CONTRIBUTION BY RITA FAMOS TO THE CSI VALUES SERIES
“ECUMENISM OF THE MARTYRS”

# The Ecumenism of Martyrs –
# A Reformed Perspective on Christian Solidarity

*How can the Reformed tradition in Switzerland respond to the call for solidarity with persecuted Christians? And how might this “ecumenism of martyrs” be lived out in practice, even in the absence of full theological unity between the churches?*

The Protestant Church in Switzerland (PCS) is deeply concerned about the state of freedom of religion and belief across the globe. Christians are among those increasingly affected. In many parts of the world, they are subjected to various forms of repression, ranging from restrictions on religious freedom to violence and even death. At the same time, the reality of these conflicts is often far more complex than a simple narrative of religious persecution suggests.

From a Reformed perspective, the term *persecution of Christians* therefore calls for careful and nuanced use. It is important neither to downplay the suffering of those affected nor to reduce complex situations to simplistic explanations that can foster stereotypes and hostility. In many cases, the causes of conflict are not primarily religious but are rooted in a combination of ethnic, political, social, cultural, economic, or geostrategic factors.

Accordingly, Reformed churches support oppressed and persecuted Christians in a wide range of ways and at different levels of engagement. Through the work of relief agencies and mission organizations, they support humanitarian assistance and reconciliation initiatives. They express solidarity through prayer and partnerships with churches in difficult circumstances, advocate for the protection of human rights, engage in dialogue with public authorities, and seek to understand evolving situations in affected countries through careful analysis. Reformed solidarity also extends to Christians who have sought refuge in Switzerland.

Throughout these efforts, it is essential to remember that religious freedom is a universal human right that belongs to people of all faiths. Our commitment must therefore be guided by respect, peace and a responsible approach to Christian witness and mission.

The commitment of the PCS to Christians facing oppression takes many forms. One important example is its longstanding solidarity with Armenian Christians, a relationship that began long before the genocide inflicted upon them more than a century ago.

The Armenian Heritage Conference held in Bern in May 2025, in collaboration with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, addressed the destruction and endangerment of religious and cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh, as well as questions of international responsibility, accountability, and mechanisms of protection for the displaced Armenian population.

For many years, the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich has maintained a fund for persecuted Christians, supporting in particular the Christian aid organization CAPNI (Christian Aid Program Nohadra Iraq).

Mission21, together with one of its partner churches in the conflict-ridden region of northeastern Nigeria – where thousands of Christians have been killed by extremist violence – is involved in peacebuilding initiatives in which interfaith dialogue with Muslim communities plays a central role.

Another significant example was the ecumenical gathering “Focus on Religious Freedom,” held on November 7, 2025, at the Kornhausforum in Bern, and organized with strong participation from Reformed churches and evangelical partners.

The event recalled the ecumenical silent marches, held in Zurich and Bern in 1975 at the initiative of the Reformed pastor Hansjürg Stückelberger [Ed. note: Rev. Stückelberger later founded Christian Solidarity International], to protest the persecution of Christians behind the Iron Curtain. The purpose of the conference was to bring the threats facing Christians and the wider challenges to religious freedom into public and political debate and to encourage concrete action.

In their final statement, the participating churches affirmed the unity and fellowship of Christians across denominational, cultural and national boundaries, even in situations of suffering, distress, oppression, and persecution. They reaffirmed their commitment to protecting and promoting religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

They also called for foreign and asylum policies that offer protection to persecuted believers and encouraged Christians to remain informed, pray, support refugees, and work actively for religious freedom worldwide.[1]

While Reformed solidarity with persecuted Christians and churches today often follows denominational relationships, it should always seek opportunities across confessional boundaries. The ecumenical gathering on November 7, 2025, offered an encouraging example of such collaboration. Faced with those who have risked or even lost their lives in the struggle for truth, human dignity, justice, and resistance to evil, many of the confessional and structural divisions that separate our churches lose their significance.

For the Reformed tradition, the image of the Church as the body of Christ remains fundamental: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26). It is in this spirit that Cardinal Kurt Koch’s appeal for solidarity with oppressed and persecuted Christians around the world deserves a wholehearted response.[2]

When considering what is meant by an “ecumenism of martyrs,” and what such solidarity with persecuted and oppressed Christians may contribute to the unity of the Church, the Swiss Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer (1926–2008) offered a striking insight more than forty years ago: “Martyrs are also those witnesses who transcend, almost effortlessly, the boundaries that divide the churches. In a sense, they anticipate the communion towards which the churches are journeying.” This helps to explain why Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) is honored throughout the Christian world as a martyr whose witness belongs to the whole Church rather than to any single confession.

At the same time, important differences remain between the churches in the way this idea of an “ecumenism of martyrs” or even an “ecumenism of blood” is understood and theologically interpreted.

Cardinal Kurt Koch’s high regard for this concept, which he sees as carrying particular ecumenical significance, is understandable within the framework of Roman Catholic teaching on the Church and the saints. Reformed churches, by contrast, have traditionally placed greater emphasis on ecumenism through theological dialogue and through common Christian witness in word and action.

This difference reflects deeper theological convictions. Whereas Reformed theology understands the Church primarily in the light of God’s Word and the person of Jesus Christ, Catholic theology places particular emphasis on the Eucharist and the theology of sacrifice that underlies it. Within this framework, martyrs are, as it were, incorporated into the sacrifice offered to God by Jesus Christ, and, through their death, brought into direct communion with God.

Despite the considerable ecumenical agreements reached on the doctrine of justification, Reformed theology remains cautious whenever the emphasis on human holiness or self-sacrifice risks obscuring the primacy of God’s grace. From a Reformed perspective, the self-sacrifice of the martyrs and the exalted status attributed to them because of their Christ-like perfection can risk overshadowing God’s gracious action, which always precedes all human response. Such an emphasis may draw attention away from the human person’s continuing dependence on God’s grace, despite the strength and faithfulness of their witness, and from the reality that even the most exemplary believer remains a vulnerable and needy recipient of that grace.

The strength of the martyrs’ faith and the exemplary character of their lives are revealed precisely in this trust: trust that their lives are held securely in God’s hands and that God’s life-giving power extends beyond death itself. The focus, therefore, should not be on the martyr, but on God.

It is telling that two days before his execution at the Flossenbürg concentration camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer led a devotion for his fellow prisoners based on texts from Quasimodogeniti Sunday, focusing on the words “By his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5) and “Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). What stands at the center is not the martyr Bonhoeffer himself, but the Word of God. For that reason, an ecumenism of martyrs must always be preceded by an ecumenism of shared Christian witness.

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[1] Joint Statement of the churches

[2] Lukas Vischer, Confessio fidei in der ökumenischen Diskussion, in: Den einen Glauben bekennen, ed. by G. Békés/H. Meyer, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, p. 153