ is prominent among them. Some of them interpret reality dualistically – the Spirit over against the "world" – while others understand the Spirit as inviting Christians to engage in the reforming and transforming of society. The participants "wish to encourage others in their respective communities to join in this mutual exploration".<sup>28</sup>

#### *Dialogues with more distant communions*

Two phases of dialogue (1970-77 and 1984-90) have so far been completed with the Roman Catholic secretariat – now the pontifical council – for promoting Christian unity, while a third (1998-2002) is shortly to report. In the report of the first phase, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (1977), participants do not shirk their responsibility of articulating their disagreements over church

order, the teaching authority of the church and the eucharist; but some notable sentiments indicating convergence of views are also expressed. It is agreed that all who follow Christ have the task of witnessing corporately to the gospel, and that “the church catholic is really represented and exists in the local church”.<sup>29</sup> It is further agreed that the church “has its authority to the extent that it listens to the word Christ speaks to it ever afresh”.<sup>30</sup> But where the communication of what is heard is concerned there is a significant difference between the two parties: “so far as instruction is concerned, for the Reformed it is the community as a whole that is responsible and that delegates qualified people; whereas for the Catholics there is a distinctive responsibility of the pastoral ministry: the latter is rooted in the believing community but does not derive its authority from an act of delegation on the part of the latter.”<sup>31</sup> The agreed statement that “the Christian who looks back on his own life will say that Christ was active in it, leading him to repentance, conversion, and faith, even before he was aware or made any conscious response”,<sup>32</sup> seems to encapsulate the Pauline understanding of election, and to have implications for paedobaptism. As to church and world, the sobering point is made that “the church exposes its fundamental orientations and controlling loyalties by the way it lives, no matter what it says to the contrary”.<sup>33</sup> In a paragraph advising that the localness and the catholicity of the church be held together, the important affirmation is made that “it is only by participating in the local community that we share in the life of the universal church”.<sup>34</sup> In the section on the eucharist the once-for-all-ness of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is proclaimed, and it is agreed that the sacrament is “a memorial of the Lord’s death and resurrection”, “a source of loving communion with him in the power of the Spirit”, and “a source of the eschatological hope for his coming again”.<sup>35</sup>

In the report of the second phase, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, Reformed and Roman Catholic reviews of relations in the period from the Reformation to the present day are presented. These point to the need for the reconciliation of memories (which entails dealing with mutual condemnations uttered in the past) between the two communions. The participants confess their shared faith, emphasizing the sole mediatorship of Christ, justification by grace through faith, and the inescapability of the church as the community of the justified. The doctrine of the church is then more closely examined, and the differences of emphasis that result from the Reformed stress upon the church as *creatura verbi* and the Roman Catholic understanding of the church as a sacrament are noted. It is suggested that these modes of expression may be seen as complementary. While Roman Catholics believe that the church “subsists” in their communion, the question remains “to what degree they can recognize that the church of Christ also exists in the Reformed churches”.<sup>36</sup> Another “neuralgic” point, carried over from the first phase of the dialogue, is encapsulated in the question, “Is the laying-on of hands [at ordination] a

sending on a mission, a passing on of a power, or an incorporation into an order?"<sup>37</sup>

In 1977 Professor TF Torrance, acting on behalf of the Alliance, broached the possibility of Orthodox-Reformed conversations with the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in meetings in 1979, 1981 and 1983 between the Alliance and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The papers presented during these sessions concerned Orthodox-Reformed relations, and the doctrines of God, ecclesial authority and the Trinity.<sup>39</sup> Against the background of this promising beginning the Patriarchate of Constantinople invited all the autocephalous Orthodox churches to engage in official dialogue with the Alliance. The sessions began in 1998, and continue. The jointly agreed policy was to focus upon fundamental aspects of the Christian confession, and to date the result has been the publication of agreed statements on the Holy Trinity (accompanied by a common reflection on the doctrine) (1992) and on christology (1994). The statement on the Trinity draws upon biblical and patristic sources, and in further explanation of it the participants underline the point that the statement turns upon the fact that "it is only through God that God may be known".<sup>40</sup> They also make it clear that "the doctrine of the Holy Trinity expounded here is: one God, three persons, not three persons, one nature".<sup>41</sup> They claim that their statement

cuts across mistaken polarized views of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to which Latin theology moves from the oneness of God to the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while Greek theology moves from the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the oneness of God. What is provided by the agreed statement of the Orthodox theologians of the east and the Reformed theologians of the west is pre-eminently a statement on the tri-unity of God as trinity in unity and unity in trinity.<sup>42</sup>

