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REFORMED WORLD

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Introduction

Hanns Lessing

Volume 67, No. 1, presented the contributions to the 2017 General Council in Leipzig, Germany, that dealt with the themes of justice and theology. In this issue we publish the contributions on gender justice, mission and communion.

As explicated more fully in the introduction to the first issue the 2017 General Council followed a discernment model that allowed for the discussion of Bible studies and theme inputs in Discernment Groups that were called to consider the direction of the work of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). This introduction therefore summarizes some of the actions taken by the Council. The precise wording can be found in the Proceedings of the 26th General Council that shall be published soon.

1 July, the day when the Council discussed policies on *justice* and *gender justice*, opened with a Bible study by the theologian Elsa Tamez on Romans 12:2. In her narrative Tamez utilized Paul's companion Phoebe as an interlocutor that introduces the context and the values behind Paul's exhortations. In her address to the Council Phoebe describes how a life embracing God's justice helps to abandon wrong values.

The following two presentations closely connected the themes of justice and gender justice. Isabel Phiri revisited important stages of the Reformed journey to allow women full participation in all areas of the life and the leadership of the church and concluded with a call to all church leaders urging our church leaders to use their authority to "speak out against any form of injustice, starting from within the church itself."

Philip Vinod Peacock focused on the perspective of justice and interpreted current contextual challenges in the horizon of the Accra Confession's use of the concept of empire. He concluded with a call to a faith that is "faithful to our calling as disciples to turn the world upside down."

The discernment on justice issues led the General Council to prioritize the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) in the work of the WCRC; to commit itself under guidance of the Accra Confession to use resources to enable churches and communities to live faithfully as disciples of Christ in their context and to continue its advocacy to international forums and organizations. On gender justice the General Council confessed that

gender-based violence and discrimination in all its forms are sin and adopted "A Declaration of Faith on Women's Ordination."

In his Bible study on Luke 4:16-21 that introduced the *mission* day of the General Council the Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb localized the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus' reference to Isaiah 61:1-2 in the situation of occupation and drew a line from the Babylonian occupation that still marked the context of Trito-Isaiah, over the Roman conquest in the time of Jesus, to the presence of Israel of today, and interpreted the sermon of Jesus as a "costly call" to liberation.

In his keynote to the day's theme "mission in communion," the Muslim theologian Farid Esack from South Africa took up the thread and introduced himself as a member of the family "in the prophetic tradition in confronting what this assembly calls the idolatries of power and privilege." He analysed the abuse of power in the histories of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and called for an embracing of vulnerability in which victimhood is not used as a weapon to oppress others but as point of departure for solidarity with the vulnerable.

In his lecture "Communion in Mission: From Wittenberg to Finkenwalde" Wesley Granberg-Michaelson took up Esack's reflection on the meaning of a communion in mission and invited the WCRC to embark on a pilgrimage from the "necessity of words" (Wittenberg, where God's Word and truth were confessed in the face of a corrupt and unassailably powerful system) to the "formation of lives" (Finkenwalde, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the face of Nazi oppression attempted to build a "Christian community that understood the cost of discipleship, and nurtured the means for its practice"). In response to the major shifts in Christianity Granberg-Michaelson called "1) that the Communion network and nurture communities of missional discipleship, 2) that we expand the breadth of our ecumenical partners and 3) that we engage a fresh theological agenda and lived Christian experience emerging from the non-Western world."

The WCRC's mission was taken up in a number of actions by the General Council, including in its decision on the situation in Palestine. The General Council affirmed "that with respect to the situation of injustice and suffering that exists in Palestine, and the cry of the Palestinian Christian community, that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake" and encouraged "member churches to examine their mission, education, and investment relationships with Israel and Palestine in light of the witness of Palestinian Christians and to respond as they understand the Reformed communion's commitments to

human rights and the protections of international law."

Elsa Tamez opened the *strengthening communion* day with another narrative Bible study, this time involving the participants as a chorus (modelled after those in ancient Greek drama) in the story of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28). This methodology reinforced the surprise about Jesus changing his mind about his calling. The women made Jesus see that his message was not restricted to a certain religious, cultural or ethnic group but included everyone in pain and in need of salvation.

In his keynote address Collin Cowan points to the fellowship of ecumenical organizations like the Council for World Mission and the WCRC in building communion as a "result and doing of peace," which cannot be without justice. All Christian communions must understand the context in which they do mission "because unless we are prepared to confront the death-dealing ideologies that divide and destroy" they are only making a mockery of the meaning and import of communion.

Taking up these contributions the General Council resolved that the WCRC invite member churches into a conversation about the interpretation of Scripture that is grounded in the Reformed tradition that affirms life for all, committed to setting the "atmosphere for dialogue and discernment on communion and diversity—in a spirit of consensus building where there are no winners and losers, where no one is excluded, where all are protected and where mutual challenge, mutual accountability and grace become key values" and to accompany member churches "to address issues around communion and sexual diversity."

In the last Bible study of the Council, Mitri Raheb reflected on the story of Pentecost and interpreted it as a "counter narrative to the narrative of empire" (i.e. the story of the Tower of Babel found in Genesis 11:1-11). The story of Pentecost criticizes imperial quests to unify languages and religious traditions and presents an alternative vision which accommodates the languages and culture of the *oikumene* of all times. The church born in Jerusalem was meant to counter the empire; not by creating another one but by providing a new vision of a different possible world.

Hanns Lessing is the World Communion of Reformed Churches' General Council coordinator and incoming executive secretary for theology and communion.

Bible Study
Phoebe, Bearer of the Letter to the Church in Rome, Explains Romans 12:1-2

Elsa Tamez

For this Bible study, I will use a fictional literary device in which Phoebe, the deaconess and benefactor from the port of Cenchrea, explains the text of Romans 12:1-2. This will allow me to move more easily between the times of the Roman Empire and our current time in the 21st century.

Phoebe and Paul's Dream of Traveling to Spain by Crossing Rome

My name is Phoebe. I am originally from Cenchrea, a harbor located nine miles from Corinth. I am a minister (*diakonos*) of the community of faith in Cenchrea. Paul founded the community that meets in my house. He visits us when he comes from Corinth and he stays in my home.[1] I am also a benefactor, or patron (*prostatis*). Paul, my friend and colleague, is one of those whom I support. He has told me about a thrilling journey he hopes to make to Spain, where he dreams of sharing the good news of the resurrected one (Romans 15:24). He needs the help of the faith communities in Rome to be able to go to Spain: economic support, interpreters and prayers. That is why he wants to travel through Rome.

Unfortunately, Paul has had serious conflicts with some of his own people who insist that the Gentiles follow the traditions of the Jews as to circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses. However, I assure you that when Paul shared the gospel with us here in Cenchrea, he spoke powerfully of God's grace. He did not force us to obey any law to be part of God's people. For Paul, it was enough to embrace the faith of Jesus—who was crucified by the Romans and resurrected by God—and it was sufficient to believe that God resurrected him from the dead. When our faith is genuine, our works of love and solidarity and the fruit they bear are visible. The Spirit of God helps us to discern what ways are pleasing to God.

Nevertheless, the problem with this group of Paul's compatriots has deepened; what is worse, some people from Jerusalem have brought bad news against

1 Joan Cecilia Campbell, *Phoebe, Patron and Emissary* (Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 2009), 92. The author, however, thinks that Chapter 16, where Phoebe is mentioned (16:1-2) belonged to a letter that had been sent to Ephesus and not to Rome. I think it is part of the Letter to the Romans.

Paul to Rome. They have misinterpreted Paul, and they say that Paul wants to annul the Law of Moses and some other things. This situation makes it difficult for his dream of going to Spain to come true. That is why Paul decided to write a long letter to the brothers and sisters in Rome.[2] In this letter he explains more clearly his stance regarding the faith of Jesus Christ and the Law. I feel happy to know that he asked me to travel personally to Rome and deliver this letter to its recipients. I accepted, and I promised to help him in any and all ways in this journey, including with economic support. That is why I was happy when he asked me to go to Rome to deliver the letter and to see the situation there to prepare his journey to Spain.

An important aspect I should explain is that here in my Greco-Roman culture, it is customary to send a person to deliver a letter to the recipient with the recommendation that the person bearing the letter be welcomed with honors (16:1-2). The person carrying the letter should know the content, and should be able to explain it. So, Paul sat and dialogued with me several times about the arguments in the epistle, so that I would be able to explain them if necessary. This is not very easy, for sometimes he is hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16); but I am an educated woman and my position as a deacon bestows a certain authority upon me. This is not for my own vain glory but to share the good news of the resurrected.

Therefore, I am authorized to present in this Council of Reformed Churches what that part of Romans that some Bible experts call 12:1-2[3] might mean for you. When Paul wrote that letter it was not customary to divide letters into chapters and verses. However, I think it has been a good idea.

Phoebe Explains Romans 12:1-2

Romans 12:1-2 is the introduction to what Paul writes in the second part of his letter (12-16).[4]Earlier in this letter, he wrote about God's mercy for all the peoples of the world, without exception. Now, in the introduction to Romans 12:1-2, Paul speaks about how this mercy of God should be manifested in the people who welcome God's Grace. Let's get straight to the point. The core of verses 1 and 2 is an urgent call for people not to conform (sysxēmatitsō) to the values

2 For Yewett, the trip to Spain which Paul wants to make conditions the whole letter. Cf. Robert Yewett, *Romans* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2007).

3 The division of the manuscripts into chapters and verses was done several centuries later.

4 Yewett, p. 724.

of the society in which they live, but to be transformed (metamorphoō); that is, to change radically their lives as well as their way of thinking. Paul says, "Renew your mind." It is easy to adapt oneself to the values of society that the majority follows, but sometimes these values are seductive and dishonest. That is why Paul insists on the same point by saying it in two different ways: transform your way of thinking and living, and do not adapt to the epoch in which you are living.

Shall we have the courage to stand before God as God's children if we do not make a difference in this greedy, corrupt and violent world? Transformed, renewed in thought and action is the way to stand before God and the world in a genuine, authentic way, as is proper for God's children. Let me tell you that for Paul, this is the reasonable (*logiken*) way to praise God or the true spiritual way to honour God (Romans 12:2).

I can see that among you—as in my time—people have many ways of praising God, but almost always they praise by magnifying God, by showering praises on God as if God were an emperor, singing for many hours with modern, sophisticated instruments. That is good; but when these people and congregations go back home, they do not show this transforming grace in their lives, in their families, in their societies and sometimes not even in their own congregations. Is that the reasonable or truly spiritual way to praise God? No, you do not worship only with your lips, but with your way of being, thinking and acting. In other words, this means behaving coherently and with integrity according to Jesus' teachings. When Paul says we should present our bodies as living, holy and pleasant sacrifices (*thysian*) to God, that means we are to dedicate our whole being as an offering to God and that includes our body and spirit, our entire life. Holy dedication means that the life you live should be different from the lifestyle that the Greco-Roman society of my time as well as the 21st century of your time promotes. God does not like the model of societies in which you and I live. I will tell you more later about the model that God does not like and that Paul calls "sin" (*hamartia*). Now I am only summarizing what Paul means in this paragraph in which he invites us to total renewal.

I, Phoebe, want to open a parenthesis here. I think is it interesting to see how Paul uses a sacrificial cultic figure to encourage genuine transformation in body and mind. Besides, you must remember that in Jerusalem the temple still functioned that time, around the year 57 or 58 CE, when Paul wrote this letter. The Romans had not yet invaded Jerusalem and had not destroyed the temple. They did so twelve years later. However, Paul and others had seen the death of Jesus on the cross, a sacrifice that relativized the sacrifices that the law

demanded in the temple for purification and the forgiveness of sins. I think it is interesting that Paul also invites the followers of Jesus the resurrected one to present our bodies as a sacrifice, but not for the forgiveness of sins or as victims to show the injustice of a world that condemned Jesus to the cross. Instead, we should do it so that the life of our communities and our own lives would be dedicated to God to renew God's creation. However, Paul does not allude to sacrifice as the Romans sacrificed animals to their deities, with no relationship to the ethics of justice and solidarity among people.[5] We are to present ourselves as an offering to God through a radical transformation that is capable of changing this corrupt and violent world into another possible world which God may find pleasing. For me, Phoebe, it is remarkable that Paul's perspective keeps a distance from the sacrifices practiced by the Jews as well as from those of the Romans. I told him so when he was explaining the details of his letter to me and he said, "That is good, Phoebe!" Here I close the parenthesis.

The paragraph I am discussing (verse 2) closes by expressing that all of this has an objective: to achieve the capacity to discern (*dokimatsein*) the ways that God finds pleasing (*euareston*), those that God finds good (*agadon*) and wholesome (*teleion*) and coherent. Hear me out, coherent means having consistency between what is believed, said and done.

Well, I have spoken about Romans 12:1-2 and about what this part of the passage may mean. It is a beautiful text, but it is not enough. It needs more historical and contextual content. If we do not speak in concrete terms about why we need transformation, those values to which we should not conform, and what is important to discern, there is the risk that each one will interpret what they want according to their own mental frameworks. There is also the risk that these words will become abstract, devoid of content that would challenge us to show that we have truly been justified by the faith of Jesus Christ and that we have expressed God's justice through our attitudes, thoughts, practices of justice and mutual care.

Phoebe Explains the Importance of Knowing How to Discern the Ways of the Lord

Let's start by looking at "how to discern." The liturgy has already helped us to understand the importance of "knowing how to discern" the ways of the Lord. But, Oh Lord, how difficult it is today to discern the true ways to please God! In

5 Roman piety (*eusebeia*) was reflected in the perfection of the ritual of the sacrifice of the animal, with no ethical implications.

your society, it is fashionable to launch ungrounded statements to support your own interests. It's outrageous! It was like that in my time, when the truth was imprisoned by injustice and lies, as Paul said well in Romans 1:18. The point is that in my time, in my society, the emperor was called a saviour and prince of peace.[6] Can you believe that? This was at the same time the emperor had his military all over the provinces of the empire, legions waging war here and there, collecting taxes, suffocating possible rebellions. How can this be? For me, the true Saviour and Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ. They pretended to pass off lies as if they were truths. Don't say now that it does not happen in your society. I have been told that there are thousands of refugees and thousands who have drowned here in our Mediterranean Sea, fleeing from war and hunger. Those who go around the world making peace and liberating people have done nothing but turn the Mediterranean into an immense grave. Besides, poor you, so many false preachers who only think of their own wellbeing and go around confusing people. I wonder why people do not feel they are covered and empowered by the grace of God. They want to exchange their money for blessings; or if they are rich, they want to exchange their capital for bigger blessings. What a huge challenge you have in the 21st century!

Discerning the ways that are pleasing to God is a gift that God grants us when we have embraced God's justice, that justice we have seen in Jesus' journey. As Paul says, in the gospel—that is Jesus Christ—the justice of God is revealed (Romans 1:17). In embracing that justice, we are justified by God's love, and we journey in the newness of life (6:4) as new people guided by the Spirit of God. Thus, thanks to the confidence we have in God and in God's Spirit, we can discern what is good, what is wholesome, that which pleases God (not what pleases the powers of this world). So, all of you that are justified by faith should control your greed and keep your vision clear. Do not be contaminated by the wrong values of this world: avarice, corruption, lies disguised as truths, contempt for that which is different and violence, especially against women and children. Don't ignore what is happening with nature; don't become accomplices by littering the planet and turning your back to global warming. Read the scientific reports that speak in catastrophic terms of what will happen if we do not stop greed. Do not listen to the businessman/president Trump who rolled back the tepid efforts of his predecessor for the wellbeing of the planet. Do not listen to corrupt politicians. Take the groans of the planet very seriously: droughts, floods, thawing, landslides that kill entire towns. Show compassion for the poor who suffer the

6 An inscription of Priene's from the year 9 BC speaks of the birth of divine August that brought the gospel of peace.

most due to ecological tragedies. Ask the Holy Spirit to wipe your eyes clean and give you courage to swim against the current, since the ways of the Lord nowadays, as in my time, go against the current.

