

Reformed networks merge despite visa denials: The new World Communion of Reformed Churches

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Visa problems, an ongoing concern for ecumenical gatherings in the Northern Hemisphere, put a damper on the June celebration of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches, a group created by the merger of the two largest networks of churches in the Reformed tradition. Ten percent of the 450 voting delegates who had been expected in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for the official ratification of the communion were refused U.S. visas.

At the June 18 opening worship service of the WCRC, which represents a global constituency of 80 million Christians in 108 countries, a banner was unveiled in the Calvin College assembly hall stating, "In honor of the missing 73." The 73 included 46 voting delegates as well as other participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America who were denied visas, said Susan Davies of the United Church of Christ.

"As a citizen of this country, I am outraged that United States consulates have refused access to an international ecumenical gathering because they feared terrorism and illegal immigration," Davies told worshipers.

Clifton Kirkpatrick, outgoing president of the larger and older group, the Geneva-based World Alliance of Reformed Churches, said delegates and participants acknowledged "the deep pain we feel about the absence of these brothers and sisters" at the 11-day celebration.

Kirkpatrick, a former stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said similar concerns about visa denials had been raised several weeks earlier at an international mission conference in Edinburgh.

In 2003, officials of the Lutheran World Federation expressed outrage that 51 would-be-participants at its once-every-six-years assembly in Winnipeg, mostly from poor

nations, were denied visas by Canadian authorities despite last-ditch appeals to the government.

“It is making it more and more difficult for us in the Northern Hemisphere—Europe, the United States, Canada—to hold global gatherings with integrity,” said Kirkpatrick.

Peter Borgdorff, the outgoing president of the Grand Rapids-based Reformed Ecumenical Council, told journalists that the visa denials appeared to be “very arbitrary.” Borgdorff said that federal authorities had “broken a commitment” to organizers because they had promised help if there were denials by U.S. consulates or embassies abroad. “When we went to them for help, we got turned away,” he said.

In ratifying the merger, following what Kirkpatrick described as “very vigorous and intense conversation,” the assembly increased the stipulated representation of women and young delegates at future general council meetings above what the bylaw drafters proposed. *—Ecumenical News International*