

Report on the Reformed Youth Forum

Uniting General Council of World Communion of Reformed Churches

In June 2010, people from Reformed churches around the world gathered together for the historic joining together of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) to form one new international body, the World Communion of Reformed Churches. In the week prior to the meeting of the Uniting General Council (UGC), from June 14-17, a Reformed Youth Forum (RYF) was held. Its theme was the same as that of the UGC, "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace" (Ephesians 4:3) and it was designed

to provide an opportunity for youths to make friends and build community, to appreciate and respect cultural diversity, to reflect on the UGC theme and give input to the formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The RYF will prepare a message for the UGC and will share key highlights in the UGC Youth Section.¹

Youth representatives from both the Caribbean and North America Council for Mission (CANACOM) and the Caribbean and North America Area Council (CANAAC) attended the RYF. This report presents our experiences at the forum – including what we expected, how we participated and what we got out of it – as well as our recommendations as to how to apply what we learned there to the youth/young adult programs of our respective councils. Everything good you find here comes out of our collaborative process, while I take full responsibility for any errors or poor recommendations made.

Many of us were not sure what to expect at the RYF. Some of us came to it with apprehension because we did not know what it was that we could offer. Despite this, the general feel was that we were excited to be there, to share our thoughts and listen to other peoples' experiences and challenges. We were especially interested in hearing about how other churches experience youth participation and church growth: if they are going through challenges in youth involvement and membership like our churches are, and what they are doing about it. There was a lot of energy and excitement about meeting new people from around the world and developing connections and relationships with them. We looked forward to sharing our talents and benefitting from the talents of others.

In sharing our skills and talents, we participated in various ways in the forum. Kaoma Fernandes was a steward and so was involved in a lot of the organizational aspects of the forum. He would have liked to be able to participate more in some of the sessions, but the group as a whole benefitted greatly from his efforts, and those of the other stewards. It was because of them, the excellent leadership of the forum, and the openness and creativity of all the participants in the forum that we were able as a group to create the clear and concise message that was presented to the UGC the following week. Jessie Jennette was also able to create a video to present this report, using photographs and video footage from various participants in the RYF. This video is available on the RYF Facebook page. Doniecia Ganness was a delegate to the UGC, so she was able to bring all of the observations and knowledge she had acquired during her time in the RYF (including her sense of the group's needs and goals) to her sensitive and thoughtful participation in the UGC.

¹ Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, "Reformed Youth Forum, June 14 – 17, 2010; General Council 2010, Reformed Youth Forum Handbook," March 26, 2010, 1.

During the RYF, we all contributed to at least one time of worship in some form or other. For some examples, Abigail Butler (Abby), Sarah Rhuggenaath, Naomi Stright, Jessie Jennette and Chelsea Masterman helped lead the singing in most of the services. Sarah offered a prayer in English, Dutch and Papiamento, and many of us read prayers or readings. Sarah danced for one service, and Abby and Kaoma did a liturgical dance in another of the services. Jessie wrote liturgy, and also facilitated an English-speaking Bible study. Naomi taught a song called "I only wanna be a sheep." Victoria De Caul and Sarah chose a play called "Follow Me" and determined how it would be performed. Victoria then directed it and both participated in it, as well as helped plan worship for the service it was used in. Naomi was also in the play. Wednesday morning worship was a CANACOM/CANAAC service, so that is when the play happened, and Victoria, Sarah, Chelsea participated in the planning for the service, along with CANACOM's Karen Herbst-Kim and two young men from England and Scotland who wrote some of the liturgy. Victoria was also the youngest of three preachers who preached – and preached very well – at the closing worship ceremony.

Perhaps even more than doing things in services, we participated in discussions, communal prayer, made friends and shared stories. As Sarah put it: "I got to know a lot of people and I'm really glad about that, it's amazing." Abby, Sarah, Naomi, Jessie, Chelsea and Victoria also participated in a climbing wall activity that included a theological reflection. Some of the things we reflected on included the importance of other people in our faith journey – because sometimes they can offer support and guidance when we cannot see the way for ourselves – as well as the importance of trusting in something else to hold us up when we personally do not have the strength to do so. With a climbing wall you can see the big picture of where you want to go; however you also need to focus on the step-by-step to get there. As with a faith journey, there are many routes to the destination but each of us has to work with the options we are presented with to find the one that is right for us.