Discerning is not easy. Why? Well, let's see. Before speaking about God's justice, Paul tells us about the problem of injustices, sin and the Law, serious but also relevant topics for all times.

Phoebe Explains the Dangers of Greed that Lead to Structural Sin

For Paul, sin does not come out of the blue; it is human beings who create it. In the first three chapters of his Letter to the Romans, before speaking about sin (*amartia*) Paul speaks about the injustices of all peoples. First, he speaks about the injustices of the Gentiles; then he speaks about the injustices committed by Jews, because there is no difference for God. All human beings of all races, ethnic groups, and social classes commit injustices: stealing, murdering, oppressing; they are greedy and insensitive to pain. With or without the Law, human beings are vulnerable to all these evils due to their human condition. Greed is part of the human condition, and if it is not limited, it is the spark that makes human beings commit all kinds of injustices and lose interest in caring for others. For Paul, injustices become systemic and develop into systems that turn the values of society upside down. That is why truth is hidden behind lies and people tell lies disguised as truths. Thus, human beings and communities are enslaved under this systemic power that Paul calls sin. Therefore, sin should not be taken lightly; it is an enslaving power that forces human beings to do things that they do not want to do in their minds, but they are seduced by coveting desire (*epithymia*) or by the pressure of the sinful environment. It is structural sin and all peoples and persons are accomplices.

Let me give you a personal example. Here in my society, patronage is inherent to the imperial Roman system. I am a benefactor, a patron. I do favors for people, and in return they should always repay me with honors; if they do not show respect for me, it is shameful and everybody tries to avoid that. My society is ruled by patronage and the paradigm of honor and shame. However, when I first came to know the gospel through Paul, I realized that there is another way to behave, with values that are different from Greco-Roman society. These are the values of people who live according to God's reign and not the emperor's. For instance, Paul always says, "no one should think more highly of himself or herself than he or she ought to think" (Romans 12:3), and he said it just after

exhorting everyone to be transformed and not to conform. For a Roman, it is crazy to say that no one should think of himself or herself more highly than others. Our society is highly stratified; the one who is rich, who has power and belongs to nobility, expects to be honoured and glorified. It is shameful for the wealthy to mix with the poor.[7] Our faith communities are made up of slaves and the poor; there are well-to- do people like myself, but most people are not. That is why outsiders criticize us. It is not easy for me as a benefactor or patron to behave as God wants me to act, because everybody expects me to behave as my neighbours who are also patrons. I am criticized because I mix with the slaves and the poor; for example, my slave calls me sister and I call her the same. It would be easier to follow the values of the society in which we live. I strongly recommend not doing so; try not to be influenced by those values based on discrimination.

Another terrible thing: I have heard that in the 21st century greed is seen as a virtue. Oh my God! How foolish! Not even in our Greco-Roman world is that so. Unlimited greed leads to committing injustices; Paul says in his letter that injustices produce systemic sin (Romans 1-3). I know there are laws to control greed, but when everyone is looking out for their own interests, laws are unable to do justice. They can be manipulated, and in most cases they legitimate sin. That is why Paul suspected the Law and laws.[8] When laws are followed blindly, the "I" in our conscience does not discern what is right but only does what the law states. Then the person, legitimized by the law, not only commits injustices but feels free of guilt. Paul is critical of the law, not only the Law of Moses, but laws in general, because sin takes advantage of the good things to show its deadly power. (Romans 7:13).

That is why Paul contrasts God's justice with Roman justice. While the Roman justice is ruled by its laws, God's justice is ruled by grace. This means that instead of applying all the weight of the law against humanity, God's justice proposes to renew God's creation through justice, full of grace and mercy. God justifies us, embraces us with grace as a merciful mother and opens the horizon to create another possible world ruled by grace, not by vengeance or retaliation which only produces more and more violence. Jesus is the model for life. He treated women and children well. He had mercy on the sick. He touched the lepers and he even told us to forgive seventy-seven times over (Matthew 18:23). He was not like the boastful Lamech, Cain's descendant, who sings to his two wives saying

7 Cf. Letter to Plinius the Young, (VI)

8 The concept of law (*nomos*) in Romans is wide, not only restricted to the Torah.

that if Cain had been avenged sevenfold, whoever hurt or wounded him he would revenge seventy-seven times over (Genesis 4:23-24). Infinite vengeance creates infinite violence. The infinite mercy of God may recreate humanity[9] and "good living."[10]

Phoebe Calls for Permanent Transformation

Dear brothers and sisters, I, Phoebe, embrace Paul's recommendation. Transform and renew yourselves; do not adapt to greedy and corrupt values of this violent society; I address you who are justified by faith and who call yourselves Christians. I am not addressing people and communities who do not know Jesus Christ. I am addressing communities that have had a long journey as Christians and that today celebrate 500 years of being Reformed. Ask yourselves, how are you living the Reformation in a world that begs for a change of course because it is destroying itself? I am not exaggerating. Ask the scientists who are experts in environmental issues.

The call for transformation and renewal is an ad-intra call; that is, it is directed to the inner core of Christian churches, to the very Christian men and women who have embraced the gospel and preach about Jesus, the Christ. Paul wrote also to those who were already new creatures in Christ; he explained to them what had occurred in their conversion, but he continued exhorting them to behave in a way worthy of the gospel. Those intercultural conflicts in their communities made them forget the horizon of God's Reign. Some ate meat. Others did not because it was not customary among them. They spent all their time criticizing each other. Paul calls on them to welcome each other, especially those who feel freer in Christ; those who eat and those who do not do so for the Lord. So, let's not wear ourselves out with small things that cloud the horizon of what is truly important for God. Internal conflicts usually end up badly. We have to tolerate each other and, above all, care for each other in these societies that are far from the values of the Reign of God.

Paul calls those of you who have been justified by the faith of Jesus Christ to a new conversion within your communities. Christians must be an example; we

9 Elsa Tamez, "Justicia de Dios y gracia sin desquite" ("God's Justice and Grace without Revenge"), paper presented at the Lutheran University (EST) from Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, in the Third Congress of Theology in September, 2016.

10 From Quechua *Sumak Kawsai*, whose meaning points at a full life, an alternative to the lifestyle of Western individualistic and consumer society.

have to know that there is a way to be different from that which is ruled by envy, rivalry and personal ambition. We have to persuade people that solidarity is more important than self-interest; that discriminating against and killing women is equal to discriminating against ourselves and is suicidal; that destroying our environment means destroying our own house. There are some sensitive and aware small groups that want to live in a different way, according to the values that Christians call the Reign of God. I urge you to pay attention to these initiatives and support them. Plan your priorities and with faith and trust in God, and of course with will power, you can begin to build the other possible world that you desire so much.

Good bye. I, Phoebe, wish the best for your meeting. Pray for me while I am in Rome and that things go well there; that brothers and sisters there welcome me as my colleague Paul of Tarso asks them to do.

Elsa Tamez is a Mexican-born feminist and liberation theologian. She is emeritus professor of the Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana *(San José, Costa Rica) and author of T*he Bible of the Oppressed*.*

Keynote: Gender Justice

Isabel Apawo Phiri

Introduction

In this session, we, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Philip Vinod Peacock, have been given the responsibility of reflecting on the theme of justice drawing from the experiences of Africa and Asia while bearing in mind that injustice permeates every dimension of human relationships and our relationship with the earth be it from the Global North or the Global South. Furthermore, we are working with the assumption that while humanity has the ability to control, oppress and exploit others and the earth, those with power also have the capacity to use it to do good by enabling, empowering and emancipating the oppressed, especially when inspired by their belief in God of justice who is the creator of humanity and the universe. God has given power to all. Those with more power have a greater responsibility to stand, speak and act with and on behalf of those with less power like the marginalized and discriminated against. In this case, the world is calling upon the faith leaders to use their power for justice for the excluded and discriminated against and for the exploited planet earth.

We are also working with the understanding that in the World Communion of Reformed Churches we call each other to account for the implementation of issues that bind us together. As a Communion we excise our ministry of solidarity by listening to one another and accompany one another towards fulfilling our mandate from our Lord Jesus that all those who are created in the image of God are assisted to live their lives according to the declaration of Jesus that he came that all may have fullness of life in abundance (John 10:10).

In our presentation, we engage the concept of gender justice through the lens of postcolonial theory. We affirm the comment of Musa Dube, a postcolonial New Testament scholar that:

> The struggle for liberation of postcolonial feminist readers is located within the framework of resisting global and natural structures of oppression – be they politically, economically, socially, or culturally based. Since gender oppression pervades all sectors of life, postcolonial feminist readers add gender analysis to the struggle of Two-Thirds World communities of resistance to ensure that national and international efforts of establishing justice do not side-line gender justice. Postcolonial feminists thus ask

how various forms of national oppression affect women and men, how international forms of oppression affect men and women, how gender oppression functions with other forms of oppression such as class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. They also propose various ways of reading that will chart social justice and that take on gender justice in national and international relationships.[1]

Given the above framework, we see a link between postcolonial theory and the justice discourse within the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Our own locality and experiences

Feminist scholars globally have argued for experience as the foundation and valid starting point for any liberating theology.[2] These experiences are believed to be contextually based, but even within the same context, these experiences take different turns due to various factors such as culture, religion and status. Thus, feminist thought emphasises the need to consider specifics and the location of experience. Given the significance of this argument, it is important to specify our own locality of experiences, especially as related to the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

I, Isabel Apawo. Phiri, was introduced to gender justice discourse through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians starting from 1989 when the Circle was founded.[3] My Christian faith has been shaped by the Presbyterian tradition in Malawi and South Africa. In addition I have lived most of my Christian life with the tension of conservative evangelical tradition and ecumenical experiences. Coming from Malawi where literacy rate of the adult population is

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1 Musa W. Dube, "Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, 142–158 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2006), 142.

2 For a detailed discussion on the significance of experience for feminist theological thinking, see Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "African Women's Theologies," in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* edited by Diane B Stinton, 90-100 (London: SPCK, 2010), 91-93.

3 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was founded in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye with the purpose of creating safe space for African women Christians, Muslims, Jews and Indigenous Religions to come together and theologise about gender justice in the contest of African religions, culture, political and economic context. African women wanted to generate literature about their experience of God and the society.

65.75% (i.e. aged 15 years and above of whom 73% are men 59% are women),[4] I cherish the privilege to have come from a family that valued education, especially of girls. Having studied and worked in the academic world in secular institutions but closely connected with institutions of the church, I came to experience the complexity of power dynamics when a female lay person who identifies with a feminist framework is significantly contributing to the education of the male clergy. In the context of Africa, I am constantly asked: "How can one be an evangelical Christian and also be an activist for gender justice?" This hard question comes from women who are in the church and have a conservative understanding of the Bible and women who are gender activist who feel that the Bible is a patriarchal book and that the structures of the church are too patriarchal for their comfort. In my case leaving the church is not an option. It is my home where I live out my faith in God while drawing from prophetic theology which has turned me into activist for justice of all forms, of which gender justice is one. Working for the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been an opportunity to bring local activism on justice issues informed by prophetic theology to the international platform where I have learnt to speak the truth to power with and on behalf of the marginalized of our society. Leading the implementation of the pilgrimage of justice and peace in the programmatic work of the WCC has made me appreciate the connection between peace and justice issues and the unity of the church. The unity of the church is the basis on which we walk together for justice and peace. I have seen the importance of the creation of intergenerational safe spaces for the people of God to listen to one another and be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us.

In my life there have been two significant contacts with the then-World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) which were life transforming and are relevant to the topic of gender justice. The first was my participation in a women's consultation on the topic "Walk My Sister: The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives"[5] which took place at Kampen Theological Seminary in 1992. The consultation was organized by the Women's Desk of WARC. At this time WARC

4 According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (March 2016), 65.75% of the adult population (aged 15 years and above) in Malawi are able to read and write. For adult men, the literacy rate is 73% and for women it is 59%.

5 Phiri, Isabel Apawo, "The `Proper' place of women (Genesis 1 and I timothy 2) A Biblical Exegetical Study from a Malawian Chewa Presbyterian Perspective." in *`Walk my Sister' The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*. Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Vol. 18, July 1993, 42-33. And Phiri, Isabel Apawo, "Women's/Feminist Challenges for Wholeness" in *Reformed World*. Vol. 43, No. 4, Dec. 1993, 159-168.

had just established the Programme on Partnership between Men and Women in the Church. Its aim was to "encourage churches to promote partnership of women and men modelled in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Partnership was understood to be a gift of the Holy Spirit in which there is a new focus of relationship in Jesus Christ that brings wholeness and justice in communities."[6] Of significance was the fact that this was during the period of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) built on the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985).[7] The consultation organized by WARC left a big impression on me as we searched the Scriptures together to understand afresh what God is saying to us about the place of women in the church. At that consultation I found my Reformed sisters from all over the world who were raising the same questions I was raising in my own PhD studies as I worked with women and men of the Nkhoma Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa in Malawi. That consultation confirmed for me what Mercy Amba Oduyoye said in *Who Will Roll the Stone Away: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity With Women*,[8] that the Ecumenical Decade was more of women in solidarity with each other than the churches in solidarity with women.

The second significant contact was in 1995 when the executive secretary of the women's desk, Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge and the then-general secretary, Rev. Dr. Milan Opocensky, wrote letters to my church in Malawi to express concern over the reaction of my church to the peaceful march of church women to present a petition raising issues of: lack of partnership between men and women in the church, violence against women, lack of participation of women in leadership roles including the ordination of women to the ministry of word and sacrament. The church women made history for being on such a march as it was the first of its kind. This should be understood in the context of the then-just realized political transition to democracy in the country where the church had played a significant role in taking a prophetic stand against all form of injustices experienced by Malawians. Through the petition the women were demanding that the political and economic justice that the churches were seeking for all Malawians should include gender justice for women who are in

6 See the letter of Nyambura Njoroge to the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian written in 1995 when she was the Executive Secretary for the Women's desk of WARC.

7 See the work of Dr Fulata Mbano Moyo on https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/women-and-men/history

8 Published by World Council of Churches, 1991.

the church and society too. In other words, the church women were already pointing to the interconnectedness of oppression and the need for the church to be comprehensive in its resistance to all forms of oppression that dehumanizes God's children irrespective of gender, race, age and class. The leadership of the church reacted negatively to the petition of the church women by setting a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the issue. Among other issues the Commission of Inquiry recommended the suspension of women church workers who were part of the march. The Commission also recommended that I leave the Blantyre Synod and go to the synod of my ancestors, Nkhoma Synod. I wrote back to the church to protest all the recommendations. Among other things I said: "I have no intentions of leaving the church unless I am asked by the church court to do so. My life has been lived in the grip of the church. I have my roots in the CCAP."

