

Introduction

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“The church exists wherever the gospel of God’s grace and human freedom, of justification and justice, is proclaimed and received in faith, and where the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper are administered according to Christ’s will. The church is the communion (*koinonia*) of all believers, who are members of a body whose sole head is Jesus the resurrected. It is because of what the Reformation said and did about the church that the Alliance has embraced with enthusiasm the cause of visible Christian unity, which it understands in this Reformed sense.” – *The Alliance beyond 2004*, par 70.

“The Alliance beyond 2004” is a draft prospectus for the future of the Alliance fellowship after the 24th general council (Accra 2004). It has already gone to member churches with an invitation to respond and will shortly go out to delegates and other Accra participants as well.

That the Alliance is an ecumenically committed Christian world communion is no news to anyone who isn’t actually Rip van Winkle. That our ecumenical engagement is grounded in our confessional heritage is, however, not a note that we have often sounded quite so deliberately as here.

We may gloss the point by borrowing from Michael Weinrich the notion of a horizon. For a horizon has two poles, objective and subjective. And if the objective pole of our ecumenical engagement is the *oikoumene* – not just the universal church, but the whole inhabited earth – the subjective pole is rooted firmly in our specific histories as Reformation churches.

Recognizing this saves us from the twin traps of irritation and surprise: surprise, when other Christian traditions fail to embrace with enthusiasm our perfectly reasonable ecumenical views; and irritation, when they attempt to foist upon us their own entirely unreasonable convictions. In short, it saves us from the illusion that there is only one way to be ecumenical and, in so doing, frees us to be ecumenical in our own Reformed way.

As the following essays suggest, our Reformed commitment to the message of justification and justice gives us something distinctive to say and do, and thus to contribute to the wider ecumenical movement: both critically, in resisting the absurd and intolerable conditions that others seek to impose on full communion or other forms of visible unity, and constructively, in insisting on the one unity that ultimately matters – the unity under God of a fallen and redeemed humanity.