

Opening address EuCRC 2014 by chairman rev. Han Schenau

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I would like to welcome you at the fifth European Conference of Reformed Churches. As you may have experienced in one way or another, we have taken the utmost security measures to get you here safely, by finding NATO prepared to protect us. Unfortunately they booked the Celtic Manor Resort just before we could do so, but we think we have found a suitable, hospitable alternative here in Hebron Hall. Which also happens to be a bit cheaper...

But let me first express my gratitude for being able to meet with you. The first two EuCRC's in 2007 and 2008 took place in Soest, the Netherlands. In 2010 we met in Edinburgh, followed by 2012 in Kiev. While mentioning the name of that City we remember with compassion the tragic events that have been taken place in Ukraine: rebellion, violence, war with losses of militaries, civilians and people, amongst whom were many Dutchmen, travelling miles and miles above the battlefield, unaware of any danger. The encounter with Ukrainian brothers and sisters at the EuCRC in Kiev, singing hymns for us and with us, draws our attention to what's happening now in that country and makes us curious to know how they are doing under these circumstances. Our brother Sandor Molnar will tell us something about that later.

We have representatives of six of the eight EuCRC member churches. The Free Church of Scotland (continuing) has made efforts to find someone to represent them but they didn't succeed in sending one. The Spanish Reformed Church did not react on the invitation at all, which must be due to the small strength of this church. We welcome representatives from several organizations on mission and theological education. We hoped to meet with dr. Victor d' Assonville, who is involved in the Reformed Theological Seminary in Heidelberg but recently he had to be taken into a hospital because of a severe illness. May our prayers be with him and his family.

With gratefulness and joy I mention the attendance at the conference of our brother and sister from Albania. As far as I know it is the first time they are with us. Good to have you here! We hope that you will be able to give us a ten-minute-introduction of your denomination after the coffee break. If there are any other denominations or organizations represented for the first time at the EuCRC, please come to me during the coffee break. And furthermore all of you from – if I have counted properly – 9 or 10 different European countries, 9 or 10 depending on the question if we do or don't count Scotland as an independent country.

You have received the programme for the conference by email. You can find a more updated version in the conference folder. We had to make some changes. The main one is on our sightseeing trip, tomorrow afternoon. We planned to visit Cardiff Castle, however the Castle will be occupied by NATO tomorrow afternoon. The sightseeing trip will take place, but with an altered destination. More about that later.

The organizing committee has tried to comply with most wishes and requests, expressed at the previous conference. The conference asked for discussion in smaller groups after the papers and also for more time for networking. One activity we didn't schedule, but which we hope will happen anyway is reading the Bible and praying in smaller groups. This would be a very practical way to experience the theme of this conference: Reformed Piety.

Why have we chosen this theme? It was a proposal by one of the Scottish brothers in the evaluation of the Kiev conference. Actually it was a quite surprising proposal. All themes of the previous conferences had a more specific missional theme. But it seemed good to us to have this conference on Reformed Piety.

The wording of the theme might be a first point of discussion. Without giving a definition on 'piety', the meaning is clear. The very heart of piety is what the Bible in several places calls 'the fear of the Lord'. This starts with the warm-hearted personal confidential communication with the Lord. Knowing with grief that you are a sinner, by your human nature even dead in sin, but also knowing that you can be a saved sinner in Jesus Christ. To serve Him and your neighbour in gratefulness and love. But it also finds embodiment in our Sunday services, our preaching, in holy baptism and the Lord's Supper, in singing, confessing and offering. But from there piety is spreading out over the full existence of the believer, one's entire thinking, feeling, willing and acting. So that it may all be to the glory of God.

I was asked if it would not be better to name the theme 'Reformed Spirituality'. I can understand that question. Doesn't speaking of 'Reformed Piety' face the danger of subjectivism? A focus on the experiential self. Some kind of a religious *selfie*. Well, church history proves that this danger is not hypothetical. But if piety is made subjective is it still Reformed then? That is the reason for starting with a paper on Calvin.

It is true that there will be no Reformed or even Christian piety than only generated and shaped by the Holy Spirit. This would plead for the word 'spirituality' in the theme. And it would have been suitable. But this would also have its dangers. The word 'spirituality' is much used in the charismatic-evangelical tradition too. But there we sometimes meet a spirituality with a lot of boasting in the Spirit. The Father and the Son, however, seem often to be forgotten. We want to honour the Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. That is the reason for having a paper on Piety in a Trinitarian perspective.

We will have another paper on the Holy Spirit and the congregation. It is the local congregation that is called to embody the Reformed Spirituality in her environment. Regarding this another reason to prefer Piety to Spirituality could be mentioned. In postmodern Europe we see more and more a hankering for all kinds of secular spirituality. This could be seen as a good sign of dissatisfaction with our Western materialism. Or should this hanker perhaps rather be seen as a judgement by God? However, much so-called spirituality is not about seeking salvation of one's soul but seeking the re-development of one's own true self. In this perspective a conference on Reformed Piety can still be very missional. And perhaps that may be a benefit of NATO gathering in Cardiff too. This will prevent us from losing sight on the world we live in. The world that is so full of sin and iniquity, threat and fear and still an object of God's pity and mercy. It is in that world that we may serve God's pity with our Reformed piety.

Finally, two things:

Firstly, allow me to introduce you to the members of the organizing committee. I will call their names and ask them to stand up for a moment. There is David McKay from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Then we have David Miller from the Free Church of Scotland. He is the successor in the committee of James McIver, who has participated in the EuCRC since the start (of the EuCRC). James is not here but we want to thank him for all his efforts. From the Reformed Church in the Netherlands we have Lucius de Graaff. He is our financial man. So whenever you are in need of money... He is also the watchdog of the conference, which means he is going to make sure that we will all get to the next activity in time. We are very happy to have the logistic assistance of Anja Mijnheer of BBK. She is the successor of Gretie Enter, who has resigned. Please Anja, convey the conference's thankfulness for what Gretie did from the start of the EuCRC in 2007. I am Han Schenau from the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and I have had the privilege of chairing this conference three times, of which this one will also be my last one.

Secondly, I'd like to make use of the opportunity to express the greetings of the ICRC, our mother organization to you. At the last ICRC I was appointed as member of the committee for regional conferences and I have been asked to bring you the heartfelt Christian greetings from the Cardiff ICRC Conference in 2013. And with your permission I will bring our greetings back.

May the Lord give us a blessed conference, to the exaltation of his great name and to a true spiritual encouragement for us.