Of particular significance to today's plenary topic was the letter of Opocensky which stated;

...the peaceful demonstration and the issues it had attempted to address had been widely publicized in Malawi, and thereby caught the attention of the international community, and that the world church was concerned indeed.

People who are aware of WARC's involvement in Malawi during the political transition are inquiring from us what we are doing to address the injustices the women have expressed in their petition to the church leadership in Malawi. Since Dr Njoroge has not received any response from your office, I kindly urge you to treat this matter with utmost priority, and send the report of the inquiry as soon as possible .... I am sure that you are aware that the implications of this whole affair go far beyond the issue of suspension. We are requesting the church to look seriously into how the whole church treats women and deals with their concerns. **Justice delayed is justice denied. The church has the responsibility of "breaking the chains of injustice,"**[9] as the theme of the next General Council of WARC attests. The credibility of the local as well as the world church is at stake if concrete action is not taken to address the issue at hand: discrimination of women in the church and society.[10]

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9 The use of bold letters is mine to emphasize the importance of what he was saying for us today.

10 See the letter of Rev Dr Milan Opocensky to Blantyre Synod in 1995.

A pastoral team of six Reformed members was organised by WARC and sent to the Blantyre Synod to discuss the role of the church in promoting justice in the country and the partnership of women and men. The letters from WARC and the pastoral visit had a huge impact on the church's commitment to resolve the issue because it was made clear that there is a link between what was happening in a member church with the wider Reformed family. It is about accompaniment and accountability to each other in the body of Christ, which I believe should always be the case to witness to the world that we are one.

Thereafter a process was established for church members and the leadership of the church on partnership between women and men in the church. This was the beginning of change and the concerns of the women were addressed over a period of five years. As from 2000, the Blantyre Synod has been ordaining women to the ministry of the word and sacrament and continues to work on the partnership of women and men in the church. This is an example to show that it is possible for a church in our communion to go through total transformation in the area of gender justice and continues to do more and more.

Discerning the signs of our times

At a global level and within our Communion, we have seen that the partnership of women and men has continued to be pursued through asking different hard questions based on context. In some of our churches the conversation has continued to be about whether gender differentiation is as a result of creation by God and therefore given and to be accepted as the norm or to accept the argument of those who believe that gender is constructed by cultures and religions in our particular context and therefore is open to change with time as humanity evolves.

Difficult conversations are still taking place about how Jesus dealt with the question of gender differentiation in the society that he belonged to and what we today can learn from his way of being a man which was different from the men of his time.[11] Questions are being asked whether or not to include studies on patriarchal masculinities and liberating masculinities in our theological institutions or during seminars in our churches.

Our use of worship language is still in question. There are also debates still taking place about whether we should use inclusive language in our worship or continue to use male dominated language on the understanding that man

11 See the work of Tinyiko Maluleke, Gerald West, Kä Mana and Ezra Chitando.

stands for all humanity despite the fact that in 1975 the UN declared that the term man does not stand for all humanity.

Furthermore, hard conversations are still taking place about whether women should be allowed to take leadership positions in the church or not. There are still few women who are participating in leadership roles including the ordination of women. Some of our churches had been moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to start ordaining women to the ministry of the word and sacrament and to become church elders. To everyone's surprise the steps forward have since been rescinded. Who is on a pilgrimage of justice and peace with such churches to accompany them in their struggle for the implementation of justice for all?

Still hard conversations are happening about what to do with the ordained women. Peggy Mulambya Kabonde's PhD thesis,[12] which I had the honour to supervise, made me realize how difficult life continues to be for Reformed ordained women in terms of churches establishing true partnership between ordained women and ordained men, let alone between ordained women and their congregations. Kabonde also highlighted that most of our theological institutions are yet to include gender as a tool of analysis in research or when teaching theological subjects. This is also connected to lack of inclusion of feminist theological studies and gender studies in our theological curriculum.

I have come to accept that there is a link between the way the churches have handled the issues of the leadership of women in the church with the support or lack of it for women in political leadership. Torild Skard in *Women of Power*[13] has demonstrated that where participation of women in the faith institutions is a difficult conversation, faith communities as citizens of their country tend to vote for a man than for a woman for the position of president or prime minister of their country. She has shown that by 2012, there were 10% female and 90% male presidents and prime ministers worldwide. She argues that culture and religion account for this screwed percentages even in countries where democracy has been in existence for a long time. In the thinking of many, including women, they find it difficult to vote for a female president or prime minister because

12 Peggy Mlambya Kabonde, "Ordination of Women: Partnership, Praxis and Experience of the United Church of Zambia." University of KwaZulu Natal, 2014, Supervisor: Prof. IA Phiri, co-supervisor: Dr. Julius Gathogo.

13 Torild Skard, Women of Power Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide 2014.

in their reflection of God and human leadership, they understand that it is the will of God for men to lead and women to follow, even though the Bible and the experience of women today tells a different story.

Intersectionanries of oppression of marginalized groups

The extremely difficult conversations of our times have been about all forms of sexual and gender based violence in the church and society. Sexual and any form of violence against minorities and marginalized groups of people is about power and control. Of particular concern for us today, which has become a global phenomenon, is when the gender-based violence is happening in our own churches and homes. Pope Francis led by example by refusing to be silent about the sexual abuse of children by church leaders. The joint publication of the World Student Christian Fellowship and the World Council of Churches entitled: *When Pastors Prey: Overcoming Clergy Sexual Abuse of Women*[14] is another example of refusing to join the conspiracy of silence over sexual and gender based violence in the church and in Christian homes. Campaigns like "Thursdays in Black," which has been observed at this General Council, is a significant symbol of our solidarity to end any form violence in the church and society.

The huge wave of migrants and refugees from the Global South to the Global North and the internal displacement of people in their countries or outside due to conflict or economic reasons or due to environmental disasters has exposed the existence of modern day slavery and racism. Human trafficking is on the increase and many more children and women migrants and refugees are going through sexual and gender-based violence in camps, enroute to their new countries and in the host countries. They cannot afford to use the legal system to seek protection because they cannot afford it or they are afraid of being sent back to their countries. Testimonies are shared through media of terrible conditions in many camps where the migrants live, exposing them to sickness. Fear of migrants and refugees, which in some cases is understandable when viewed in the context of increased terror attacks from extremists, is also exposing racist tendencies. At the same time we acknowledge the excellent work done by people from the Global North who have opened their homes and churches to welcome and assist migrants and refugees. On this pilgrimage of justice and peace, what can we do together to address the fear of the receiving countries, racism and support the migrants and refugees?

Then there is the state sanctioned or community inspired sexual violence or

14 Edited by Villi Boobal Batchelor. WCC publication, 2013.

killing of people who are sexual minorities. While the message of the gospel is about inclusivity, as communities of faith we are not speaking out loud enough to stop the killing of people on the basis of their sexual orientation. As people who stand in solidarity for justice for all God's people, we cannot afford to be quiet when life is destroyed through what is termed righteous anger directed towards sexual minorities. On a pilgrimage of justice and peace we are walking together and discussing about human sexuality in its totality. We celebrate God's gift to humanity of sexuality. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we listen to each other's stories with love and compassion. As we listen we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us to see the topic of human sexuality from God's perspective as revealed to us for our times.

As a person who comes from Malawi, which is listed among the least developed countries, I cannot fail to point out the interconnectedness of extreme poverty, experiences of drought and floods, food insecurity and lack of access to clean water and poor health, and exposure to HIV. The effects of climate change and degradation of our forests is very visible. The majority of people in Malawi still use firewood for cooking, which in turn brings health complications as they are constantly exposed to dangerous fumes from firewood. It is not enough to say that people should stop cooking using firewood when they cannot afford the alternatives which are being offered. It is the agenda of the churches to advocate for a life lived with dignity for all people by holding governments accountable to prioritize the basic human rights of their people. Churches have a long history of involvement in the provision of health services, agriculture and education, just to mention a few. Let us not get tired of doing good but continue to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals from a faith perspective to promote justice for all so that no one is left behind.

I could go on listing the issues that are calling for hard conversations and action. But it is better that we now turn to discuss why I believe we ought to act differently in the face of all the hard issues that require our agent attention and action.

Biblical and theological reflection on justice

Our Christian faith empowers us to live a life of hope for transformation in the face of brokenness. We have hope because we believe that the Bible has shown us that God created every human being with inherent dignity through being created in God's image, male and female.[15] As argued by Suzan Berber, "on this

15 Genesis 1:27.

basis Christians affirmed the equality of men and women in God's sight. This means that every community or culture shaped by Christian theology, with an understanding of the unique and inestimable dignity of each human being, should be one in which women and men live alongside one another in peaceful and just relationship."

I find the story of Exodus 2:16-22 very inspiring as it deals with injustice and justice issues in an interconnected way. The story is as follows:

> 16 Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water
> and fill the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 Some shepherds came
> along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and
> watered their flock.
>
> 18 When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, "Why have
> you returned so early today?"
>
> 19 They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even
> drew water for us and watered the flock."
>
> 20 "And where is he?" Reuel asked his daughters. "Why did you leave him?
> Invite him to have something to eat."
>
> 21 Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to
> Moses in marriage. 22 Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him
> Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land."

What I like about this story is the way power is being used over the issue of water. Moses is a man of power from outside this community. He sees the injustice done to the seven daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, another man of power. The seven girls arrived at the well first, but were pushed aside by the shepherds who came later than the girls. Moses uses his male power to defend the rights of the girls. He does not allow gender to be used to disadvantage the girls. He even helps the girls by watering their animals. The shaperds noticed that Moses was a man of authority; they listened to him and allowed the girls to go first. Reuel the father of the girls is surprised that today they have come home early; did he knew that his daughters were being harassed by the shepherds? I believe he did but did not use his position as priest to protect his daughters. He normalized their oppression and made them also accept it as normal.

I would like to conclude by urging our church leaders to use their authority to speak out against any form of injustice, starting from within the church itself. The time of normalizing the oppression of the minorities in our churches is over. We are now leading by example by protecting those who are not able to speak for themselves or those whose voices are not listened to. Let your voices be heard in your countries and in international spaces as you speak out for justice.

Conclusion

The hymn below inspires me when I think of justice promoting Reformed churches. It says:

1. The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
   knowing they're wanted and loved by their Lord.
   The Church is wherever Christ's followers are trying
   to live and to share out the good news of God.

2. The Church is wherever God's people are loving,
   where all are forgiven and start once again,
   where all are accepted, whatever their background,
   whatever their past and whatever their pain.

3. The Church is wherever God's people are seeking
   to reach out and touch folk wherever they are --
   conveying the Gospel, its joy and its comfort,
   to challenge, refresh, and excite and inspire.

4. The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
   knowing we're wanted and loved by our Lord.
   The Church is where we as Christ's followers are trying
   to live and to share out the good news of God.[16]

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16 Church Hymnary (4th ed.) #522, Author: Carol Rose Ikeler (b. 1920), Publication Date: 2005, Meter: 12 10 12 11 Irregular, Scripture: 1 John 3:1; Acts 2:43-47; Acts 4:32-35; Ephesians 5:1; Hebrews 13:16 Topic: Our Response to Christ: In Discipleship; Our Response to God: in the worship of God's house; Children (2 more...), Copyright: © 1963 W. L. Jenkins.

Keynote: Justice

Philip Vinod Peacock

My name is Philip Vinod Peacock and I come from India. I am a Dalit Christian and an ordained minister of the Church of North India. Today, Dr. Phiri and I would like to address the issue of justice, and I think that I would like to state from the outset that we do this to you as Christians. Also I would like to specifically say that we do this as Christians located in the Reformed tradition and inspired by the work of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). As those committed to being the disciples of Jesus, called to live faithfully but at the same time to discern critically. To state at the outset itself that our engagement with issues of justice and our solidarity with the oppressed is not because this is a good idea, and we are reminded that good ideas do not fall from the skies, but that because this is an act of faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Justice beats at the heart of the God we believe in and to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly is what this God requires of us. And this is important to us as a Reformed community, that our struggles for justice arise out of our faith and our commitment to struggle to be faithful disciples of Jesus in our world today. To put it in other words, it is not Christians who should be involved with acts of justice, rather it is doing acts of justice that make us Christian as the Accra Confession puts it:

> Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another.

I would like to begin by offering a story from Orissa, a state that lies just south of where I live. It is a story of the Niyamgiri Hills, home and sacred space to the many indigenous people who live in the area. The Dongri Kondh is only one of the many indigenous communities that live in the area. In the year 2003, Vedanta, a United Kingdom headquartered metals and mining company, owned by an Indian and having mining interests in India, Zambia and Australia, entered into a memorandum of understanding with the state government of Orissa to mine bauxite, a necessary ore in aluminium production, from the Niyamgiri Hills. And I name these countries to point out to you the transnational interests

at work here. In the year 2004, the Ministry of Environment and Forests gave Vedanta environmental clearance to mine three million tons of bauxite per year from the Niyamgiri Hills land that is sacred to the Dongri Kondh tribe. Vedanta was to start an aluminium factory near by that would process the bauxite into aluminium. For those of you who know, the processes of making bauxite into aluminium use copious amounts of water and release effluents into the eco-system which have large and long-term effects on the environment. Local people and women in particular rose up in protest against this threat to their life and livelihood and in usual fashion this uprising was met with violence, both overt and subvert. The coercive forces of the state, police and paramilitary, and the propaganda machinery released an onslaught against the indigenous communities and their struggle for life. Liberals over the country invoked the logic of development and the language of progress to shut down any element of resistance! Make no mistake the people of the Niyamgiri Hills were up against the violence, logic and the violent logic of the forces of death.

What we have here is a classic example of the inner workings of the machinations of death which take away the lives and livelihood of the most vulnerable that live on this planet. It makes clear to us the coming together of military, economic and political power that the Accra Confession spoke about. The destructive intentions of Vedanta would have not only had its impact on the environment but on the lives of the community who would be displaced, possibly to the slums of the cities in India. The lives of women would be dramatically changed with increasing difficulties in finding water and fuel, the cultural life of the tribe and their sacred relationship was going to be twisted in unimaginable ways. And this is not just the story of the Niyamgiri Hills, across the world it is also the story of the Dakota pipeline, it is the story of aboriginal communities destroyed by mining activity in Australia, of communities in Africa, of fishing communities around the world!

And this is the deepening crisis of the world we live in. That the forces of death, that principalities and powers, to use the words of Ephesians, incarnate and manifest in the weapons of the military complex that can destroy the world many times over, as though once is not enough, that these forces of death are manifest in the so-called invisible hand (and it is not funny the number of people that have been murdered by this invisible hand) of neo-liberal capitalism that upholds the idolatry of profit over all else, it is manifest in a rabidly growing racism that is either extinguishing young black men or locking them away. It is being manifest in a whole new wave of Islamophobia the world over. And these forces combine in special and unique ways to inflict violence on the bodies of women and sexual minorities. The military-industrial-patriarchal complex is a

many-headed monster that is destroying life and denying the promise of life in its fullness.

Fourteen years ago the Reformed family gathered in Accra and offered to the ecumenical world a gift, a gift of naming what is going on the world. And naming what is going on is a necessary part of discernment. Words are powerful. On the one hand words enable us to describe our experience; without the right words we will not be able to articulate our experiences we face. But a far deeper power of words is that not only do they enable us to describe our experiences, words also have the power of enabling us to understand our experiences. The ability to have words, to have language then is the ability to both understand as well as articulate what is happening around us. It is therefore always in the interest of the powerful to be able to control language. To control language is to be able to control people. The feminist theologian Mary Daly informs us that our theological task is to find new words and give old words new meanings. As Christians we are called to offer good news to the poor and the oppressed; this necessitates that we name that which is bad news, that which causes death.