The statement on christology focuses upon the affirmation in the Nicene Creed that "it was 'for us and our salvation' that the eternal Son of God became flesh, lived, died and rose again".<sup>43</sup> It is suggested that while the Orthodox set out from the mystery of the incarnation understood as encompassing the entire saving economy proclaimed in the Bible, and the Reformed proceed from the scriptural witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the two approaches are not incompatible. Both sides "agree that their teaching about trinity and incarnation reflects the encounter with the reality of God as revealed in Christ".<sup>44</sup> The agent in this encounter is the Holy Spirit who, among other things "brings about the communion of all believers both with the head of the body of Christ and between themselves".<sup>45</sup> In view of the significant agreements so far reached, it is hoped that discussions of church, ministry and sacraments may follow.

The dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox churches began in 1992 and continues. Its objectives are to foster mutual understanding and fellowship

between the two families. Christology is a central theme in this dialogue, and in an agreed statement on christology the Formula of Union of AD 433 is declared to be compatible with the christological doctrines of both dialogue partners. Further,

Both sides agree in rejecting the teaching which separates or divides the human nature, both soul and body in Christ, from his divine nature or reduces the union of the natures to the level of conjoining. Both sides also agree in rejecting the teaching which confuses the human nature in Christ with the divine nature so that the former is absorbed in the latter and thus ceases to exist.

In offering this statement, we recognize the mystery of God's act in Christ and seek to express that we have shared the same authentic christological faith in the one incarnate Lord.<sup>46</sup>

The two sides agree on "the normative function of holy scripture for the life of the church... Holy scripture and its correct interpretation, guided by tradition, witnesses to the Word of God in our different contexts."<sup>46</sup> As to mission, the Reformed participants affirm that "united by the Spirit to the risen Christ, our participation in the mission of the Triune God flows out in service and witness to the world",<sup>48</sup> while their Oriental Orthodox colleagues declare that "the church, as the living body of Christ, constantly called together and renewed by the Holy Spirit, worships the triune God on behalf of all God's creation. This is mission in its totality."<sup>49</sup> They do, however, proclaim the Word of God so as to "bring about and foster the signs of the rule of God in human history", and they believe that "the church's prayer and pastoral care, struggle for justice and search for communion are all vital expressions of her participation in the mission of Jesus Christ, her Lord and saviour".<sup>50</sup> Indeed, "the ultimate form of the church's mission is to carry the whole creation in all its brokenness and misery before the transforming presence of the triune God in a perpetual act of praise and thanksgiving".<sup>51</sup>

In 2001 the first dialogue session took place with the general conference of Seventh-Day Adventists. The report states the common ground between the two traditions. Among the points noted are acceptance of "the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the supreme witness to God's saving grace in Christ"; the Trinity; God's reconciling work in Christ: "By the work of Christ God's holiness is honoured and our sins forgiven"; the calling of the church to proclaim salvation and to work for "healing, and deliverance from spiritual and economic poverty". The participants affirm their belief that they "stand in the succession of those who, through the ages, have faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Christ". For them the Lord's Supper is "integral to the church's worship and witness", and they acknowledge their debt to the Reformation's biblical emphases upon salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.<sup>52</sup>

The report tackles the mutual misunderstanding and suspicions that have

hitherto marred their relationship. Among clarifications from the Adventist side are that their church, organized in 1863, has never set dates for the second coming of Jesus; they understand the death of Christ on the cross as providing the once-for-all atonement for sins, and “their distinctive view of the high priestly ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary teaches that he is applying the ongoing benefits of his atonement, not adding any value to it”. While Adventists highly prize the writings of Ellen G White for their counsel, devotional content and biblical reflection, they “hold firmly to the principle of *sola scriptura*”. Hence all other writings, including Ellen White’s, are to be tested by the Bible. Adventists do not teach that they alone will be saved, and while they have been reluctant to engage in political activities designed to challenge social structures, they “have always been engaged in social betterment as part of their understanding of the gospel”.

