

# Introduction

**Author:**

Isabel A. Phiri

**Affiliation:**World Council of Churches,  
Switzerland**Corresponding author:**Isabel Phiri,  
isabel.phiri@wcc-coe.org**Dates:**

Received: 15 Sept. 2017

Accepted: 15 Sept. 2017

Published: 06 Dec. 2017

**How to cite this article:**Phiri, I.A., 2017,  
'Introduction', *HTS Theologiese  
Studies/Theological Studies*  
73(3), a4816. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4816](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4816)**Copyright:**© 2017. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

This article is an introduction to 10 articles addressing the issue of what does the 500 years of Reformation mean for us today. Authors from different disciplines, within the context of South Africa, have given their reflections. They all affirm that the church is still an agent of change in South Africa. The article assesses the 10 articles on Protestant Reformation by placing them in the current global events of dialogue and agreements by the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation and World Communion of Reformed Churches. In conclusion, it identifies as a conversation on Gender Justice in the context of the Reformation as a gap that needs to be filled.

The Special Collection, *Reformation, Transformation and Change Agency*, initiated by the Discipline of Church History at the University of South Africa, is a major contribution towards a global celebration to mark the 500th Reformation anniversary on 31 October 2017. Since the project was initiated, there have been two major global ecumenical milestones that are connected to the events of the 1517 Reformation that deserve mention. The first is that the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) jointly held an ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation on 31 October 2016 in Lund, Sweden. Of significance to this book is that this event was held in two parts: a common prayer service in the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund and a public event at Malmö Arena – Pope Francis and Bishop Mounib Younan, President of the LWF, signed a Joint Statement. In the statement:

Catholics and Lutherans pledged to pursue their dialogue in order to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder them from reaching full unity. They also stressed their commitment to common witness on behalf of the poor, the needy and the victims of injustice. (Vatican Radio 2016)

The significance of this event is also seen in the willingness of both sides to move together from conflict to communion by realising that there are gifts that came to the Christians as a result of the Reformation. It was also a time to confess the past and present failures that perpetuated violence in the name of religion and a turning to a new commitment of working together. The Joint Statement also mentions:

As we move beyond those episodes in history that burden us, we pledge to witness together to God's merciful grace, made visible in the crucified and risen Christ. Aware that the way we relate to one another shapes our witness to the Gospel, we commit ourselves to further growth in communion rooted in Baptism, as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity. Christ desires that we be one, so that the world may believe (cf. John 17:21). (Vatican Radio 2016)

The statement goes further to say:

We pray to God that Catholics and Lutherans will be able to witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; inviting humanity to hear and receive the good news of God's redeeming action. We pray to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence. God summons us to be close to all those who yearn for dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation. Today in particular, we raise our voices for an end to the violence and extremism which affect so many countries and communities, and countless sisters and brothers in Christ. We urge Lutherans and Catholics to work together to welcome the stranger, to come to the aid of those forced to flee because of war and persecution, and to defend the rights of refugees and those who seek asylum.

More than ever before, we realize that our joint service in this world must extend to God's creation, which suffers exploitation and the effects of insatiable greed. We recognize the right of future generations to enjoy God's world in all its potential and beauty. We pray for a change of hearts and minds that leads to a loving and responsible way to care for creation. (Vatican Radio 2016)

The second significant event took place on Wednesday, 05 July 2017, when the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith with the Catholic Church. The Lutherans were the first to sign this Joint Declaration in 1999, and the World Methodist Council also signed in 2006. The Anglicans will sign this Joint Declaration

**Read online:**

Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

within the period of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This means that the major Protestant churches have now agreed with the RCC on the essence of justification, which was one of the main areas of conflict during the Reformation. Bishop Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who headed the Vatican delegation in Wittenberg in Germany (this is the place where, in 1517, the Reformation began when Luther presented his 95 theses against Indulgences) for the signing ceremony with the WCRC, explained the significance of the document by stating that:

one of the major problems of 16th century was the theological and spiritual understanding of how the salvation brought by Christ actually takes effect in the life of people. This 'bone of contention' over whether 'we are saved by grace, or we are saved by good works' was at the heart of the Reformation. 'But in the ecumenical process', he says, 'we have come to see that we have a common understanding, that we are saved by grace, but that that requires that we show our changed relationship to God in good works'. (Vatican Radio 2017)