It was in this context that we offered the word "empire" as a way of naming what is going on in the world. It offers us a means of understanding, articulating and therefore naming the experiences of those who suffer under the present global regime. Even further we can claim that the word empire offers us a hermeneutical lens to uncover and expose the dynamics of power that we possibly find ourselves in.

Yet if we are honest we have also lost ourselves in a noose of words, that while we have made an offering of naming empire as a way of looking at the world, we have lost our way in arguing and defining what this word actually means and what it possibly could mean. Don't get me wrong, this process of naming, defining and arguing is not just important, it is necessary, it is our theological task and perhaps the way that the church moves forward, albeit slowly, the fact is that the forces of death have not only morphed but have grown stronger while we have argued.

And therefore the story is not just about Niyamgiri; it is a story that is unfolding on the bombed streets of Syria, in the occupied lands in Palestine, in the favelas of Brazil, in the demonization of the working class in Europe, in the jails of the United States of America. It is the story of Soni Sori, an indigenous woman who had acid thrown on her because she dared challenge the power of the state. It is the story of Alan Kurdi whose body was found on the beach on the Mediterranean Sea. It is the story of Ken Saro Wiwa, killed by the militia of

a multinational corporation in search of oil. It is the story of Junaid, lynched because he was accused of having eaten beef. It is the story of Juan Ramon Guerrero from Orlando, shot and killed because he was gay. It is the story of Philando Castile, murdered by the police because he was black! And while we struggle to name the beast we are knee deep in the blood of those that the beast has slain!

The Bible tells us that the God of life, whose name we invoke at this gathering, is revealed to us in Scripture, in the form of a story, and specifically of a God who takes the side of the powerless in the story. This is the unique character of God as shown to us in the Bible—the God of the Bible chooses the Hebrew slaves over Pharaoh. God chooses to appear to Moses in a lowly bush and not in a mighty cedar. God chooses David, a small boy, over Goliath as well as over Saul and the other mighty men of Israel—including David's own brothers for that matter. A Jewish midrash tells us of how when Miriam was dancing because the horse and the rider were thrown into the sea, the angels also descended from heaven and danced with her. And while they were dancing they wondered what God was doing, and the angels went up again and visited God and they found God sitting sullenly. And the angels asked God why God was not dancing? And God answers saying, how can I dance when my people are drowning? That the God we believe in is always on the side of the suffering ones.

Liberation theology has often used the language of the preferential option for the poor. Perhaps this is mistaken. God is always on the side of the poor. The question we have to answer is: which side are we on?

And therefore the discernment of the signs of the times is not a neutral observation of what is happening around us but is a call for us to take sides with those whose lives are being destroyed. It is a call to resist the forces of death, to join in the struggle to transform the world. It is not just a way of looking but a way of participating. Nivedita Menon, the Indian feminist, tells us that a feminist gaze is an intentional position from the margins which seeks to dismantle all hierarchies. It is no wonder then that Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza spoke of it in terms of the dismantling of kyriarchy, the radical disruption of all lordship; the dismantling of the imperial project if you will.

But perhaps two caveats: firstly, we as Christians make much of the idea of the presence of God. While I know that it is popular for us to speak of God being everywhere, I think it is also time that we humbly accept that sometimes we need to speak in terms of God absence, God behind the veil so to speak. I would believe that all of us here have experienced moments of God absence—times

when we have cried out to God asking, "Where are you?" To question God in this manner is a legitimate question in the face of human suffering, and it is also the experience of Jesus on the cross when he cries out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" This experience of the absence of God is abundantly clear to those who face the forces of death on a daily basis.

Yet what we must remember that even in moments of God absence we are not alone. The absence of God necessitates the presence of human community, even I would argue the presence of the community of the redeemed. Perhaps this is a reminder for those of us in the Reformed communion, that our commitment to justice necessitates the presence of the Reformed community in those sites of struggle that experience God absence on a daily basis. To Christ on the cross human presence was exemplified in the presence of the woman, the faithful disciples who stood by Jesus in his moment of despair. Even when God was absent and he cried out to God, it was the women who were present at the foot of the cross; showing us that it is really only women who were the true disciples of Jesus. It is this radical commitment of solidarity that is a necessary component of justice.

Secondly, we must acknowledge the church's complicity with these forces of death. And this is not just to be found in our silence about what is happening and has happened around us but in our actual complicity. I would argue that the first thing that this requires us to do as a communion is to be able to delearn and defamiliarize ourselves. We as a church have the notion that we have all the answers, that we know how to we are to transform the world. And we are fantastic preachers always telling others what to do, rather than being able to learn from others. A theology and a spirituality that is directed towards the other is not one that tells the other what to do, but rather is one which is willing to listen to the other, to hear and learn from the other. While it is true that what Paul is speaking of in prophesy is that the church be willing to speak truth to power, to name and to dismantle the structures of power that oppressed others. Perhaps we cannot do the same today without understanding our own location in the midst of power. That the church is no longer a minority who is being hunted down by empire, but that the church today is empire. We are powerful and are responsible for much exclusionary violence around the world. The fact is that we have privilege and we have to be able to unlearn our privilege. In fact I would argue that we have to unlearn our privilege and actually be able to see our privilege as our loss. That precisely because we as a church are in positions of power we can no longer speak the truth that we are losing out on salvation as a result. We need to defamiliarize and unlearn our notions of power as individuals and as institutions as well. What we have to do is to learn some humility and set

out to learn from the very people we intend to teach.

As a communion, we have seen some hard times and learned some hard lessons. But the question is how can we learn to be better Christian leaders through all of this. Perhaps it is easy to see the other as being wrong, the other as needing correction, and this is not just for some of us, it is for all of us, the question that we have to ask ourselves is not what we can teach the other but what have we learnt from the other. Unless we are able to listen to the other and learn from the other we have lost out on something. And we have lost out on becoming better Christians.

But the question is how do we unlearn our privilege and learn to listen to others; this should not be an accumulation and an assimilation of the knowledge of others into our own systems, this is not to judge and learn from the mistakes of others, but to be able to learn from the good of others, even those we consider having wronged us. This means that we allow the other, and particularly the marginalized, broken other to derange and destabilize us, to completely and fundamentally change us. That listening to the other really should twist us out of shape in a way that we are no longer the same.

I would argue that at this moment of time what we need is faith, hope and love. It is not insignificant that Paul speaks about these three aspects of the Christian faith in the context of communion, in a letter to a church that was struggling with the idea of unity. As an organization that is called to communion and committed to justice, where communion and justice are held together, perhaps these words speak out to us now more than ever.

To have faith is to be faithful to our calling as disciples to turn the world upside down, that we are not just to reform the world, but to radically change it, to revolutionize it. To hope is to be subversive, it is to long for that which is not present; to pray let your kingdom come is also to pray let this empire pass away. And to love, to love radically, dangerously, transgressively and boldly. But where are we to find this faith and hope and love? I believe that we are to find it in the cusp of the struggle for life in the midst of the forces of death, on the margins and with the people. For there is where Christ is and there is where the church should be.

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Bible Study
Luke 4:16-21

Mitri Raheb

This text is placed by Luke at the beginning of his Gospel. After Jesus' birth, genealogy and his temptation, this first thing Jesus does is teach at the synagogue in Nazareth. This sermon should be read as Jesus' mission statement. It provides an overview of Jesus life, work, and ministry. It points to Jesus' mandate. His mission is broken into five goals:

1. Bring good news to the poor
2. Proclaim release to the captives
3. Proclaim recovery of sight to the blind
4. Let the oppressed go free
5. Proclaim the year of Jubilee

This mission statement is highly political. There is nothing here about the salvation of the souls, but it's all about liberation. The target group of Jesus' ministry are not the souls, but the oppressed. Luke, in comparison to Mathew, is not interested in the poor in spirit, but in those made poor by unjust economic systems. Jesus here is not so much concerned by those captive by "sin" but those jailed by the empire.

Are we made blind that we can't see anymore what the text is saying? If we have doubt then let's look at Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1, which is a kind of a prelude to Luke 4. In Luke 4 people wonder if Jesus was no other than Joseph's son, but Luke 4 make it clear that Jesus is Mary's son, and they have the same theology with a preferential option for the poor. If we have doubt, let's look at Jesus' sermon on the field in Luke 6 to see that Jesus is interested in the poor and the hungry.

To understand Jesus' mission we have to understand his context. Jesus was born in Palestine under occupation, Roman occupation. Palestine has been an occupied country for most of the last 3000 years. It started with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then came the Greeks and then the Romans. Jesus' mission statement is a combination of words spoken by Trito-Isaiah (61:1-2 and 58:6) and Deutro-Isaiah (42:7). At the time of Deutro-Isaiah Palestine was occupied by the Babylonians. Although the Babylonians were not

anymore at the time of Trito-Isaiah, the Persians were in control. These words were spoken in the context of empire. Jesus knew exactly what to quote from the Hebrew Bible, when and why. *Der Sitz im Leben* of those texts is the occupation. This is why they have to be read and understood in this context.

Occupation is almost a synonym for Palestine. The Romans weren't the last empire who occupied our country. We had the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British and now the Israeli occupation.

I was five years old when Israel occupied Bethlehem in 1967. This was exactly fifty years ago. I know what living under occupation means, I can imagine what it meant for Jesus to be born under occupation, to live his entire life under occupation and to be crushed on the cross by the empire. There is no way to understand Jesus' mission without looking at the context of imperial occupation.

Occupied people are not poor, per se, but are made poor. Their resources are exploited by the empire, and they are made to cheap labour to keep the economy of the empire running and growing. The cost of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is around 10 billion dollars, representing almost 80% of the GDP. The total economic aid that we get doesn't even compensate for a small portion of what the occupation is costing us. Occupied people are not poor, they are made poor. Jesus understood that. This is why he is not promising them aid or food but good news of social justice.

Those captives Jesus is addressing are not those captives in sin. The text is very clear. These are captives of the empire. These are political prisoners who dare to resist the empire. They are put into prison so that they don't disrupt the empire, so that business in the empire can continue as usual. Since 1967 over 700,000 Palestinians have been put in Israeli jails. This is almost one fifth of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Currently, over 6000 Palestinian political prisoners are in Israeli jails awaiting for someone to proclaim their freedom and set them free.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration. It wasn't the Lord God that promised Israel Palestine, but Lord Balfour. This was part of a British imperial, colonial plan. But this year marks also the 50th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Churches are calling for a year of Jubilee, for Israel to end its occupation and to give the land back to its original owners. We have to read the mission statement of Jesus in such a political context.

Jesus' mission statement is highly political. But Jesus' mission is holistic. This is why we see Jesus opting for the sinners and outcast of his time. Occupied people often blame themselves for their occupation. They see this is a punishment from God for not observing the law. So more religious laws are produced to keep people in line. Occupied people in this case become doubly oppressed. They are oppressed by the political laws of the empire but also by religious laws introduced by the religious establishment. Freedom from religious oppression is an integral part of Jesus' mission and an integral part of the reformation.

Understanding Jesus' mission in his context might be threatening for some people who got used to spiritualizing Jesus ministry. But this understanding poses a challenge as well to us. If we are to understand Jesus' mission as highly political, then we need to ask the question, if Jesus was able to achieve the five goals he set for himself, did he accomplish his mission? If his mission is understood spiritually, it is easier to claim that it was fulfilled. But what if his mission is political? Don't we need to admit that Jesus failed in his mission? Imperial oppression is still not only in Palestine but throughout the world in an unprecedented magnitude.

I believe that Jesus' mission is not accomplished yet. What was accomplished is the proclamation. Jesus proclaimed God's vision for this world in very clear terms, and it is highly political. But Jesus didn't claim that he is the one that will do all of that. He proclaims God's intention and plan. But like in any other plan, God needs resources to accomplish his plan. He needs human resources and with his mission statement he hopes to invite us and to motivate us to join his team, to join his mission and to become his agents of change.

Jesus' sermon was in no way an illusion, wishful thinking or a kind of hallucination. Jesus' sermon was the unfolding of a new vision for social and political transformation. As Christians we continue to live in a broken world and thus the tension between the "the world as it is" with all its ugly and painful realities and the "the world as it could be." We have to balance that tension. Being too absorbed by "the world as it is" makes us resentful. Dreaming too much about "the world as it should be" makes us fundamentalists. We can't live but with our two feet deeply grounded in the reality of this world, and, at the same time, with our two hands engaged in creating the "the world as it could be." We have to learn to hold the reins of tension between history with its endless wounds and the future with its promises without forgetting that the present is the space to heal wounds and to seize opportunities. We need to analyze the oppressive system of empire, without falling into a kind of fatalism where

we become objects of history. To some extent, we lose the future the moment we lose our capability for imagination. Jesus' sermon is an open invitation to envision a new world as God intended it. Without a new driving vision and without allowing for such an imaginative process to take place, the world will spiral into chaos. Without vision, nations go astray. It is in this time of immense challenges that imaginative faith rises to discover the endless possibilities that lie therein.

Imagination is important, but imagination alone is not enough. God's preferential option for the poor is good, but it is not enough. Faith is about imagination, but it is more about hope. Imagination is what we see. Hope is what we do. Imagination can be highly deceiving if it is not connected to a well-defined strategy and a plan. Hope is the power to keep focusing on the larger vision while taking and doing the small steps towards that future. Hope doesn't wait for vision to come. Hope is vision in action today. Faith that makes people passive, depressive, or illusive is not faith, but opium. Faith is facing the empire with open eyes that analyzes what is happening while, at the same time, develops the ability to see beyond what humans see. Hope is living the reality and yet investing in a different one. Jesus' plan has to be implemented "today" in our lives, in our churches and in our world. Jesus' sermon can't be something from "yesterday." It is always a call for us today to engage in God's mission. Just as *ekklesia semper reformanda*, so we have to keep translating Jesus' sermon into our world of today, in the context of the empire of today, with a new vision for the world of today.

This is our call. It is a costly call. This is why the people, after hearing his sermon, felt threatened and wanted to get rid of him. Everyone who dares to challenge the empire experiences what Jesus experienced. The time of Jesus is not different than our time. It is much easier to spiritualize Christianity so that it loses its teeth. Then we don't need to do much, but to conform ourselves to the empire. Jesus' sermon is an open invitation for a costly life that is committed to social, political and religious transformation in the face of empire today.

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Keynote: Mission in Communion

Farid Esack

In the Name of God, the Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace.

Delegates present here today, President Jerry Pillay, General Secretary Chris Ferguson, I greet you as a Muslim with the greetings of Islam—*As Salamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatu.* May the peace and blessings and mercy of God be upon all of you.

I am absolutely delighted to be here with you today.

This assembly is a bit of a break from many of the international Christian organizations, when they invite someone from another faith, they look for somebody who is the ideal "moderate Muslim," somebody who will make them feel comfortable, somebody whom they want to see in their own kind of image. So, they go in search of what is described as the "moderate Muslim." This is largely part of a project I think is based on the idea that Muslims in general are increasingly awkward—to put it mildly. The construction of the moderate Muslim—often also a task enthusiastically embraced by Muslims themselves—is part of a project to civilize the Muslim barbarians.