The Reformed participants were called upon to clarify their position regarding predestination. They replied that predestination is a religious term that is not to be elided with “determinism” and that “God’s electing grace is not to be construed fatalistically, but in the context of God’s indiscriminating love whereby *all* are called to salvation, to which call they make their own, enabled, response”. Along this line the sting can be drawn from the historic Calvinist-Arminian debates, it being understood that the former were seeking to honour God’s sovereignty in salvation, the latter to uphold human responsibility before God. Adventist queries concerning the relative lack of interest among the Reformed in eschatology, and the overemphasis on the part of some Reformed Christians on socioethical activities at the expense of gospel proclamation, were also addressed.

The participants also consider mission in the world as it is. Poverty, HIV/Aids, violence, ecological destruction, religious freedom and gender biases are discussed, and the necessity of raised consciousness in relation to all of these matters is urged.

This dialogue session was a learning process for both parties, and the desirability of further discussion on such topics as biblical interpretation, the sabbath, church discipline and the meaning and significance of Christ’s high priestly ministry was noted.

The reception of dialogue<sup>53</sup>

There are practical difficulties in the way of the reception of dialogue findings. The reports are costly to produce and costly to mail. During my period as theological secretary of the Alliance I wrote two letters every year to general secretaries of member churches and deans or presidents of the nearly four hundred theological colleges, seminaries and university faculties with which at that time we had connections. Once a year I wrote to the librarians of all such institutions. I reported on the Alliance’s theological work, and normally

whenever a dialogue report was to hand I enclosed it. But one cannot ensure that general secretaries will pass reports to the appropriate person, that deans or presidents will ensure that their professors of systematic theology will have access to the reports, or that librarians will actually catalogue and shelve them.<sup>54</sup> More broadly, the nature of the Alliance is such that its members are under no obligation to receive, implement, or even read the findings of the panels that work on their behalf.

Over and above the practicalities there are contextual, theological and demographic factors that inhibit reception. Some representatives of some Alliance member churches feel that bilateral dialogues are a “western” hobby far removed from their own concerns.<sup>55</sup> This concern has a practical and a historical aspect. It is entirely understandable that churches whose members live in life-or-death situations – and many do – should regard the digestion of dialogue reports as a luxury for which they have little time. Churches – especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific – also point out that the dialogues are concerned with the healing of divisions whose roots are in the west, divisions that have been imposed upon them by missionary endeavour. During the Alliance’s 1992 review of its dialogue programme, African representatives “felt that the dialogues presently going on within the context of WARC are inter-European. They are concerned with issues of theology and practice (praxis) that are not alive in Africa. They seem abstract and largely imposed.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, while they encourage their western friends to sort these matters out, “they feel that their agenda is quite different”.<sup>57</sup> But on the very next page the African representatives declare that “traditional denominational distinctions were found to be standing in the way of bi-and/or multilateral ‘conversations’ in Africa”.<sup>58</sup> To the extent that this is so, it would seem that the dialogues are, after all, relevant in Africa, for they have the goal of removing such obstacles. Above all, can we really say that the dialogues are of no relevance so long as, in all the countries of the world, the people of Christ are divided at the table of the Lord? However we have come by the divisions (and we have *all* inherited them from our Christian history, short or long), do they not need to be removed?

There is more than one way of finding the dialogues irrelevant.

There are Reformed Christians in many parts of the world who have a different understanding of the nature of the church and hence of ecumenism. They emphasize and rejoice in the spiritual unity of the church invisible and see no great urgency to address the disunity of the church visible. But as John Whale once cheekily remarked, “It would be an Irish result if the only discernible mark of the church were its invisibility.”<sup>59</sup>

Again, there are “conservative evangelicals” for whom unity must be in the truth; and since they disagree with “liberal” or “ecumenical” Christians on specific doctrinal matters and/or on their understanding of scripture, they cooperate (or not, as the case may be) only with those of like mind and see no

point in bilateral dialogues. But what is the evangel or gospel that these Christians wish to conserve? It sometimes seems as if it is a rather individualistic piece of good news, namely, that God sent his Son to die on the cross in order to save my soul. No doubt he did, but this as part of his sovereign purpose to call out one covenant *people* for his praise and service, uniting them to Christ and therefore to each other as branches of the Vine. If this is what God has done, then the actual disunity of his people is a challenge to be addressed, and bilateral dialogues are a sincere effort in this direction.