On the WCRC side, the Reverend Professor Jerry Pillay, president of the WCRC, the Reverend Najla Kassab, the newly elected WCRC President, and WCRC General Secretary, Reverend Doctor Chris Ferguson, were present to witness the signing of the Declaration. The general secretaries of the LWF and World Methodist Council were also present at the signing ceremony:

The Reformed Churches bring to the ecumenical consensus around this fundamental doctrine a particular concern for the relationship between justification and a commitment to justice in the world. Grace leads to and requires 'good works' in bringing about God's kingdom of justice, peace and reconciliation. Justification leads to solidarity with the victims of social disorder and opposition to systems of social and economic injustice. (Vatican Radio 2017)

This emphasis of the link between salvations by grace linked to bringing about God's kingdom of justice is also found in the World Council of Churches' (WCC) call to join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Being on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace means participating in God's mission towards life; moving to issues and places relevant for life and survival of people and earth; deepening the fellowship of churches on the way with a strong spiritual dimension of common prayer and theological reflection; a journey of hope, looking for and celebrating signs of God's reign of justice and peace already here and now; and discovering opportunities for common witness and transformative action that make a difference in today's world with an open invitation to all people of goodwill. The Pilgrimage might consist of at least three different dimensions: celebrating the gifts (e.g. the gift of grace), visiting the wounds (e.g. broken visible unity of the churches as a result of the Reformation) and transforming the injustice (e.g. continued transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit to bring reconciliation, peace and justice). My own reflection of the book *Reformation, Transformation and Change Agency* is influenced by these two global events and the call to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which gives

me hope for visible unity of the churches and working together for justice and peace.

Having located the discussions of the *Reformation, Transformation and Change Agency* within the current global agenda of Reformation, Transformation and Change Agency, I now turn to the summaries of each of the 10 essays in this book. The book is written by mainly South African scholars, mainly from the Reformed tradition, who are reflecting within their academic disciplines on the 16th-century Reformation of 1517 associated with the German Martin Luther. The contributors are celebrating the God-given gifts that came with the Reformation. They are revisiting the wounds that are associated with the events that took place in the process of spreading the gospel from Europe to Africa. They are also celebrating the agency of the church which has brought transformation to institutions and people as a result of their encounter with the gospel.

In the editorial by Mandla Makhanya, 'Embrace of Christianity and reaction to conquest: Transformative role of South African independent churches', he makes a case for the similarities between the Reformation of Martin Luther in the 16th century and the rise of African Independent Churches in South Africa since the establishment of mission churches in this country. In his own words, he argues that:

the leaders of this movement were change agents who, in their unique local context, tried to reform and transform the dominant churches to adjust to the African socio-political conditions. Most of the mainstream literature on church history, with a notable few, do not give due credit to the agency role of this cohort of pioneering African clergy and particularly to the early African intellectual elite, when they exclusively examine the epic clash of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation movement on a global scale. Here, the agency role of AICs gives narrative dignity to local, regional and continental reform initiatives that have often evolved without being acknowledged for their concrete verifiable impact. (p. 4)

He has given a few case studies to support his argument of Africans as agents of change and concludes his essay by arguing that the current African leaders can learn much on being change agents despite the fact that the context has now changed. I find his arguments compelling although I am aware of detailed research in this field. This is one field that has been well researched in the context of South Africa.