So, thanks for breaking this tradition. You don't have a moderate Muslim in front of you. In fact, you have a radical one. And now, I bet, that I have some of you really worried. "What on earth did the organizing committee have in mind when they invited this guy to address the plenary?"

I am aware that I stand in front of you as a distinct representative of a more than 1400 year-old tradition; however, I also stand in front of you as family. As a representative of that tradition of Islam, I represent a religious tradition that rose up in Arabia in the sixth century and spread across the world—a movement that started as one obsessed with social economic injustice, with the role of women in society and that challenged the dominant norms.

There is a very poignant verse in the Quran that challenges infanticide, the common practice amongst Arabs at that time, embarrassed at the birth of a girl child. When a woman was pregnant with a second or third child the family, in anxiety and in terror at the prospect yet another child who may—God forbid!—may be a girl, would often go into the interior without announcing to their neighbours that the woman is pregnant.

When they gave birth to a girl child they would bury her alive and return back to the village they are from as if nothing had happened. About this the Quran says "*wa idh al-maw'udatu su'lat, bi ayyi dhanbin qutilat?*" ("And when the innocent girl child is asked, for what crime were you murdered?")

So, this is a tradition that came to challenge not only the criminals of infanticide but also the gatherers of wealth. The Quran speaks in poignant and moving terms about the gatherers of wealth who think that their wealth gives them a sense of permanency and divinity. This is a tradition I come from that gave the world math, medicine and algebra. That gave the world a model of coexistence in a place in Andalusia in what is known today as Spain before all of us Muslims and Jews were expelled more than 400 years ago by Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, and we with the Jews went into exile.

And today this is a tradition wherein we are also victims, the victims of Islamphobia; our countries are invaded, war is inflicted on our people, utilizing weapons largely manufactured in the Global North, where its leaders and people still claim to be heirs of Christian tradition.

I stand as representative of a community that comprises the largest percentage of refugees from war and victims of terror in the world today. Both the minor terror wars that are more physically depicted on our television screens and the major ones—the major ones experienced by the homeless and by the hungry. We are victims because our leaders are captured and act as the local proxies of imperialism, colonialism and capitalism, and our people are subjected to their whims.

But, brothers and sisters, we are not only victims.

I stand before you today as representative of a community that are also victimizers. Sometimes our victims are more stark in the sense in the victims of the ISIS and in the case of the Yazadis in Iraq. And at other times our victims are less stark in the case of Christians in Pakistan where you are refused to drink water from the cups, eat food from the plates from the Muslims in restaurants simply because you are a Christian. It is a country where we claim that Islam liberated us from the caste systems of Hinduism, and then repeat all of those patterns and subject the Christians living in our societies to all of the same kind of daily humiliations that Dalit people experience in India at the hands of the upper caste.

I come from a tradition where my people have captured God and cast him in a narrow Muslim cell and want to own the word "Allah," the Transcendent, and want to imprison that term and apply that term to a small bunch of tribalists called "Muslims." Thus we criminalize the use of the word "Allah" by Christians in a country like Malaysia.

I come from a tradition where many of the men in our tradition think of women as slightly better than dogs but less than donkeys. I come from a tradition where we elevate the sexually normal amongst us and consign to the dungeons of marginality the so-called sexually abnormal amongst us. Where the wealthy amongst us keep imprisoned, sometimes even in the hotel rooms in the West, our Filipino, our Bangladeshi and our Indonesian workers. You see them in airports in tow, behind the rich and imprisoned in five-star hotel rooms inside the West.

This is my community. And all of this is done in my name, and therefore I stand before you with my hand sullied, with my hands dirty.

But like your tradition, mine is a mixed bag. You know, I often speak about making a distinction between the notion of powerlessness and less-powerness. Very often we fall into the trap of thinking of ourselves as powerless. We are the victims. None of us are only powerless. I, in relation to the military industrial complex, may be "powerless." I, in relation to a darker skin person, in relation to a female, I am powerful. So, none of us are absolutely powerless. We have less power than what others have, and at times we have more power than what others have.

But I also stand in front of you as family; I am not just the other. First, I am one of you as part of this community that in Islam is referred to as the People of the Book tradition. But above all, I stand in front of you as family, my brothers and sisters, in the prophetic tradition in confronting what this assembly calls the idolatries of power and privilege. That injunction of the Quran where God commands Moses, "*Idh-hab ila Fir`awn; innahu tagha*" ("Go and challenge Pharaoh, he is an oppressor"). I stand in front of you as part of that tradition that recognizes that not a single prophet of God ever came into this world and made his or her fundamental question, "How do I fit in with power?" This is one of the great heresies of our time when religious communities and religious leaders make it their primary question: "How do I get a seat at the table of power?"

Prophets did not ask how do I fit in with an unjust system, "How do I fit with in with the powers that be?" Their fundamental question was "How do I challenge pharaoh?" This leads to the tension between often many of us being in positions of religious leadership and authority on the one hand and therefore seeking, and sometimes—for the sake of the survival of our communities we have to be in conversation with—to get the recognition of those who are in power. So, we live with this tension of wanting to be recognized. And in brackets, I think there is something also perverse about this, only something, by the way. There is something that often draws religious leadership to power and authority and all the trappings that go along with it. However, I also acknowledge that the interests of our communities very often demand that we also be in conversion with those who are in power. This on the one hand, and our prophetic requirement to be in solidarity with the vulnerable, to be in solidarity with the least.

So, how do we embrace this vulnerability when we are in this solidarity?

In Islam, the dominant ethos today, regrettably, is one of power. In fact, it finds expression in a Muslim adage "*Al-Islam ya`la wa la yu'la alaihi*"—Islam is dominant and is never dominated. Islam is in power and never controlled. Yet this is a tradition that claims to be following a Prophet who comes into the world fatherless. Muhammad (may the Blessings and peace of God abide upon him)—his father dies six months before he is born. He was reared by his single mother. His mother dies two years after he is born. He gets passed on to his grandfather who leaves the world, when he is at the age of eight years. We are the followers of a Prophet who is a marginalized figure in his society, who does not leave behind any boy children as heirs in a society where you only acquire value once you are the father of a male child.

This Muhammad, peace be upon him, when he receives revelation rushes to his wife and asks his wife to embrace him and to cover him and support him. And this is the Muhammad who says, "I have been born amongst the poor, I will live amongst the poor, I will die amongst the poor and on the Day of Judgment I pray God raises me amongst the poor."

This tradition has become so subverted that we end up with the idea that that Islam can only ever be dominant over others—never in a relationship of absolute equality with others.

So, how do we embrace vulnerability?

How do we negotiate a space beyond this need to move away the idea Islam as political power to the embrace of vulnerability and, at the same time, to not use vulnerability as synonymous with victimhood, and use our victimhood as a weapon to oppress others?

The terrible tragedy is what has happened to most of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Caught between the owning of ruthless utilization of victimhood as a weapon on the one hand and the real presence of anti-Semitism on the other. This continent was responsible for the Nazi Holocaust, the religious tradition, Christianity, that all of you are heirs to—with a good bit of support from my tradition, Islam, was responsible for providing the textual justification for the oppression of Jewish people throughout human history. The collusion between that tradition, Christianity on the one hand and a pernicious victimhood on the other hand conspiring to create new victims in the shape of the Palestinian homeless, dispossessed and occupied. How do we not fall victim to a manipulated and Machiavellian victimhood?

And so, to conclude—and these are just random thoughts, I didn't want to prepare a speech for being here today. I wanted to share to you from my heart and share some of these reflections and thoughts on our theme here of liberating discipleship.

And so, we have the challenge: how do we understand this deity, this God that we worship, this God we worship and submit to in a liberating discipleship? How do we understand that the God that we worship is *Akbar*, when Muslims say, and sadly it has become to be used as a slogan of war, *Allahu Akbar*, greater than—not "The greatest." God is greater than. Allah as the transcendent, that He is greater than me and my small community, that I won't reduce God to a mascot on the eve of a cricket game and pray to God for victory against the Indians or Pakistanis or whoever you are going to play in a cricket or soccer match today, that I will not reduce God to a flag-waving patriot on the eve that we decide to launch our bombs on other helpless victims. We will not cloak our God in the flag of a particular nation or the flag of a particular sect or the labels of a particular tradition. God is greater than.

And in this acknowledgement that God as "greater than," how do we stand in solidarity with the least, particularly if the criminals inflicting this injustice against the least come from our own ranks?

We must be willing to challenge the other. In your conversations with Muslims,

or in your conversations with Jews, or whoever you are in conversation with as a Christian community, be ready to challenge. Acknowledge that there is more to us and our games than just being victims. Call us out on our crimes! Our demands for justice inside Europe and our denial of justice to those inside our own societies and in doing so I can do none other but say how do we continue to confront the self.

And this is one of the most amazing things about your tradition—the tradition of the Reformed churches. The whole idea about *status confessionis*, this idea of acknowledging your guilt in the presence of the Almighty and your complicity in the presence of each other.

So friends, brothers and sisters, as I have read through the conference documents for this assembly, I was deeply moved by this. But I am also aware of our own limitations as human beings and ultimately our utter dependence on the grace of God and God's assistance as we move forth from this assembly to our communities and take forth both the inspirations and lessons that we have gathered here.

Thank you very much, and God bless you all!

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Keynote: Communion in Mission From Wittenberg to Finkenwalde

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

Mission means confronting barriers and crossing boundaries, in word and deed, with the liberating love of God known in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Participating in God's mission—"*Missio Dei*"—is intended to be at the heart of the church's life and identity. Thus, mission is no program or Christian enterprise conducted as another activity which the church, or its multiple para-church organizations, fits into its agenda. Rather, it lies at the core of the church, defining its presence in the world, grounding its witness and framing its discipleship.

God's mission is incarnational, rooted in the sending of God's Son into the world. It takes on flesh and blood, the real stuff of life, engaging and confronting the fresh realities of the world with the intent of renewal and transformation. Therefore, *Missio Dei* is always intensely contextual. The work of the gospel, empowered by the many tongues of the Spirit present at Pentecost, constantly crosses boundaries of language, race, class, gender, nation and culture, creating communities that embody the promise of a new humanity.

This day at the General Council is focused on God's mission in the world today, in light of our theme ("Living God, Renew and Transform Us"). You have seen the concept paper titled "Communion in Mission" which provides a compelling picture of the forces shaping, and misshaping, the world today. These are identified as chauvinistic nationalism, growing economic inequality, destabilizing climate change, unprecedented forced migration and increasing militarization and violence. This paints a picture, at least in part, of the grim economic, social and political landscape of today's world. Within these realities the gospel of Jesus Christ is announced, in flesh and blood, through the ongoing movement of God's mission.

Crucial to all this, however, is a fundamental question. Are we confronted today simply by another set of vexing economic and social developments which require our attention? Or is something deeper at stake? Are we facing forces which constitute a spiritual assault on the integrity and truth of Christian faith in today's world? Is this a time when our response, however well intended, will be inept unless it is grounded in a spiritual resilience that confesses faith in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Spirit, which unmasks and defies powers that

would subdue and crush the public integrity of the gospel in the world?

This is, in truth, the crucial question for us to discern as a Communion. And it is deeply serious. I'd pose it this way. When rising forces of nationalistic exclusivism are fueled by racial bigotry, when a naked global struggle for money and power shreds bonds of human solidarity, and when unbridled greed threatens planetary survival, is the truth and integrity of our faith at stake? Is the only response capable of addressing the roots of this crisis one of spiritual resistance and renewal rooted in what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord? In other words, is it a *kairos* moment calling us to a clear discernment of what it means, in this present context, to confess our faith? And must such a confession then shape the communities of those believe the gospel? In my view, the answer is yes.

We of the Reformed tradition should understand this. One of our unique contributions to Christian history is the conviction that our confession of faith is never over. It does not end, and is not complete, with any specific historic expression or creed, however significant and enduring that may be. Rather, this process of confession, and its reforming impulse, is continuous. This is one of the keys to how, in the words of our theme, the Living God renews and transforms us.

We've experienced this in the journey of our Communion in a dramatic fashion with the Belhar Confession. In the struggle against apartheid, the response of much of the Reformed community and others became rooted in this confession of our faith, centered on unity, reconciliation and justice. That confession has grown globally, out of its immediate context, framing the confession of faith by Reformed communities around the world, including my own, the Reformed Church in America.

The Accra Confession presents a similar challenge, proposing that global economic inequalities, and the deepening injustice imposed by the prevailing systems of imperial-like power, present realities requiring a fresh confession of our faith. For the past dozen years this proposed Confession has circulated in the life of our Communion in consultations, debate and reflection. The realities which it named in 2004 have now been compounded with politically potent expressions of aggressive chauvinism, racial bigotry, and a creed of national selfishness that dismisses even the pretense of moral obligation for humanity's common good. The election and policies of Donald Trump most recently and alarmingly epitomize this trend, but it reverberates globally.

The most cogent historical lessons, however, for framing our Communion's mission and witness in this time might be found in the soil and history of the land that is the gracious host for our 26th General Council. We are gathered here in Germany to refresh our memory and our hearts with the passion, faith and truth which propelled the Protestant Reformation. For this reason, we will travel to Wittenberg, and recall the courage which it took to confess God's Word and Truth in the face of a prevailing system whose corruption seemed matched only by its unassailable power.

However, I'd suggest that the 26th General Council be a "tale of two cities"—Wittenberg, on the one hand, and the other being Finkenwalde. This city lies on the east side of the Oder River, 365 kilometers north and east of where we meet. Today it's in Poland, and named Zdroje. But before 1945 this was part of Germany, and Finkenwalde was a suburb of Stettin. It was here, in 1935, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer founded an underground seminary of the Confessing Church.

An heir of the Reformation, Bonhoeffer struggled to discern the shape and character of the church's mission and witness in the context where he found himself, during the rise of the Third Reich in Germany. He witnessed a nationalism which was becoming chauvinistic and exclusive, contaminated by racial pride and exploiting economic grievances through bigotry and rejection of those who were different. Political and economic power were married and harnessed to obstruct dissent and reinforce a mindset of cultural superiority in the name of rectifying national grievances.

In all this Bonhoeffer and others saw the established church as deeply complicit, functioning with inexplicable comfort toward this emerging order, whose values so clearly violated the message of the gospel. The conflict intensified as the National Socialist government moved to establish direct control over the "German church." This led to the Barmen Declaration, drafted primarily by Karl Barth and adopted in 1934, laying the theological foundation for establishing the Confessing Church, with the leadership of Martin Niemoller and other German pastors.

Bonhoeffer went to Finkenwalde in 1935 to start an underground seminary that would train pastors to serve in the Confessing Church. He perceived that established Christianity in Germany was failing in the test of that time. It did not produce the depth of discipleship, the strength of commitment, nor the spiritual

foundation deep and resilient enough to offer the witness that was required to face the fearsome idolatries propagated by an emerging evil empire.

In response, life together at Finkenwalde focused on building a Christian community capable of nurturing Christian faith that understood the cost of discipleship, and nurtured the means for its practice. Students were encouraged to dwell in the Word, rest in prayer, support one another and turn in solidarity to those most vulnerable in society. Bonhoeffer sought to create a Christian community capable of instilling and forming a depth of faith capable of resisting the onslaught of evil he saw arising in his country's life.