Yet again, in some parts there is a more theologically diverse individualism that manifests itself in a variety of ways. Individuals, under the influence of consumerism, shop around for a church in which they feel “comfortable” (baneful word!) regardless of theological considerations, while particular local churches and even denominations may be so well blessed with resources of various kinds that they feel no urgent need of fellowship with the wider family of Christians.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps the most straightforward reason for the lack of interest of some member churches in particular dialogues is that the dialogue partner is not present in their region. Even where both are present one partner may be much larger than the other, and this can have an inhibiting effect; and in some cases the partners may be on different sides in political conflicts.<sup>61</sup>

In all of these ways, and many more, Reformed Christians may persuade themselves that they have no need of, or are not in a position to take advantage of, the findings of bilateral dialogues. I nevertheless believe that the reports of the bilateral dialogues contain a wealth of material the assimilation of which would make for the strengthening of the witness of Reformed churches in many places, and in some cases would stimulate the taking of practical steps towards closer relations with our friends of other communions.

### Concluding reflections

I hope it has become clear, even from the highly selective survey that I have been able to present, that in the bilateral dialogue reports the Alliance and its diverse partners have covered a wide range of doctrinal and practical points. Quite apart from any results in terms of unity on the ground, there is a body of material here that should find its way into appropriate theological courses, not least those attended by Reformed candidates for ministry. Moreover this material should not be siphoned off into optional courses on ecumenism, which are so frequently taken only by the “converted”, but should appear in general doctrine courses taken by the majority.

For the most part the reports are written clearly and with conviction: this is not bland “committee theology”. Few punches are pulled, and continuing disagreements are honestly recorded. But on many of the traditionally “neuralgic” points convergence is apparent and in some cases consensus is

reached. It is also quite remarkable, given the diversity of the dialogue teams, that there is such a high degree of consistency between the dialogue reports. It is true, as Karel Blei has shown, that some reports omit what others include (the eldership here, the idea of covenant there) when the topic under consideration cried out for their inclusion,<sup>62</sup> but I have found very few cases of one report flatly contradicting another.

The fact must be faced that, for the reasons suggested above, too frequently the dialogue reports lie dormant. If it is odd that some Christians query the very idea of dialogue, it seems still odder that others, officially committed to the goal of manifesting the unity God has granted us all in Christ, do little to harvest the results of dialogue. I am here thinking particularly of the dialogues with our near neighbours. It is a matter for rejoicing that the dialogues with the Lutherans, Methodists and Disciples of Christ have declared that no theological obstacles to full communion exist. Yet on the ground, while some united churches have come into being, elsewhere there has been little movement, despite the fact that in an increasing number of places Reformed Christians already worship jointly with these partners at the local level. Whereas some churches have seized the opportunity of devising a church order in which both paedobaptism and believers' baptism are available as alternatives, it is particularly unfortunate that only 22 member churches of the Alliance and Baptist World Alliance responded to the Reformed-Baptist dialogue report in which that possibility was proposed for consideration. All of which causes one to wonder whether a knowledgeable Reformed enthusiast could be found in every member church who would assume the role of monitoring the take-up of dialogue findings and liaising with the department of theology in Geneva.

Concerning those whom history has given to be our near neighbours, some of whom are already united with us in some parts of the world,<sup>63</sup> it is not surprising that the dialogue reports concentrate upon particular "neuralgic" issues – baptism, ministry and the like – and propose practical steps that might be taken to foster full union. This narrowing of concern occurs on the basis of a degree of familiarity with one another such that we do not have to expound the Trinity or christology to each other. But where the more distant communions are concerned this fundamental theological work has been essential, and its fruit has been significant.

But this leads me to express my view that, taking the dialogue reports as a whole, there is one fundamental doctrine in particular that, while it has been frequently alluded to, has not had detailed attention directed to it. I refer to the doctrine of the Christ's atoning work at the Cross. If convergence could be recorded – still better, if consensus could be reached on this issue between the Alliance and its dialogue partners – I suggest that this would place questions of ministry, sacraments and the like in proper perspective. As I have elsewhere asked, "What are the ecclesiological implications of God's unmerited grace

which has accepted even us?”<sup>64</sup> To begin to answer my own question: I believe that one implication would be that we would allow nothing to keep us from fellowship at the table of the Lord with all who by grace are in Christ – and anything that threatened to prevent such fellowship would immediately be perceived and repudiated as sectarian. In the words of the eirenic John Howe (1630-1705), “Without all controversy, the main inlet of all the distractions, confusions, and divisions of the Christian world hath been by adding other conditions of church communion than Christ hath done.”<sup>65</sup> It is in the light of the reconciliation wrought on the cross that we see our ecclesiological “small print” for what it is.