In the essay "By faith alone" (undivided loyalty) in light of change agency theory: Jesus, Paul and the Jesus-group in Colossae', Andries van Aarde writes from a New Testament perspective to discuss one of the five *solae* of the Reformation. He has focused on the book of Colossians to demonstrate that:

a social-scientific model of change agency can help exegetes and theologians address questions that historical and literary interpretations cannot. It proposes that historical Jesus and Pauline scholars ought to consider adopting the sequence of generations to complement historical-critical approaches that utilise a chronological stratification of texts. It seeks a way of

considering the continuity between Jesus and Paul. With the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century as background, the chapter introduces the concept of 'by faith alone' from the Pauline letters. By this expression is meant an undivided fidelity to an inclusive approach to understanding God's work, with concrete historical roots in Jesus' crossing of gender, ethnic and cultural boundaries. Living in this manner requires reformation, transformation and change. The chapter spells out in fuller detail what is understood 'by faith alone' by discussing the meaning of 'faith' within its semantic domain embedded in the codes of 1st-century Mediterranean culture. Living in faith is both a change of one's inner convictions and about a life in faith. The chapter aims to argue that both Paul and Jesus reject boundaries related to tradition, culture, cult and ethnicity. Following the work of Bruce Malina and John Pilch on change agents, it reads Paul as a 'Jesus-group prophet' who transcended the interests of individuals belonging to the in-group, but also the interests of the whole in-group which tended to exclude the out-group. This is a reading which differs substantively from Malina and Pilch. It is at this point that the chapter locates the commonality of Jesus and Paul, specifically with regard to transcending an in-group mentality and adopting radical inclusivity and love as the distinctive ethical values of the Jesus-group. Finally, the chapter argues that in those places where 'faith-alone' as undivided loyalty was not the regnant position within an early Jesus-group, two alternative positions arose: an apocalyptic retribution mentality regarding the out-group and the deinstitutionalisation of the Jesus-group in terms of patriarchal and hierarchical 'in house' systems. It shows that Colossians fit within a limited number of texts (Col, Eph, 1 Pt) that demonstrate both Paul's resurrection faith and his opposing of patriarchal household codes. Seven characteristics of change agents are described. The chapter explains how each of them is relevant to the interpretation of Colossians. It demonstrates how the author of the letter to the Colossians convinces the group that change is vital, exchanges information with the group, motivates them to change (based on Jesus' having been resurrected and the recipients' sharing in Jesus' resurrection through baptism), identifies matters of concern, initiates change and stabilises continuity within the group (hereby appealing for all forms of discrimination to be removed, a characteristic of the Jesus tradition). Finally, the chapter discusses the termination of the relationship by noting that the author of Colossians hedges his bet to some extent by including the household code. This reinsertion of distinctions moves away from Paul and in the direction of 'love-patriarchalism'. (p. 51)

In 'Can Christians really make a difference? A response to the call for change to make the world a better place', Erna Oliver, together with Vusi Tsabele, Floors Baartman, Alfred Masooa and Lorna Laister, shows that over the centuries, the landscape in which Christianity has been practised has been changed. They acknowledge both positive and negative impacts of Christianity in different communities over centuries. The biggest change has been in the global North where the relevancy of Christianity is constantly challenged in the context of economic prosperity and the increase of the individualistic approach to spirituality. Drawing from field research, the authors have put up an argument to show that it is possible for committed individual Christians to make a difference in their communities. As I was reading this essay, I was reminded of the work of Emmanuel Katongole (2005)

who has written extensively on the fact that another world is possible in Africa. He examines the works of individual Africans who have made a huge difference in their communities. In this case, Katongole argues that Christians can still make a difference in their communities despite the rapidly changing societies in which we find ourselves.

In the essay 'The church as a transformation and change agent', Jerry Pillay writes from a systematic theological perspective, and his major argument is that the church has always had a concept of transformation and change in its mission and ministry, especially as it relates to the poor. He goes further to support the scholars who have stated that the rise of the missional church is the single biggest development in Christianity since the Reformation. He disagrees with the scholars who are of the opinion that ecumenism in South Africa is dying. He recognises that the South African Council of Churches' financial struggles for survival have contributed to the wrong perception that ecumenism in South Africa is dying. He argues:

In my opinion, ecumenism is not dying; instead, it is morphing into something new. This new development is not driven by ecclesiology, doctrine, tradition, and denominationalism but by a missional focus. The essential question is: How can we work/partner together in God's mission in transforming society and country? How can we exercise a prophetic voice together? How can we journey with the poor? The evangelical churches, in particular, are at the forefront seeking to influence government and business with the gospel. Sometimes one wonders whether their goal in mission is Christianisation or transformation. Whatever the intentions, one thing is sure, that we are experiencing what I call a missional revolution with the intention of inspiring, motivating, equipping, and nurturing Christian disciples. We are realising that the goal is not to get people to church but to get the church into the world – to transform the world with the justice and peace of God so that all may experience the 'fullness of life' on earth.

I find Pillay's statement about getting the church into the world to be powerful in showing direction as to what it means to be church today: who we are and what we do to be relevant in the society today.

Micheal van Wyk in 'Exploring the role of the Church as a "reformation agency" in enhancing a socially transformative agenda in South Africa' has aptly pointed out that:

the church as a change reformation agency could be the driver for a formative and transformation agenda in enhancing the Reformation by eliciting in addressing the socio-economic needs in the new democratic dispensation. (p. 104)

This essay is based on field research using the methodology of qualitative research and focusing on the role of church ministers in promoting change in their communities. Van Wyk's research has demonstrated that:

deliberate and intentional actions by churches allow them to become a voice for the marginalised, to create spaces for searching for excellence and to increase the quality of servant leadership, all as vehicles for transforming church society. Further-more, servant leadership is a social phenomenon,

a philosophy-in-practice aimed at leading by example to achieve a common goal. To accomplish this, church ministers are required to spearhead the challenge as a prerequisite to creating 'lived experienced' opportunities for members as an inward-outward spiritual journey. Finally, church leaders believed that transformation is a secular dimension, but that it can also be aligned towards God's redemption plan. (p. 104)

What he has found through his research is in line with the missional churches that were originally centres of development in their communities. The perception of a church leader as also a community leader has remained to be true in most rural communities. This position of the church leaders is also recognised by the United Nations who, on 14 July 2017, launched an Action Plan to promote the role of religious leaders in preventing incitements to violence that may lead to infractions categorised in international law as 'atrocities crimes': these are war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity and crimes of aggression. The Ecumenical United Nations Office in New York worked with the United Nations Office for Genocide Prevention and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers to engage the religious leaders since 2015 to produce the Action Plan. The success of this Action Plan heavily depends on the affirmation of religious leaders as agents of change, as argued by Van Wyk.

Piet Strauss in the essay 'Five hundred years on: Some traces of the Reformation in the Church Ordinances of two South African Reformed Churches' is only one of two contributors who has actually spelt out the five key expressions of the Reformation: '*sola gratia* [by grace alone], *sola scriptura* [by Scripture alone], *sola fidei* [by faith alone], *solus Christus* [Christ alone] and *solus Deo gloria* [glory to God alone]'.

In his essay, his major interest is to see how well the Reformation of the 16th century has influenced the Church Ordinances of two South African reformed churches: the Dutch Reformed Church and the reformed churches in South Africa. In particular, he has closely studied the Three Formulas of Unity as reformed confessions of faith and the Dordt Church Order. For each church, he points out where they have followed tradition and where they have diverted from tradition. His conclusion is that:

[t]he said South African churches accept the Three Formulas of Unity as confessions of faith and view their church orders as a modern version of the Dordt Church Order – adapted to the demands of the time. (p. 193)

The value of this study is in showing that Reformed theology continues to reform so that it remains relevant to each context. At the same time, Reformed theology remains faithful to the key elements of the 16th-century Reformation.