In 1937 the Gestapo shut down the underground seminary at Finkenwalde and arrested many of its students. Apparently, the authorities recognized the threat posed by those who simply read the Bible and prayed about the nature of God's mission in the specific context of their time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer continually asked this question: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" That question, asked in any time, and accompanied by a clear discernment of the times, will undermine the power and authority of any regimes intent on imposing a reign based on the prerogatives of privilege, race, wealth and might.

It is also our question at this *kairos* moment as our Communion discerns the shape of God's unfolding mission in today's world and our participation in this work of the Spirit. Asking this question drives us, like those at Finkenwalde, to seek those practices and form those communities whose life and work embody a faith with the power to confront and overturn the idolatries of this era. That rests on a resonant and fresh confession of our faith, and propels us to embrace those ways of discipleship that can sustain our witness in the long run.

This requires far more than the right words. Let's be honest. Getting the words right is both one of the strengths and weakness of the Reformed tradition. We know how important it is to say what we believe and what we mean. Whether in drafting 95 Theses, or meeting 1,163 times in Westminster Abbey to write a Confession, or memorizing the Heidelberg or adopting the Belhar, we know that words matter. But the danger is to believe that once we say it correctly, and get the words planted in our heads, then our hearts will automatically follow, shaping our lives.

We face this temptation as well at ecumenical gatherings, like this General Council. It's been my privilege to participate in scores of ecumenical meetings over the past decades. And with English as my mother tongue, I've frequently

been placed on drafting committees. Countless sleepless nights have been spent with others struggling over finding agreement on what to say, drafting phrases that would matter to shared memory, and seeking words with the capacity to inspire. Sometimes parts of those statements and reports make a difference, clarifying truth and prompting commitment. But many other times they are adopted after tedious debate parsing phrases in plenary sessions and then neglected and forgotten.

It requires more than the persuasion of well-crafted words analyzing our present context and commending action to prompt participation in God's mission in such a time as this. This takes the unfettered allegiance of people's hearts, and the formation of their lives of discipleship. Countless pernicious forces press in the opposite direction, lulling the church back into complicit comfort, condoning narrow, nationalistic loyalties, offering the subtle idols of personal success and material reward and promoting forms of spiritual escapism. It takes spiritual resistance, nurtured in communities of faithful disciples, to confront and overcome those forces. That was Bonhoeffer's lesson at Finkenwalde and should be our own today.

I am not maintaining a simplistic parallel between the rise of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler's attempts to directly suppress and subvert the church with political realities faced today in the world. Times and contexts are different. But the similarities of forceful appeals to nationalistic chauvinism, racial bigotry and cultural exclusivism as manipulative reactions to economic anxieties, particularly in the United States and Europe, are chilling. What is parallel to that time and this, for all of world Christianity, is the call to freshly confess faith in ways that shape the church and form disciples with enduring capacity for the spiritual resistance, renewal and transformation required for this moment in the world's history.

Mission rests on the faith we confess, understood incarnationally in the context of our time. That confession shapes communities of discipleship. Our response to God's mission has its roots in these communities, expressions of the body of Christ in local congregations. It is here, in the congregations where you and I worship, nurtured by Word and Sacrament, that the shape of the gospel is to be seen and understood, in flesh and blood, by others. That's why it is said that "the local congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel."

People don't just want to hear about faith. They want to see what it looks like in the communities of men and women who claim and are claimed by this faith.

When participation in God's mission is placed at the heart of a congregation's life, the Living God renews and transforms us. Yet, God's mission is never something which the church confines and controls. Leslie Newbigin said this best:

> Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church its missionary journey.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches, as it plans its work following Leipzig, would do well to focus on how congregations are formed and nurtured which instill faith formation and discipleship that spiritually confront the idolatries of our time. In other words, what does it take for congregations to be shaped by their confession of faith today? How can the Communion gather, connect and strengthen such communities of faith as a means for participating in God's mission?

Such work would be different than in the past. Instead of working primarily on crafting words, we'd focus on shaping lives. Thousands of congregations in the Communion are struggling with the call to respond faithfully, in mission, to the pernicious forces shaping so much of our world. But that can't be done in isolation. Just as individual members cannot live independently from others in a local church, congregations cannot thrive in their witness if they are isolated from others. That's why we have named ourselves a "Communion."

Could we imagine ways that take seriously congregational journeys in vastly different regions and situations which all strive for costly and faithful engagement in God's mission? Could we connect such congregations in a virtual electronic community, sharing and networking together pilgrimages, and answering from their own contexts the question, "Who is Jesus Christ ***for us today***? Instead of simply Facebook, what if the Communion created "**FaithBook**"? What better way to build avenues for future emerging leaders in the Communion to find their voice and their allies?

The missional call to confess faith in today's context also points us beyond WCRC to the wider ecumenical community. This prompts us to reflect on who we mean by "us" when our theme proclaims "Living God, renew and transform us." Today, understanding the radical changes in world Christianity is essential to discerning our context for confession and mission in this time. The geographical shift in Christianity's presence in the world, now firmly placing the dominant future of

Christian faith in Africa, Latin America and Asia, is the most dramatic change of its kind in Christian history. But this is about far more than geography. Most of the Christian world is now developing its faith and witness outside the modern Western culture, and the framework of the Enlightenment, which has been Christianity's predominant home for four centuries. World Christianity is now emerging as a non-Western religion.

With this has come the rapid growth of Pentecostalism throughout the globe. One of our four Christians in the world today now identifies as a Pentecostal or charismatic believer. Similarly, other highly contextualized expressions of Christianity now are emerging in the "global South." Global evangelical bodies shaped by these changes have stances toward human rights, economic justice and climate change that overlap with the well-established ecumenical agenda. Growth in the Catholic Church is being driven primarily by those from these regions, led for the first time in over 1,000 years by a Pope from the "global South."

All this should reshape the WCRC's understanding of who constitutes "us." Solidarity with the wider church is more essential than ever in the face of growing global threats to life. This stretches our boundaries and past categories of ecumenical partners. The Communion's future outreach should be structured not as much by attention to divisions created by historic church traditions, such as Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, etc. Rather, we should address the growing cleavage between churches rooted in the "global North," with their identity as older, historic churches with a long continuity of faithful witness, and those rooted in the "global South," with their identity mostly as younger, emerging churches, with thriving vitality but often a more narrow, sectarian mindset. That division is reflected within the WCRC as well as in the whole of world Christianity.

The dominant growth of Christianity in non-Western settings also presents a new agenda of theological challenges. The WCRC, with its history of formative theological reflection in the wider ecumenical community, can contribute here as well. In the most general terms, these cultures and the churches nurtured within them begin with a different starting point from Western modernity in understanding the relationship of community to the individual. Further, their assumptions for how the spiritual and material dimensions of life relate are sharply different from those spawned by the Enlightenment. And the place of reason and rationality in understanding truth also presents a different paradigm. Despite some attempts, these differing theological and cultural

frameworks are not being adequately addressed as core issues determining how faith will be fashioned in the future.

The participation of WCRC in God's ongoing mission, then requires: 1) that the Communion network and nurture communities of missional discipleship, 2) that we expand the breadth of our ecumenical partners and 3) that we engage a fresh theological agenda and lived Christian experience emerging from the non-Western world. Such mission finds expression in solidarity with the marginalized and most vulnerable and in fact emerges from those communities. The crisis of global refugees and migration, for instance, not only makes welcoming the stranger a daily existential reality for many in our Communion. We also discover that worldwide, about half of those moving from one country to another today are Christian. An emerging, powerful migrant church is on the move as part of the unexpected expression of God's mission today. As Jehu Hanciles from Sierra Leone says, "Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary."

Moreover, when we follow the trajectory of God's Spirit leading us in mission, we are joined in God's work of redeeming the creation, so imperiled by the willful and wanton destruction of its sacred, life-sustaining capacities. Participating in mission means we are sent as God's people, crossing comfortable and constraining boundaries, and expecting God's liberating love to renew and transform individual lives, communities of discipleship, social structures and the gift of the created world.

Reflecting on our participation in *Missio Dei* today also urgently raises the challenge our relationship to those of other living faiths, outside of Christianity. How we understand and practice evangelism, our grasp of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world ahead of and beyond the church and a calling to build bonds of inter-religious fellowship and trust in resisting life-threatening forces, all are now challenges inescapably on our agenda. We are assisted here by ecumenical wisdom, and particularly the recent document by the WCC's Commission on Mission and Evangelism, titled "Together Toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes." Perhaps its most important contribution is to place an illuminating theology of the Holy Spirit at the center of our understanding of God's mission, which opens promising avenues for the WCRC's future work.

In conclusion, as we meet on this religiously historic landscape, I'm inviting our Communion to embark on a pilgrimage from Wittenberg to Filkenwalde. It's a journey from the necessity of words to the formation of lives, from the announcement of our declarations to the pronouncement of our discipleship

and from the frenzy of our activity to the building of Christian community. This pilgrimage poses these questions along the way: Are we ready to live into our identity as a *communion*, expecting that we are covenanted together as communities of faithful discipleship obedient to the kairos nature of this time? Can we truly place our commitment as the WCRC to join in the movement of God's mission, at the *center* of our Communion's life and identity? Are we willing to direct our Communion's material and spiritual resources toward learning from the practices at Finkenwalde, and all the places like that today, from Belhar to Bethlehem, and from Matanzas to Manado? Can we nurture the formation of Christian faith in communities of missional discipleship that can respond to the test of this time? And will this compel us to participate courageously and joyfully in God's reconciling and redeeming mission in the world? That is the pathway for the Living God to renew and transform us.

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Bible Study
The Canaanite – Matthew 15:21-28

Elsa Tamez

Note: In this Bible study I will use a literary resource that will make the narration advance through the use of meaningful segments. I will use the chorus as in Greek tragedy to accompany the narration (italicized text) together with the public, and this will give it a a clear structure. By this means I am calling the attention to the most fundamental aspects in this story, read and heard so many times.

Then he…

Who?

Jesus the Nazarene, David's son, the one that is more than a shaman when he cures the sick.

The one who came to reform his people

The one who questions the traditions threatening human life

The self-critical one

The one persecuted by the Jewish authorities

The one closer to God

The human face of God

After having left

Where from?

From Genesaret

From a place considered clean by tradition (14.34),

From the discussions with the experts of the law,

Discussions about the clean and the unclean

With the people coming from the great city of Jerusalem

With people who felt uneasy about Jesus' irreverent attitudes.

He left (*anaxoreō*)

He fled, escaped, went away,

(According to the dictionary of semantic domain, anaxoreō implies a distant place

In 14:13 the same Greek verb is used when Jesus goes by himself somewhere after hearing that John the Baptist had been killed.

In Mark, when Jesus goes to Tyre he does not want anyone to know about it. He wants to rest.)

Why?

We do not know why he left to a far-off place. Probably, he wanted to go away from those who did not understand his ministry. Perhaps he was simply tired after working so hard for the people in need.

Or perhaps Matthew wants to tell something important to the readers.

We do not know, we only know that he left.

Where to?

To the regions of Tyre and Sidon

To an unclean place

To Greek cities hostile to Galilee,

To rich and important cities that take advantage of the agricultural goods from the farming region of Galilee.

And look! (*idou*)

("Look," "Here she is." A discourse marker asking the reader to pay special attention.)

A woman

A woman appears in the narration, a human being that does not count among

the males in that epoch. A woman discriminated against, a lone woman

A nameless woman called by her nationality

A Canaanite woman,

The Canaanites, a despised ethnic group

> (Canaanite, a deliberately archaic name. The Phoenicians had been called Canaanites before the Hebrew occupation of their land.)

Matthew wants to bring to the readers' minds the echos of idolater and unclean inhabitants

That woman, with no name, considered as unclean and as an idolater,

She came out

Where from?

From the distant places of Tyre and Sidon. Places that were unclean among Jesus' contemporaries.

She came out from a region that was hostile to the Jews.

From a home where there was anguish and sadness

She cried out

She cried out of despair, a heartbreaking cry coming deep inside from her.

A cry that the insensitive people do not want to hear.

A cry that disturbs the people's consciousness because it makes them uncomfortable.

A cry that resembles the howling of a wounded animal.

She constantly cried out

What did she cry?

Have mercy on me!

An anguished cry coming from her heart.

Have mercy on me. Stop walking, turn around!

Here I am. I am not invisible. My cry makes me noticeable. I am running towards you. Look at me!

> (Mercy (*eleēson*). The definition of God, kindness, solidarity with people in need. The movement of the entrails, previous to mercy.)

Kyrie eleison (Chorus singing)

She was crying out.

To whom?

To the Lord.

Kyrios, the one with power to heal.

The one with no silver or gold like *kyrios* Caesar.

The one with authority before the powers of this world and the demons of this world.

The one who has no slaves but friends,

The one who sympathizes with the needy.

To whom?

To the son of David.

The one who was a shepherd before being a king.

To the small one who defeated the giant Goliath with a small stone.

David, the utopia of the people from Judaea in their yearning for a time when they would not be subject to any empire.

The David who abused his power as a king, sinned and asked to be forgiven.

The woman, what did she want?

She wanted Jesus to heal her daughter.

"My daughter is sick. My daughter is demon-possessed. My daughter is suffering terribly!"

Her daughter was no longer a person. The demon had robbed the Canaanite woman of the fruit of her womb.

"My house is in shadows. Cast out the demon possessing my daughter!"

Heal her!

A Demon?

Yes, an evil spirit possessing her, a perverse power getting inside her daughter and not letting her be herself.

An evil blinding her mind, impoverishing her spirit, taking hold of her body. A demon who deprives her of her woman's humanity.

What did Jesus do? What did he tell her?

He did not answer. He said not a word. He did not turn around to see her either. He kept walking.

> (Like the priest and the Levite passing by the wounded man from Jericho in Luke 10.25-37.)

Like many people insensitive to the pain of other cultures, Jesus also turned his back on her.

He went by as if he did not care about the woman's suffering.

He did not pay attention to her. Jesus, from whom we would have never expected such attitude, paid no attention to the woman in need of his compassion.

Why?

Because she was a pagan. She did not belong to his culture. She was different.

He felt in the trap of tradition.

Because the cultural habit was stronger than the other's pain. The pain of the different one, of the Canaanite.

Oh, no!

But just because:

He did not want to get engaged in another argument.

He was sick and tired of going against the tide.

It made him remember the hostilities between the two peoples.

Tire and Sidon were cities that considered themselves superior to the country folk of Galilee.

He did not feel like it. He was tired. There were many sick people among his own people. No more. That was it!

He was a human being, like any other Jew.

Or perhaps because Matthew wants to tell something important to his readers.

The disciples

Where were they? What did they say? What did they do?

They were walking with Jesus; they heard the heartbreaking cries of the woman. The woman that was following them, begging. The Canaanite, the person that was different.

They did not want to hear the disconcerting cries of the anonymous woman who was running like crazy.

They want to cover their ears. They do not want to see nor hear the different other.

She disturbs them, she bothers them; she makes them embarrassed.

They do not want the people to look at them because of the Canaanite.

They want her to leave, not to follow them, not to bother them. They want her to vanish, not to exist.

So that women do not bother them with home issues!

So that women do not disturb men or God!

So that the different ones get assimilated to the others!

So that women keep silent, so that there are no different people!

Send her away (Ἀπόλυσον), they said.

Send her away, tell her to go far away, tell her to leave

Send her away (Ἀπόλυσον), they said.