## Notes

1. There are, in addition, two trilateral dialogues between Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed, on *The Theology of Marriage and the Problems of Mixed Marriages* (Geneva: WARC, 1976) and on indulgences (2001); a quadrilateral dialogue also involving the Methodists on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (2001); and a series of multilateral “Prague Conversations”, initiated in 1986 and continuing, on the “First, Radical and Second Reformations” – see Milan Opocensky, ed, *Towards a Renewed Dialogue: The First and Second Reformations* (Geneva: WARC, 1996) and Milan Opocensky and Páraic Réamonn, eds, *Justification and Sanctification in the Traditions of the Reformation* (Geneva: WARC, 1999). Conversations have also been held between representatives of the Alliance and the African Instituted Churches; see “African Christians talk together” (*Update* 12/1, May 2002, p.12). The dialogue reports are available on the WARC website ([www.warc.ch/dt/er11](http://www.warc.ch/dt/er11)), with an introduction by the Alliance’s current theological secretary, Odair Pedroso Mateus; many of them are also available in the two volumes, Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds, *Growth in Agreement* (Geneva/New York: WCC/Paulist Press, 1984) and Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G Rusch, eds, *Growth in Agreement II* (Geneva/Grand Rapids, MI: WCC/Eerdmans, 2000). It has been a privilege to be associated with a number of these dialogues, and I thank Dr Mateus for the invitation to offer some reflections upon this significant aspect of the Alliance’s theological work.
2. Letter of Calvin to Sadolet, quoted by GW Richards, *Proceedings of the World Presbyterian Alliance*, XIII, 1929, p.291.
3. See Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service: A history of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875-1975* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), p.202.
4. The strenuous efforts and kindly guidance of Richmond Smith, theological secretary during the first thirteen years of bilateral dialogue, should not go unremarked.
5. I have been around long enough to have said some of these things before: for example, in “The Role of Bilateral Dialogues within the One Ecumenical Movement”, *The Ecumenical Review* 46/4, October 1994, pp.453-60.
6. See further, Alan PF Sell, “The Reformed Family Today: Some theological reflections”, in Donald K McKim, ed, *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp.433-41.
7. There are significant differences between the Alliance, a fellowship of Reformed churches each having its own confession(s) of faith – or not, and those Christian

world communions that are structured in a more conciliar fashion. Not least is that the Alliance's recommendations come to its members with moral authority only. Karel Blei has wondered whether the time is ripe for the Alliance to transform itself into a more structured fellowship. See HS Wilson, ed, *Bilateral Dialogues* (Geneva: WARC 1993), p.15. This is a delicate matter, for there are member churches who remain within the fold only because the Alliance is *not* a formal conciliar structure. It may not be irrelevant to recall on the one hand that in its very earliest days the World Presbyterian Alliance found it quite impossible to devise a confession of faith to which all its members would assent; while on the other hand today's Alliance was able to discipline member churches over apartheid without being a tightly-structured conciliar body. See Alan PF Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.71-3, 233-5.

8. See her paper in *Bilateral Dialogues*, p.40.
9. *Ibid.*, p.35.
10. *Ibid.*, p.36.
11. See *Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1988).
12. See *God's Reign and Our Unity* (London: SPCK and Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1984), pp.62-5. Integrity prompted the comment that "There is a substantial minority of Reformed Christians who do not accept women ministers. Even where there are women ministers there has been little serious consideration of the distinctive contribution that women might make in the ordained ministry." (pp.62f) The question of the ordination of women was raised, but not pursued, during the second phase of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue. See *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* (Geneva: WARC, 1991), p.49. The question of ordination has yet to be broached in dialogues with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches.
13. See, for example, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.iv n.1.
14. See, for example, Günther Gassmann, "Nature and Function of Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues and their Interrelation", *Mid-Stream*, 25/3, July 1986, pp.299-308.
15. I suspect that there are points to be made about the varied psychodynamics of the several dialogues – but I forbear!
16. See *Reformed World* 33/7, September 1975, pp.314-20.
17. *Towards Church Fellowship* (Geneva: LWF/WARC, 1989), p.28.
18. *Called to Communion and Common Witness* (Geneva: LWF/WARC, 2002), p.17.
19. *God's Reign and Our Unity*, p.82. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.137-42.
20. Ross T Bender and Alan PF Sell, eds, *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991), p.238. This phase of the dialogue represented a pioneering attempt to forward the Alliance's work by utilizing the resources of a university Institute for the Humanities – in this case, Calgary's. The two world bodies constituted their dialogue panels and covered the travel costs of their participants, while the institute provided the physical facilities and organized funding.
21. *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1984), pp.19f. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.142-5.
22. *Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1988), p.14.

