

# Briefly noted

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**The World Communion of Reformed Churches**, created from the merger of the two largest networks of Protestant churches in the Reformed tradition, was celebrated June 18–26 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The larger World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) developed the plan between 2005 and 2007 to form the new body. The new ecumenical body has 227 member churches representing 80 million Christians in 108 countries. “The coming into being of the World Communion of Reformed Churches [is] a historic moment for the churches of the Reformed family and for the church of Christ everywhere,” said World Council of Churches general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit, who attended the uniting event. “The term ‘communion’ in the new organization’s name points to a new form of working relationship,” said Setri Nyomi, WARC general secretary.

**The U.S. Supreme Court** will review the constitutionality of an Arizona program that provides state tax breaks for donations to private school scholarship programs. As part of the 13-year-old tax-tuition program, taxpayers receive a dollar-for-dollar reduction in state income taxes for their donations to not-for-profit school-tuition organizations. Last year, 91.5 percent of the \$52 million collected in Arizona went to religious schools, according to the *Arizona Republic*. Opponents, including the American Civil Liberties Union and others, argue that the program violates the First Amendment, which prohibits government establishment of religion. While the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared in 2009 that the Arizona program violated the separation of church and state, the Supreme Court has upheld cases that give parents public funding for private institutions.

**Irja Askola, 57, has become** the first woman to be elected as a bishop in the 4.5-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, a step described as a “milestone” by the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. “It is an important sign that a woman has been elected to the office of bishop in yet another LWF member church,” said Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Geneva-based Lutheran federation, after the June 3 vote. Women have been ordained in the Finnish church since 1986. Askola, who received 591 votes to 567 for her rival Matti

Poutiainen, will take office September 1. The *Helsinki Times* reported that one of the differences between the two candidates concerned marriage. Askola is willing to bless same-sex couples, whereas Poutiainen holds that marriage is solely between a man and a woman.