Set her free, cast the demon out her, listen to her …

(*Apoluō*, ambiguous Greek word that means either to send someone away so that he/she leaves or set him/her free.)

Jesus, listen to her, set her free so that she leaves. So that she does not disturb us any more.

She cries behind them.

She wants something; she insists on being heard, on being seen.

She insists with her presence and her voice:

My daughter suffers! I suffer! I am not leaving until you respond!

And she stays there, after them, insisting, crying and asking for mercy. She wants to be present like many invisible women and men, considered non-persons for belonging to stigmatized genders or ethnic groups.

She is the Canaanite, the idolatrous native,

The person uprooted after the conquest of Canaan, of America, of Asia, of Africa.

But they do not want to listen:

"Send her away, because she is crying after us."

In response, Jesus said

What did he say?

God has not sent me to save pagans, the non-Jewish, those not belonging to the people of God.

Who were you sent to save?

God has only sent me to help the people of Israel

Why save them only?

Because they are in a bad way, they need me, they look like sheep without a shepherd.

They have no one to guide them on the ways of justice. Their religious leaders oppress my people. The experts in the law divert them rather than help them, and make them obey the rules that not even they can follow. The rich think only of their riches, they do not pity the poor, the sick and the marginalized. The temple has become a cave of thieves.

I must save my people. My people need me.

The others have their own gods. Let them ask them.

And the disciples?

They did not say anything. They did not contradict him. They kept thinking.

They had no time to react.

She came before. She ran and kneeled before him.

> (*Proskeunei*. To kneel. To kneel in attitude of reverence and plea at the same time.)

What?

She kneeled before him. She bowed and begged insistently. “Please Lord, help me!”

Why did she kneel before him? She was not Jewish. She had her own religion.

She had her own religion, but she was living among the Israelites because she was a Canaanite. She had heard a lot about Jesus as a healer, as a Saviour, as the one who pities the poor and the needy. Why not help her also?

In fact, she called him Lord, not as a mere title. She recognized his lordship. He can heal, she must have thought. He is the Lord, and I have faith in God.

Who told her about him? Where did she hear that he cast out demons? Jesus' fame was spread in many places of Palestine and even out of the Jewish territory.

She must have thought that by getting closer to him and daring to talk to him, by begging him, he would take pity on her and her daughter. I have to insist. I have to be inopportune. My daughter is a human being that deserves being restored.

What did he say?

He refused to save her daughter. He said something nasty. He called her "dog".

> ("Dog" was a serious insult used by the Jews of that epoch to refer to pagans. The little dog was an unclean animal. Jesus uses the diminutive (*kunariov*) to refer to the domesticated little dogs living in a house. In Philippians 3:2 Paul, who was a Jew, ironically used the term "dog" (*kyōn*) without diminutive, meaning wild dogs, to refer to the group of Jews demanding the circumcision of the Gentiles. That is, he used the insult in return.)

Jesus told her: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their little dogs."

This was a very cultural reaction on the part of the Jews to refer to the Gentiles. What Jesus told his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." And he told the Canaanite woman in a derisive way: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their little dogs."

We, as readers, get surprised. How can Jesus react in such a negative and selfish way? We did not expect this from him. Chiefly, after the discussion he had with the religious leaders of his people, who criticized him for not washing his hands, for not following the rules of cleanliness and impurity. Here Jesus reacts like them. Or, perhaps, he reacts like this just because of such a discussion where it is exactly demonstrated how far from God are their religious leaders, tied to their traditions and diverting their people's attention from what was truly important. Jesus had to reform the leaders out of compassion for his people.

But what about the rest, and what about the women, the non-Jewish women in need? They, who also had faith in him, who wanted to eat bread because they were not satisfied with the bread of their own bakery. Were they left out?

In fact, this answer by Jesus was surprising, but the Canaanite woman's answer caused more surprise and admiration. Jesus did not expect it.

What did she say?

The Canaanite woman answered by saying:

"Yes, Lord. But even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

The Canaanite recognizes the Jews' privileged position. They are the lords who are given the bread. She recognizes that the pagans have a secondary role in the history of salvation. She also recognizes Jesus' lordship because she calls him Lord. But at the same time she recognizes that those from outside, the pagans, can also eat the food falling from the table. They, the Gentiles, live in the house, in the village created by God, and they are God's creatures. Why not eat from the same blessings that God has for his people?

The Canaanite woman reasons differently from the Syrophoenician woman appearing in Mark.

Why?

> (The Gospel according to Mark was written before the gospel of Matthew. The Gospel according to Matthew was written about 15 years later; the temple no longer existed for it had been destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. The Pharisees unified Judaism in defense for survival. Jesus' followers, who believed he was the Messiah, had been expelled from the synagogue and they were seen as people who did not preserve their traditions. Matthew, probably written by a scribe follower of Jesus, asserts in his Gospel that Jesus' followers are also Abraham's descendants and that they follow the traditions reread in the light of the Messiah, that is Jesus. Therefore, Judaism, a wide and flexible current before the destruction of the temple, was later narrowed to a trend led by the Phrisees. Matthew wants to show that they are also Jews in their own right. That makes the Canaanite woman recognize the Jews as the lords, the owners of bread. The Syrophoenician woman in Matthew is very different. She belongs to the

Greek culture; she has a higher social class. She is not called Cannanite and she preserves her culture and religion. The Syrophoenician woman claims the crumbs for the gentiles, even for those who still preserve their non-Jewish faith. To the answer of the Syrophoenician woman Jesus remarks in Mark, "For such a reply (for your logos) your daughter is healed." Matthew however, presents her from the beginning as a pagan believer, with great faith.)

How did Jesus react before the Canaanite woman's answer?

He was deeply impressed. He did not expect such answer.

In a very intelligent way she uses Jesus' discourse refusing to heal her daughter and changes it. She also extends it to cover the non-Jews as well (the little dogs eat the lords' crumbs, the crumbs falling from their table). She changes Jesus' derisive phrasing and transforms it into an intimate scene inside a home where there is room for everybody. It is not a question of taking something from someone to give it to somebody else, but of everybody eating at the same time, although some with greater privilege for being Jews. Jesus says it is not right to take away from the children what belongs to them and toss it to the little dogs, to whom it does not belong; to toss it means that they are outside; that is, that those outside are depriving the people inside from their right. But she imagines and describes a different scene. She puts the little dogs inside the house, together with the owners of the bread and both groups are eating at the same time, for the children can share the bread and they can all eat it at the same time. There can be enough bread of life for everyone.

The Canaanite woman opens Jesus' eyes and makes him understand that healing her daughter does not change his mission; that it is not a question of putting some people aside to take care of the others. He is just widening his mission, because everyone is God's creature.

You have great faith!

You have great faith! (like an echo)

Jesus surprised, moved and probably grateful tells her, "Woman you have great faith!" or "What great trust you have in God."

It is true, she had faith; she put trust in God. She knew that she had to persevere, that Jesus had to change his vision, that the marginalized of other peoples could also be agreeable in the eyes of God and blessed.

She insisted, knelt, begged. She made him reason by her discourse.

How interesting that it was not the compassion and tenderness always shown by Jesus towards the other's suffering, but the arguments of the woman, that impacted him and made him change his mind. This is very important; Jesus the Messiah, the Lord, can change his opinion. If he can do that everybody can change their frames of mind. Jesus refused three times before her plea. Firstly he did not say a single word in response to her cry asking for mercy. (v. 23); secondly, he said said no to his disciples, the intercessors of suffering, who just wanted her to leave. He tells them I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (v. 24) and thirdly, he denies it to her, personally, when she begs on her knees. "It is not right to take their childrens' bread and toss it to the little dogs." But she made him change his mind. From that moment on Jesus is opened to the non-Jews. The same chapter ends with the multiplication of bread in the same Galilee. There they share seven loaves of bread and some fish to feed a great crowd, more than 4,000 people. Once the crowd was satisfied there are seven other baskets left. In Hebrew numerology, number seven means full, integral. There were not 12 more baskets in reference to the 12 tribes of Israel, but seven, the perfect number including the Gentiles. Number four means the four cardinal points in reference to the universe. This makes it clear that Matthew is telling the readers that Jesus came to renew not only the Jews but also the Gentiles.

Do as you wish

Do as you wish (like an echo)

At the end it was done the way she wanted. She wanted her daughter to come back to life, to cast the demon out of her, of her house, and she succeeded. It was not easy for her. Her voice, her tears, her kneeling and her clear and quick mind made possible what was most precious to her. Her daughter was healed by Jesus. She wanted it, and she got it.

From that moment on the Canaanite woman's daughter was healed.

The Canaanite woman's daughter was healed (like an echo)

This story is not meant as a spectacular miracle. It was a healing done at a distance. That is why the story is not told as a miracle. The story is intended to show something else, something that will change the course of Jesus' ministry. The center of the story is the argumentation, the dialogue between him, the Messiah of Galilee and the woman, a Canaanite with a bright mind. She knows

what she wants, she knows who she is, and achieves what she wants. She is not looking for selfish whims, but for a life and death issue. Jesus said: "Your request is granted." And it was done as she wished. In the house of that mother and daughter, of the different ones, light shone again.

Light shone again. (strong and assertive)

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Instructions for the presentation of the Bible study

Letters in **bold type** and regular text: Leader (Elsa Tamez)

Italics: a ten-person chorus

Parenthetical text: explanation that is not part of the text of the narration (a person should be chosen for this)

Elsa Tamez is a Mexican-born feminist and liberation theologian. She is emeritus professor of the Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana *(San José, Costa Rica) and author of* The Bible of the Oppressed*.*

Keynote: Strengthening Communion

Collin Cowan

Introduction

With great delight and a sense of privilege, I bring greetings and best wishes to this General Council on behalf of the Council for World Mission. Council for World Mission is an international mission organization, committed to working ecumenically in addressing contextual issues that we believe the God of life is concerned about. CWM is committed to working with local church communities, various organizations and people's movements across local communities and international borders, because of our conviction that God is at work in and through these and other media to proclaim the good news and practice life in fullness through Christ for all creation.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is one of the organizations with which CWM has established a solid working relationship, and we are indeed grateful for the opportunity for this level of partnership. Over the years we have worked together on issues such as gender justice, partnership of women and men in mission, justice in the economy and the Earth and, since the last General Council, on the audacious journey of imagining a New International Financial and Economic Architecture, a journey that involves also the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. In this partnership, we share the best of who we are and what we have to advance God's mission, and the most valuable of these resources are the indispensable gifts of people and ideas and experiences that can enrich our lives and encourage us in our struggle and search for meaning. We give thanks to God that our partnership is defined by mutual respect, commitment to God's mission and a shared vision of fullness of life through Christ for all creation.

I have accepted this invitation to offer input into the theme conversation on strengthening communion, conscious of my limitations but mindful that we are an integral part of the Communion. Twenty-nine of the thirty-two member churches of CWM are also members of WCRC. Your president, two of your vice presidents and several of your executive members are also part of the CWM family. I, myself, have served on the Executive of WARC from Accra to Grand Rapids. We are in it together.

I come at this theme from a missional perspective, given that CWM is a missional organization, "called to partnership in Christ to mutually challenge, encourage and equip churches to share in God's mission" (CWM's mission statement). CWM

has determined that mission has to be interpreted within contexts of peoples struggle and search for meaning and in the context where creation groans at the injustices that infest the Earth. We believe that God's gift of hope is that which inspires us to radical engagement with the world as we know it to the end that healing may be experienced by all and peace become the new basis for life in community, which I regard as the sum total of communion. In this presentation, therefore, I will invite us to consider three movements:

- Communion as a call to being and doing
- Communion as counter-empire
- Communion as transformative praxis

Communion as a call to being and doing

In the concept paper on strengthening communion the critical question seems to be whether the strength of the Communion is an end in itself, becoming bigger and more united; or whether strength is a means to an end, that end being capacity for transformative praxis in response to *Missio Dei*—the will to discerning and doing God's mission in the context of a groaning creation. So, I declare my intention at the beginning that I share the view of the writers that:

> ...if the communion being sought in one that leads to engagement in risky boundary crossing discipleship, reaching out and sharing fullness of life (John 10:10) and building life-giving relationships with others—this form of Reformed communion is good news (SC- 2).

WCRC's confessional position on justice and communion finds resonance with CWM. "Called to communion, committed to justice" are opposite sides of the same coin in the understanding of CWM. In the ongoing discourse, within WCRC's circle, we say, "there can be no justice without communion and no communion without justice." It may be argued, however, that if we are called to one and simply committed to the other, the impression may be given that one is an imperative and the other a mere interest. Such redaction would be unhealthy, and therefore I call our attention to the concept paper, which states:

> If the goal of communion is to do what the Lord requires of you, then the mandate is to "...do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (SC - 3).

I agree. In my understanding, embedded in the very identity of the Reformed community is the understanding that communion is both the result and the doing of peace and that there can be no peace without justice. In his address to this General Council, the German Federal President calls the Communion to "foster peaceful dialogue and to very consciously underline the power of religion to promote peace and reconciliation and most importantly, to be an example of this themselves." This poignant call comes against the backdrop of what he calls the misuse of religion "as a means of isolation and distance... as a pretext for the most brutal acts of violence." The president is right; this is a call to be a communion in which our identity and lifestyle are marked by peace, and our engagement is that of peace-making; it is to be and do that makes us a Communion. Therefore, holding in creative tension the call to be a justice community and fixing its gaze on communion as God's indisputable intention for God's creation, makes the WCRC a Christian organization that fully understands and embraces *Missio Dei* as both koinonia and diakonia. If we were to accept such an understanding then WCRC would see that its identity and vocation are inextricably intertwined; and that as disciples of Christ, who we are and what we do are inseparable.

We live in a world where the quest for profit takes precedence over value for life and the common good; where life-saving actions such as access to medication, food and safety are unashamedly weighed against the bottom line and often denied. We are witnesses to a regression from advances we thought we had made against the violence of racism, nationalism and many other ideologies of supremacy. Gender-based violence scourges our communities; we struggle with the inclusion of persons living with disability or with embracing persons of different sexual orientation—all this in spite of the abundance of dehumanizing legacies littered across history and living memory. As we grapple with the present evil of extremism, we are reminded of how much we need each other—our partnership, our faith, and our hope in God—to not be overcome. It is for this reason that the importance of relationships of integrity and the commitment to encounters and engagements with the diversity of our existence cannot be overstated.

WCRC and CWM have been challenged and enriched by each other; we share a partnership that is based on reciprocity, where our values and passion for justice define the relationship; our staff join each other in thinking through the meaning of life in the midst of turmoil and planning ways of response in light of the call of Jesus of Nazareth to join him in establishing at alternative community, based on justice and peace, a community in which all are accepted and embraced and

none refused or excluded. I am pleased to affirm that CWM remains committed to this partnership, as together we discern and devote ourselves to doing God's mission in the context of empire.

Understanding the context in which we do mission is important to the question of communion; because unless we are prepared to confront the death-dealing ideologies that divide and destroy we are only making a mockery of the meaning and import of communion. Without being willing and ready to name the context in which we do mission, to critique it and confront it, we run the risk of playing the usual ecumenical politics, claiming that bigger is better even when size is no more than parading ourselves as paragons of virtue in the name of unity. This is the kind of attitude that Jesus rejected in the teachers of the law and the Pharisees when he called them "...white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside, are full of the bones of the dead..." (Matthew 23:27). The call to Communion is a call to "come out from among..." and be the "light of the world" that leads the way for all and to all. This is what leads to my second movement, Communion as counter-empire.