Through it all, we were continually drawn out of the sense of isolation we sometimes experience as young people in the church. In our own contexts, it is easy to feel as though no one is listening to us – and also to feel a sense of helplessness over the dwindling youth involvement in the church. At the RYF, we were empowered to speak our truths and have them heard and taken seriously by the Uniting General Council. All the young people around us inspired us too. As Naomi put it: "Everyone I've listened to is so bright and intelligent and has so much to say. This helped me to feel like I could say anything too and that it would be listened to." Abby expressed the edification we felt by being around so many other faithful young adults as she commented on how good it was to see young people be so sentimental, religious, unashamed of being faithful, and all coming together with really well-put-together thoughts.

This event allowed us to come together, realize a greater sense of worldwide Christianity, experience community with folks from other cultures and denominations and return home re-affirmed in our faith and sense of call as current and future leaders (lay and ordained) of our respective denominations. Simply experiencing different forms of worship gave us new ideas as to what we might bring to our churches to help people connect intentionally and experientially with the Spirit – and with the very experience of being in church. For some of the young people such as Victoria, helping to lead worship and direct a play left her feeling more empowered to be a leader back home. Jessie

mentioned that the collective embrace of change by the young people of the RYF helped her come away strengthened by the idea that change is a good thing and that we should be pushing for change in the church if we are really trying to grow.

The experience allowed us to bring back to our own contexts different worship materials and perspectives. It helped us break out of old patterns into, in some cases, a more open-minded and ecumenical sense of “Church.” Kaoma mentioned the importance of educating people back home about the global church, perhaps developing an education program in your own congregation and then letting it spread to others. As Jessie pointed out, we were reminded that young people go where the energy is – so if we want thriving youth ministries we need to take our young people seriously and put real effort into them. It was in listening to us, in facilitating the conversation and giving us a real voice that the collective youth and young adults at the RYF were freed to speak so concisely and eloquently. Imagine what it would be like if we did that in every congregation.

From the collective observations and experiences recorded above, I offer four suggestions to CANACOM and CANAAC for our youth programming:

1. If you are looking for discernment on issues from your young people, a helpful way to facilitate this is to provide a context in which sufficient time, space, theological reflection and guiding questions are provided as a framework in which to give them voice. Peers who have experience in these areas should guide the experience. Writing the report to the UGC would have been a very different process without this.
2. Something I personally noticed and found unsettling was the verbal dominance of the white European and American members of the group over many (not all) of the Caribbean and Asian members. Most people seemed to chalk this up to personality and did not appear to be too concerned, as the people who were talking seemed to be reflecting much of the group sentiment. As well, the leadership team was well balanced from the various regions and its members seemed to have relatively equal roles. However, when one broad racial/ethnic group takes the majority of the overall floor space, I see a problem. I do not think anyone was acting out of prejudice in dominating discussions – the love in the group was obvious. What I do think is that, in intercultural groups, some intercultural training on communication patterns from various societies would be helpful. How do people feel comfortable speaking up? Just calling out, or being called on? These are often regionally-specific norms and if we want to hear from everyone in the group instead of perpetuating historical patterns of power and privilege, we need to pay attention to things like this. I am not saying it is anyone’s fault when there is an imbalance, and I recognize that more “behind-the-scenes” conversations (hopefully with diverse conversation partners) often help inform the opinions of those who are speaking out in the group setting. What I *am* suggesting is that intercultural education sessions/workshops be part of our international youth gatherings. This will enable youth and young adults to practice the knowledge they gain about intercultural relations in a safe space. They can then take this learning with them out into the world, where they will hopefully be increasingly aware and intentional participants in our globally diverse – and in some cases also quite locally diverse – society.

3. Young Christians in the Reform tradition in the world tend to feel isolated from the church as a whole, and even within their own congregations. Any and all experiences and tools we can give them – or assist them in developing – to help them realize they are not alone, and to help them build bridges within their own contexts, are welcome. With this, it is helpful to take into consideration that not all of them are youth ministers or pastors and many of them are students or hold full or part-time jobs outside of the church. Therefore, tools that make efficient use of time and often-scarce resources are encouraged. Perhaps developing specific tools or a curriculum while we are together, to take back to our churches and youth programs, would be a good idea. Having a collective project to which all intentionally contributed in one way or other worked very well at the RYF for our report to the WCRC's UGC. This might also work for developing materials to use in our own contexts.
4. Sharing of resources – liturgies, songs, rituals – are revitalizing. A Caribbean and North America worship conference for young people might be a very successful endeavor.

The overall sentiment regarding the RYF was overwhelmingly positive. All of the CANACOM/CANAAC participants expressed deep gratitude for our involvement with the conference. Thank you for sending us, and for valuing our voices.

Respectfully submitted March 2, 2011

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