In 'Religious experience in the current theological discussion and in the church pew', David Biernot and Christo Lombaard tackle a subject that is very relevant for Africa today, where American and local television evangelism

have become very popular. They are revisiting the work of George Lindbeck to find out if his criticism of the experiential-expressive model of religion is still relevant for the church today. They have entered into dialogue with scholars and ordinary church goers on the subject of 'religious experience'. I find their conclusion worrisome although it is a true description of urban Christianity as I have experienced it myself in South Africa and in Malawi. Their conclusion is:

Psychologisation of religion had undoubtedly contributed to the abandonment of the pursuit of the cognitive aspect of faith, which on its part suffers from the retreat into spiritual privacy in which doctrinal propositions have often been reduced to such clichés as 'Jesus loves me' or 'Christ has died for me'. This mood has taken grip on clergy too, with some having adopted a pronounced anti-theological stance, happily slipping in this way into the roles of psychological counsellors and managers rather than that of theologically well-educated ministers. The psychological counsellor controls the inner world; the manager the outer. Theological seminaries conveniently continue to churn out both of them. In whichever ways this may bother us, while continuing to nurture philosophically justified distrust towards experience, eventually we should probably in the spirit of pragmatism make our peace with 'therapeutic' religious practices, no longer seeing them as non-equals to the moderate traditional forms of worship and piety, accepting that many people can still find in them happiness and a measure of intimacy, spirituality, all the while calling for moral integrity and social commitment. (p. 133)

The reality is that television has indeed changed the way we experience Christianity. It is shifting the denominational lines of the churches to move more into interdenominational churches where experience rather than reason takes the centre stage. Preparing church leaders for such a shifted spirituality is really a challenge for the whole of the African continent.

Piet Naudé in 'Toward justice and social transformation? Appealing to the tradition against the tradition' deals with the question of paradox of the Reformed tradition in the context of South Africa. On the one hand, he grapples with the challenge of how Reformed theology was used in South Africa in order to support apartheid, and acknowledges how black people suffered under such interpretation of Reformed theology. On the other hand, he also articulates the liberative nature of Reformed theology by drawing from the work of South African prominent Reformed systematic theologian, Dirkie Smit, who has demonstrated the life-affirming nature of Reformed theology. He follows Smit's:

hermeneutical task built on three specific reinterpretations: (1) the reinterpretation of Scripture from the perspective of the weak, the poor and the oppressed (against a hermeneutic of creation orders and God-willed division of people); (2) a rereading of John Calvin to affirm the dignity and freedom of all humans (against the grain of neo-Calvinist interpretations); and (3) a rereading of Karl Barth with a focus on God's inclusive grace, Christian confessions and the nature of the Christian life (against the limitation of his influence because of his perceived actualistic view on Scripture or unscientific, foundational methodology). (p. 174)

Naudé concludes his essay by examining a possible contribution of Reformed theology towards public life in South Africa. Here, I see a resonance between the proposals of Naudé and Nico Koopman who has written extensively on political theology in the context of (South) Africa.

Graham Duncan in 'John Knox and education' has performed an excellent job in evaluating the contribution of the 16th-century Scottish Reformer, John Knox, to the education system of Scotland, and also in the mission fields where the Church of Scotland was planted. Duncan follows John Knox to the time he studied and worked with John Calvin in Geneva and how he implemented the same vision that Calvin had, but adjusted it for the Scottish Church and society. Of particular interest to Duncan, which I also appreciated very much, was the emphasis on formal education where he was involved in the construction of the curriculum for theology, medicine and law at all levels. Duncan states in this essay that he has examined John Knox's:

work in the field of education with particular reference to the Buke [Book] of Discipline. The outcome of his labours was a compulsory, universal system of free education, which involved character formation and enabled all to achieve the limit of their potential. (p. 189)

Having read this essay, I now better understand the education system introduced by the Church of Scotland in the Blantyre Mission in the 1870s, and the Free Church of Scotland in the Livingstonia Mission around the same time, in comparison with the Dutch Reformed Mission at Nkhoma Mission where education was offered to the Africans just to help them read the Bible.

