

A short history of the Alliance

“The Alliance of the Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian System” was founded in 1875. The International Congregational Council first met in 1891. These two bodies merged in 1970 to form the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational).

The Presbyterian Alliance (1875-1970)

Proposals to organize Presbyterian churches as a world confessional family began to circulate in 1868. The aims were to give to the various churches more real fellowship in each other’s gifts and grace; coordinate activity in mission and evangelism; strengthen weak and struggling churches; exchange the results of experience in practical work; and offer opportunities for united prayer. In 1875, the Alliance was founded in London by 64 delegates from 21 churches. The first general council met in 1877. By that time the Alliance had 49 member churches, mainly English-speaking, but also including some churches from continental Europe. For the first time, Presbyterian churches had an international instrument through which they could speak and act together.

From the beginning the Alliance was strongly interested in Christian unity. It endorsed attempts to unite churches in particular countries and in the mission fields. It sought contact with the International Congregational Council, welcomed the first beginnings of the Faith and Order movement (from 1910), and sent a message to the Lutheran World Congress in Eisenach in 1923. Already at the end of the 19th century the Alliance gave attention to the growth of Pentecostalism.

The first general council sought to define the principles of Presbyterianism, but the attempt to construct a common confession of faith was later abandoned. Questions of ordination and oversight, catholicity in the Reformed tradition, the office of elder, mixed marriages, church renewal and Reformed worship were discussed. Before the first world war, evangelization and national mission stood in the foreground.

In 1893, the Alliance convened a conference of its churches’ mission boards to address disunity in foreign missions. It was concerned with helping younger churches towards independence. It was agreed that no missionary work should be undertaken in European countries where an indigenous Reformed church already existed.

Time and again, the position of women in the Alliance was discussed. Women’s conferences were held on the fringes of the general councils. At the 17th general council (Princeton 1954), women for the first time were delegates, and some were elected to the executive committee. A department of women was created, which was later integrated into the department for cooperation and witness.

Youth conferences took place in Liverpool in 1933, in Montpellier in 1949 and in Woudschoten in 1954. Later the Alliance decided against creating its own youth department – it believed that youth work, for the most part, should be done ecumenically.

The pioneers of the Alliance were driven by a strong ecumenical awareness. The Alliance refused to promote a narrow Presbyterianism, while holding that the ecumenical movement needs strong confessional families. After the founding of the World Council of Churches, the Alliance defined its ecumenical stance in the Basle declaration of 1951.

In its activity, the Alliance devoted attention to religious freedom and gave support to religious minorities (not all of them Reformed) in several countries.

Social questions and the consequences of industrialization were often on the agenda. Unjust social systems were criticized and a cooperative society was urged. A conference on the race question was held in Johannesburg in 1924. A manifesto against slavery and racism was issued in 1933. From the 1950s on, the Alliance confronted the problem of apartheid in South Africa.

The Alliance often dealt with public issues such as colonial politics in Africa (imperialism), slavery in the New Hebrides, the Armenian genocide, support for the League of Nations, the situation in Germany after 1933, or the position of the churches in central and eastern Europe after 1945.

Two world wars and the subsequent nuclear arms race made peace an important priority.

Interchurch aid was already on the agenda of the first general council in 1877. There it was a question of support for the stipends of Waldensian pastors in Italy. Later, churches in the west were time and again concerned about the smaller struggling churches in continental Europe.

The International Congregational Council (1891-1970)

As early as 1874, an ecumenical council of Congregational churches was proposed. Arrangements were made by the Congregational Union of England and Wales, in consultation with the National Council of the United States, for an assembly of 300 delegates, equally divided between England, the USA, and the rest of the world.

The first International Congregational Council (ICC) met in London in 1891. It helped delegates from smaller unions, in particular, to realize that they belonged to a worldwide fellowship. This was followed by a second council in 1899, a third in 1908, a fourth in 1920 (following the Great War), and a fifth in 1930; but the ICC remained for many years a very loosely structured organization.