23. Papers designed to introduce the families to one another were presented and topics for future consideration were noted. See Alan PF Sell, ed, *Reformed and Disciples of Christ in Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1985).
24. *Towards Closer Fellowship* (Geneva: WARC, 1988), p.11.
25. *Ibid.*, p.14.
26. *Reformed World* 50/3, September 2000, pp.128-156.
27. *Ibid.*, p.144.
28. *Ibid.*, p.153.
29. *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (The Vatican: Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Geneva: WARC, 1977), p.8. Cf *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, pp.132-7.
30. *Ibid.*, p.10.
31. *Ibid.*, p.13. I think that Reformed communities recognize and ordain those whom God calls and equips, and whose sense of call is tested within the community. In other words, the above statement seems to elevate democracy at the expense of the divine initiative.
32. *Ibid.*, p.16.
33. *Ibid.*, p.19.
34. *Ibid.* Though there may, of course, be different understandings of "local".
35. *Ibid.*, p.27.
36. *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.46.
37. *Ibid.*, p.49.
38. There had already been Reformed-Orthodox conversations in Romania (from 1964), the United States and Canada (1968) and Hungary (1972). See Lukas Vischer, "Introduction" to *Agreed Statements from the Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue* (Geneva: WARC, 1998), p.8.
39. The papers are published in TF Torrance, ed, *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985).
40. *Agreed Statements*, p.18.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p.20.
43. *Ibid.*, p.23.
44. *Ibid.*, p.21.
45. *Ibid.*, p.24.
46. *Oriental Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue: The first four sessions* (Geneva: WARC, 1998), p.52.
47. *Ibid.*, p.53.
48. *Ibid.*, p.54.
49. *Ibid.*, p.55.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. See the *Report of the International Theological Dialogue between the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (2002), also available on the WARC website: [www.warc.ch/dt/er11/22.html](http://www.warc.ch/dt/er11/22.html)
53. For a variety of views of reception, see *Ecumenical Trends*, 15/7, July-August 1986; cf Lukas Vischer, "The Process of 'reception' in the Ecumenical Movement", *Mid-Stream* 23/2, 1984, pp.221-233.

54. I have visited a number of libraries to which I know I have sent materials only to find no trace of them.
55. In fact it would be most encouraging if certain western churches paid any attention at all to dialogue reports!
56. This comment was made before the dialogue with the African Instituted Churches began in 1998, but similar sentiments are expressed from various quarters.
57. *Bilateral Dialogues*, p.70.
58. *Ibid.*, p.71.
59. JS Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (London: Collins Fontana, 1957), p.134. [The Irish editor takes exception to this remark, but tolerantly allows it to stand.]
60. For a helpful brief study of individualism in one country see Dennis N Voskuil, "Individualism and Evangelism in America", *Reformed Review* 41/1, Autumn 1987, pp.21-28.
61. These points are noted in *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, p.54.
62. Karel Blei, in *Bilateral Dialogues*, pp.7-9.
63. So that it would have been embarrassing, to say the least, if the Reformed-Methodist report, for example, had concluded that the traditional doctrinal differences between Methodists and ourselves ought still to be church-dividing.
64. *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, p.240.
65. John Howe, *Works*, ed Henry Rogers, 1862-3, V, p.226.

### The electronic general council

*The Alliance beyond 2004* is a draft prospectus for the future of the Alliance fellowship after the 24th general council – the full title is *The Common Witness of WARC Member Churches Today and Tomorrow and the Service of the Alliance* – and is available in pdf format on our website at [www.warc.ch/24gc/ab2004.pdf](http://www.warc.ch/24gc/ab2004.pdf)

*Crossing Ten Seas*, a set of 14 studies related to the Accra theme and intended for use by congregations, is available at [www.warc.ch/24gc/cts/index.html](http://www.warc.ch/24gc/cts/index.html)

The *study texts and Bible studies* for use in and before Accra have been published as a double issue of *Reformed World* (53/2&3, October 2003) and are available at [www.warc.ch/24gc/study/index.html](http://www.warc.ch/24gc/study/index.html)

These materials may also be obtained in hard copy by writing to the general council coordination office at our Geneva address or by emailing [accra@warc.ch](mailto:accra@warc.ch)