In 'From conciliar ecumenism to transformative receptive ecumenism', Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel writes from a Church Polity perspective. As the current (2013–2021) Africa president of the WCC, her essay focuses on the status of global ecumenism and the need for a second Reformation. In particular, she traces the historical status of the work of the WCC, and enters into dialogue with the ecumenical scholars and activists who argue that the ecumenical movement is going through a crisis and requires a change in their approach or methodology. She then goes into dialogue with scholars to find a solution to the ecumenical winter in the:

emergence of two initiatives that are going to influence ecumenical theology and practice in future, namely the Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning research project, based in Durham, United Kingdom, and the International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism of the WCC. Both initiatives constitute a fresh approach in methodology to ecumenical theology and practice. (p. 70)

She pays more attention to conciliar ecumenism, transformative ecumenism, receptive ecumenism and African theology in order to show what should be carried out to strengthen global and local ecumenism. She concludes her essay by arguing for more dialogue with people of other

faiths and different ideologies in order to enrich the ecumenical movement. This recommendation is already in line with what the WCC has been doing since the 1980s. Dialogue with other religions is no longer an option in the current context where religion is being politicised and politics is using religion to incite violence against other religions or minority groups. The call of the WCC to be on a pilgrimage of justice and peace is not only to the fellowship, but also to other churches, people of other faiths and people of goodwill. There is already pressure coming from the United Nations and its agencies who want to work with the WCC and its ecumenical partners on issues of justice and peace.

In the last essay by Erna Oliver and Willem Oliver entitled 'An African Reformation', they make a case for the need for a Reformation that is initiated by Africans as Africa was not really influenced by the 16th-century European Reformation. They trace the North African contribution to Christianity and Theology starting from the 1st century. They also trace the mission history in Africa and come to the conclusion that 'Notwithstanding all the negative attributes of the missionaries, one thing is clear: they introduced the bigger part of Africa to modern Christianity'. They have evaluated the current status of unity of the churches in Africa and came to the conclusion that the African Reformation will not come from the National Council of Churches nor from the Mega Churches that seem to attract many people. It will also not be an African Reformation based on the Creeds of Christian groups or theological reflection. They see the African Reformation to be based on deeds influenced by Scriptures. Indeed, at the global level, this is the direction that is being promoted by the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and by the Joint Statements on Justification by Faith of the RCC with the LWF, United Methodist Council and the WCRC.

In conclusion, I note that there is no chapter that is dedicated to issues of gender justice and the injustice experienced by sexual minorities. Both issues were discussed extensively at the 2017 General Council of the WCRC, and resolutions were adopted to keep them in the centre of the justice discussion in the communion.

On the occasion that the WCRC joined the other churches by signing the Justification by Faith Declaration, the newly appointed president of the WCRC, reverend Kassab, said:

Wherever we are in the church we are held accountable... Today we are reminded of Luther's words from his pulpit, 'A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing'. 'All human beings are valuable in the eyes of God no matter what their colour or gender or race or passport', she said. 'Here I stand, a Middle Eastern woman in the pulpit of Luther ... If only Luther had imagined this, this could have been his 96th question to the church. Not, "Why there is a woman in this pulpit?," but "Why did it take so long?'" (Brown 2017)

This is the question we need to ask ourselves about all the marginalised and excluded who are in our communities where the church is an agent of change.

## References

Brown, S., 2017, *WCRC joins declaration to overcome reformation divisions*, World Communion of Reformed Churches, viewed 01 July 2017, from <http://wrcr.ch/news/wcrc-joins-declaration-to-overcome-reformation-divisions>

Katongole, E., 2005, *A future for Africa: Essay in in Christian social imagination*, Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Vatican Radio, 2016, *Pope and President of LWF sign Joint statement*, viewed 01 July 2017, from [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/10/31/pope\\_and\\_president\\_of\\_lwf\\_sign\\_joint\\_statement/1269150](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/10/31/pope_and_president_of_lwf_sign_joint_statement/1269150)

Vatican Radio, 2017, *Catholic and Reformed Churches mark ecumenical 'milestone'*, viewed 01 July 2017, from [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/07/04/catholic\\_and\\_reformed\\_churches\\_mark\\_ecumenical\\_milestone/1323039](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/07/04/catholic_and_reformed_churches_mark_ecumenical_milestone/1323039)