A sixth council was held in 1948 and a permanent international office was established in London. The ICC became a well-organized world confessional family. This was very important in the subsequent development of relations

with the Presbyterian Alliance, which led eventually to the merger of the two bodies in the uniting general council (Nairobi 1970).

The road to Nairobi

In 1954, the 17th general council changed the name of the Presbyterian Alliance to “the Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian Order”. It also agreed two shorter forms: the World Presbyterian Alliance, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Behind this lay a cultural and linguistic difference – the churches of the Anglo-Saxon world used the term “Presbyterian” almost exclusively, while churches in the continental European tradition preferred “Reformed”. But behind it also lay a significant question about the self-understanding of the Alliance: which was more important, the term “Presbyterian”, which referred only to polity (the form of church government), or the term “Reformed”, which indicated the substance of the faith of its member churches?

This question was already in the air when Marcel Pradervand, then general secretary of the World Alliance, took the initiative to approach the ICC. In his report to the 1956 executive committee, he observed that more and more churches of the two confessional families were engaged in discussions with a view to union. “It is imperative for us to ask ourselves,” he said, “if we should not undertake conversations on the world level to examine the future relations of our Alliance to the ICC.”

In 1958, the eighth assembly of the ICC accepted with pleasure an invitation from the Alliance “to discuss the theological agreements and community of outlook between the member churches of the two confessional bodies”. In 1960, it was agreed to appoint a joint committee to work on the Reformed doctrine of the church “in the light of the common history of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, their differences both real and supposed, and their common ecumenical experience and responsibility”. Twelve years of careful conversation and of shared practical and theological work led to union.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches

The uniting general council (Nairobi 1970) agreed to establish the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational). Delegates covenanted together in these terms:

“We, the representatives of Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational churches in all the corners of the earth,
holding the word of God given in the Bible to be the ultimate authority in matters of faith and life,
acknowledging Jesus Christ as head of the church,
and rejoicing in our fellowship with the whole church,
covenant together

to seek in all things the mind of Christ,
to make common witness to his gospel,
to serve his purpose in all the world, and,
in order to be better equipped for the tasks he lays upon us,
to form this day the new World Alliance of Reformed Churches.”

Nairobi was followed by a centennial consultation (St Andrews 1977), to mark the centenary of the first Presbyterian general council.

The 21st general council (Ottawa 1982) passed a resolution on racism and South Africa that condemned apartheid as sin and the theological defence of apartheid as heresy, and elected as president Allan Boesak of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, who went on to lead the United Democratic Front. It also launched the study “Called to witness to the gospel today”, and with it the book series, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

In 1983, an executive committee statement on covenanting for peace and justice helped catalyse the conciliar process on justice, peace and the integrity of creation initiated by the World Council of Churches.

The 22nd general council (Seoul 1989) focused on mission in unity, in response to the long history of division in the Reformed family: this led, 10 years later, to the joint mission in unity project co-sponsored by the John Knox International Reformed Centre, Geneva. Seoul called on Alliance churches “to recognize and declare that the present global economic order is *immoral* and must be changed to one that is just and produces conditions in which justice, wellbeing and wholeness are possible”. It laid the foundation for a “programme to affirm, challenge and transform: women and men in partnership in church and society”, which was established in 1992 and in 1997 became the department of partnership of women and men.

In 1990, Allan Boesak resigned as president. He was replaced by the Alliance’s first woman president: Jane Dempsey Douglass, a professor of historical theology and a lay member of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997) called on Alliance churches to join in a process of “recognition, education and confession” regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction and “to work towards the formulation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life which would express justice in the whole household of God and reflect priority for the poor, and support an ecologically sustainable future”.

Debrecen elected the Alliance’s first Asian president: CS Song of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. This, together with the appointment of an African general secretary, Setri Nyomi of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana, symbolized the shift within the Alliance towards the churches of the south, now three-quarters of its membership.