Communion as counter-empire

Now I know that the language of empire has been challenging for some of us; but it is important that we take the time to wrestle with it as it surely informs our conversation on the place of justice in communion, as a matter of faith; and the challenges of living out that faith in a context hostile to communion. CWM makes bold to name empire as the context in which we do mission. And we have adopted the definition of empire from the joint Globalisation Project of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa and Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany as:

> a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed—the worship of money, goods, and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a

> spirit lacking in compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.

We have also taken into consideration the definition of empire given at the 2004 Accra General Council of the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which states that:

> Empire is the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.

Naming empire as the context in which CWM does mission is the result of our calculated wrestling with the Accra Confession, our reading of the signs of the time and our discernment of what God is saying to us as an agent of God's mission. Accra, 2004, was a watershed moment in the life of the Christian community. Our visit to the Elmina Castle, the slave dungeon, confronted us with the cruelty and callousness of humanity against itself; with our raw emotions in the face of such hostility; and with the harsh reality of the existence of a dormant anger, for which we little knew we had the capacity. Confronted with the ferocity of such hostile history, and mindful that even as we met, the forces of systemic evil continued to rear its ugly head, the WARC General Council named empire as the source of such evil; challenged the church to rise from complicity for the sake of the faith we profess; and declared that "never again" would we stand aside and allow such evil to dominate and decimate God's creation (See the Accra Confession for more on this subject).

In a joint WARC/CWM 2006 consultation in Malaysia, called to think through how we might live out the Accra Confession, we accepted that "we are driven towards a state of madness by the forces of domination, the logic of empire (C 19) and the neo-liberal temptation to worship mammon, not God (AC 22)," and we declared that:

> The Accra Confession's great challenge for churches in our time is to reclaim the true theological and biblical meaning and activities of economy (oikonomia), from the way it has been distorted, indeed poisoned, by the modern neo-liberal economy. Theological concepts such as trust, riches, fidelity, bond, exchange, saving, fiduciary, even business—in Chinese (Seng Yi) literally "meaning of life"—have been co-opted by the dominant neo-liberal economy, and must be reclaimed or rescued by the churches (From the statement produced at the 2006 consultation).

In 2010 CWM developed its theological statement, which points to Jesus who conducted his mission in the context of empire; and who not only set the example for us to follow but called us to join him in that mission (CWM theology statement, Mission in the context of Empire, 2010).

Today CWM remains resolute that empire is alive and that it is in such a context that we do mission. We are conscious of the death-dealing systems that seek to replace God with itself; to "own the earth and everything in it," and to do whatever it pleases with impunity. We see manifestations of empire all around us, and we recognize them by the trail of social dislocation, sense of powerlessness and vulnerabilities it creates in its wake. For sixty years, generations have been born and taught to accept the Cuban embargo as a just cause in a fight for human rights. We have not been told that it is a punishment for defiance, retaliation against loss of economic control. If it were truly all about a noble protest against human rights abuses, then where is the embargo for all the rich oil producing countries where public executions are commonplace, and women are second class citizens? Where is the embargo for the cruel apartheid system happening right now in occupied Palestine? Where is the embargo for the infanticide and forced sterilizations of China's thirty-five years of one-child policy? And yet, the little move that has been made to bring about a better working relationship between Cuba and the USA is under threat by the Trump Administration. Empire divides and weakens.

It is for such reasons that I argue that Communion is counter-empire; the two cannot walk together because there is a fundamental ideological dissonance between the one and the other. Communion is counter-empire because communion exposes empire; communion expresses a theological conviction that in God's oikos there is a place for all, whilst empire feathers the powerful at the expense of the majority. Empire is based on "lordless domination" and "destructive self-interest;" communion is based on relationships of integrity and trust, spiritualities of hospitality and generosity of spirit and a commitment to the journey of healing and hope.

Communion as transformative praxis

The call to communion is a call to become a united force, a life-giving and life-affirming community, equipped and energized to join Jesus in his radical love for the world. "By this shall all people know that you are my disciples if you love one another." This agape is neither self-serving nor self-seeking; instead it is a love that takes us into the trenches of immense pain and loneliness to which the

social untouchables are relegated, compels us to cross barriers of arrogance and prejudice and to interrogate and challenge ideologies of supremacy and invites us to embrace the likes of Mary Magdala, so eloquently applied to contemporary realities and presented earlier in this General Council. Communion defined by this love knows that justice is at the heart of faith and that its very reason for being is to partner with God in the radical work of renewal and transformation—to heal the breaches and inspire hope.

In his very moving presentation to this General Council Jürgen Moltmann challenged us to consider that "the ecumenical movement is missing the Reformation agenda." I agree that the Reformation agenda is being stymied by our love for remaining the way we are and maintaining the way we are viewed, irrespective of how many categories are created and excluded in the process. We say that it is in the interest of the unity of the church; but I fear that true unity, true communion is being compromised, even sacrificed by this "colonization of the imperial logic."

The greatest paralysis facing the world today is the belief that what we are doing is right. Whether it is the United States or the Philippines or North Korea or China or Russia or Israel or Indonesia, governments and peoples alike all believe that we are right in what we are doing; that the system may need a little tweaking here and there, but it is good enough to sustain us for the long haul; that poverty is the result of laziness; and that corruption is the reason for such a thing as underdeveloped or developing countries. Even the Christian community has been sold into this imperial logic and as such our capacity for counter-cultural, counter-empire engagement is crippled to the point of impotence. The world is gone mad with the lust for power, the love of money and a callous indifference to the plight of God's creation.

Based on this extremely disturbing description, my simple argument is this: A faith community that talks about hope as the language of life and the embodiment of a future (CWM), a faith community that talks about a pilgrimage of justice and peace (WCC) and a faith community that prays for renewal and transformation (WCRC) cannot at the same time close its eyes to the fact that our whole society is being "colonized by this imperial logic" and that all our decisions and dreams are based on a death-dealing culture. If there is to be a future, then there must be a counter-imperial social order and ideology, one that stands in striking opposition to the present order. Imperial ideologies can be resisted if faith communities, such as the church, are sufficiently conscientised to the root of the issue and challenged to a different way of engagement with this

broken system. The call to communion is a call to discipleship, and this means that we must be prepared to stand with the Jesus of Nazareth who confronted the power of the day with a radical message and lifestyle of an alternative way of being and doing. As a Communion, we are people of hope and future, and as such, we must be prepared to present ourselves as a true re-presentation of Jesus of Nazareth and imagine and pursue together the alternative for which he lived and died. As a Communion, we are the embodiment of the alternative; this means that we must be prepared to model the alternative by creating safe spaces and sanctuaries of healing and hope for all and by confronting the demon of exclusion with a strong message of No. Communion is an antidote to hostility, inhospitality, callousness and indifference; therefore we are a people who embrace and embody values of justice in relationships, mutuality, equality and interdependence, unity in diversity and generosity of spirit. We are a Communion because we are disciples of Christ, called to a communitarian lifestyle, which is in striking contrast to the death-dealing paradigm of this present social order. The call to communion is a call to transformative praxis, to be "salt of the earth," beacon of hope and stewards of peace.

In his study of *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and Practice of Communism* Nicholas Sagovsky[1] examines the significance of communion for contemporary ecumenical theology, tracing the development of contemporary understanding in critical engagement with the thoughts of great thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, the Scriptures and also Augustine of Hippo. Of particular interest are the reflections on the practice of communion which in reference to ecumenism, is described as "a gift to be received and a discipline to be cultivated in the continuing practice of ecumenism." Reflecting on the various thoughts against the realities of human communion, it is a recurring theme that upon the realization of the fragility of our human relationships—our broken communion, and yet conscious of an inherent longing for a koinonia that cannot be broken—"a shared communion with God that can be traced back to the beginning of time and forward to its ending." In our human experience, we must observe that communion involves conflict, reconciliation and risk. However, among believers or between communities of believers, although the same dynamics persist, they "are explicitly set against an eschatological horizon of unbreakable communion, the unbroken co-inherence of the Trinity."

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1 Sagovsky, Nicholas. *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Sagovsky points to the sacrificial ministry and death of Jesus as the paradigm of earthly conflict, risk and reconciliation. He takes us back to Jesus' lonely ministry where even his own disciples failed to understand him when he articulated the will of God for his life, and, at times, withheld their support when he most needed it. The scene of the garden of Gethsemane portrays vividly the call for total commitment to sustained koinonia that flows from the unwavering conviction of God's will for God's creation. It is the sobering cry of Jesus, at the realization that not only must he face his death without his beloved disciples at his side, but now seeks to know why must God forsake him also. "It is at this point at which communion can only be sustained as it were 'one-sidedly', whether by the fidelity of God to the one who experiences no communion" or even as it has been described in the presentation of Rev. Dr. Zakariah earlier of the encounter of enslaved Africans with Christ in the belly of slave ships and amidst the horrors they were met with on the American shores, "by the fidelity of the forsaken to the God who forsakes." I use here the example of the enslaved Africans, but there are many others, including, for instance, post-Holocaust Jewish theology as mentioned by the author.

Conclusion

This General Council gathers under the theme: "Living God, renew and transform us." This is a most apt theme, which I know came about through a collective process of discernment. The theme appropriately locates renewal and transformation in the hands of the living God and places also, in those hands, the people of God as mere clay. The theme identifies God as not just capable but willing and ready to mould us into vessels of compassion, with a hunger for peace and justice, and a vision of communion of all creation—life-giving and life-affirming communities in which there is a place for all.

Sagovsky argues that "the unity of the churches will not come through the steady flow of ecumenical agreed statements that spell out the virtues of koinonia, though they have their part to play. The way forward must include the practice of a common life, which provides a context for the continuing debate." He proposes that

> ...it is vital that when the moments of discouragement, of apparently irreconcilable difference come, that the effort to build *koinonia* continues, even at the risk (even experience) of separation. What makes such risk-taking possible is the presence of the Spirit, for the substance of relation is the substance of the Spirit; and it is the presence of the Spirit in each human

> encounter, whether between individuals or communities, whether for a moment or miraculously sustained, whether in agreement or disagreement, which makes each such encounter a moment of hope. It is the activity of the Spirit that generates the common life; ...it is the worship of (God) and the service of the world that bears witness to this common life as a koinonia in the life of the triune God.

CWM joins WCRC in this radical prayer of resistance, hope and submission; and pledges its hopeful actions of solidarity and engagement towards fullness of life for all and the experience of Communion.

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Bible Study
Acts 2:1-21, 37-39

Mitri Raheb

The story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts (2:1-13) is one of the most powerful stories in the New Testament. For us in the Middle East and Jerusalem this is a foundational text for our identity in Palestine. The church was born in Jerusalem, in the then-occupied Palestine. It was not born in Rome, Constantinople nor Geneva, and certainly not in Hannover. It was not born in any of the regional capitals of the region, like Alexandria or Babylon, but in occupied Jerusalem. Let's hope that in a liberated Jerusalem, Jerusalem will be the seat for all ecumenical bodies. Let's pray that the next move of the WCRC will be to no other city but to East Jerusalem in Palestine.

This text is also foundational for our identity as Palestinian Arab Christian. I challenge groups always to guess when the gospel was first proclaimed in Arabic. Their guess usually is the 19th century or Late Middle Ages. They are shocked when I refer them to Acts 2, verse 11. According to this verse, Arabic was one of the languages heard at Pentecost 2000 years ago. Today Arabic has beoame almost a synonym for Muslim. But not all Arabs are Muslims nor are all Muslims Arabs. In fact the largest Muslim countries in the world today are non-Arab countries, Indonesia being the largest. On the other hand, not all Arabs are Muslims. In fact, Arab Christianity is older than Islam. The Quran itself testifies to that, and there is serious research suggesting that the Quran was intended originally as a contextualized Arab Christian liturgy before it developed to be a Holy Book for a new religion. Without doubt, it was Christians who were so much involved in developing the Arabic language, that become the language of the Quran, in the first five centuries *anno Domini*. This development was parallel to similar development of the Coptic, Armenian and other Middle Eastern languages. Today there are around 15 million Christians in the Middle East for whom Arabic is their mother tongue.

But the story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts (2:1-13) is in its essence a counter narrative to the narrative of the empire. The narrative of the empire is found in Genesis (11:1-9) in the story of the Tower of Babel, where a mighty empire with a strong economy reaches to heaven and with one language holds the empire together. Behind a single language is an imperial quest that leads all too often to a totalitarian system.

This is exactly what Alexander the Great and the Greeks tried to do with imposing Koine Greek and Hellenistic culture on their conquered peoples. Alexander and company had the ambitious plan to pour all tribes and groups into one gigantic melting pot. The outcome of this forceful unification was utter confusion. The empire fell apart and dissolved. The Romans tried the same experiment by imposing their *Pax Romana* on the conquered countries and were no more successful. *Pax Romana* was a propaganda tagline of the empire trying to silence the many resistance movements across the empire.

The Byzantine emperor, Constantine, thought that by forcing one creed at Chalcedon he could unite his empire behind one emperor and one faith. A single Greek formulated creed was supposed to be the theological glue that holds the empire together. The Byzantine Empire became hostile to the local and national expressions of Christianity in Egypt, greater Syria, Armenia, etc. The Oriental identities and expressions of faith—Coptic, Aramaic, Assyrian, Armenian—were thus declared heretical and were alienated. The ecumenical movement today, centuries later, is still suffering from this forceful imperial unification.

The Arabs tried to push their language on to the Berbers of North Africa and on central Asian countries, but that led to the opposite effect—of less identification with their empire by those tribes. The Soviets in turn tried the same and their empire too cracked and disintegrated.

This issue is central for a Middle East which is pluralistic in nature. No single empire has been able to force the region into uniformity. There was never a single Catholic Church that monopolized the Christian faith in the Middle East but rather national churches: Copts, Syriac, Marinates, Greeks, etc., each worshipping in their own native language and possessing, as they do today, a distinct cultural identity. The same is true for Islam. It, too, has different expressions according to different regions: Shiite, Sunni, Alawite, Druze, etc. All efforts to forcefully unify them have come to naught.

The Middle East continues to be one of the most diverse regions in the world with multiple ethnicities, religious affiliations and plural identities. For any empire this was and is a challenge—a challenge because the region resisted all attempts of forceful inclusion. Their local, cultural and "national" identities are so deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of people. A forceful unification that comes at the cost of their identity doesn't create a sense of belonging but the opposite. Empires fail because they often believe that military power and imperial propaganda is enough to control people. They deny conquered people the right

to preserve their language, to develop their own identity, to protect their dignity and to give them the needed space to exercise their self-determination.

On the other hand, empires were forever keen to exploit the diversity of the conquered people by playing one group against the other and ensure that the region remained preoccupied with internecine fighting so that the empire's job of control was easier. This is part and parcel of colonial history in the Middle East. Prior to World War I the West assisted the Arabs against the Turks; today the West is pitting Sunni Muslims against Shiite Muslims. Identity politics in the Middle East today are a successful tool to expedite the arms race in the region and to close gigantic military deals. The tower of Babylon is the best and clearest symbol of empire.

The story of Pentecost is both a critique of empire as well as an alternative vision. Jerusalem becomes the counter narrative to empire. Here, on otherwise contested and occupied land, not far from the battleground, various nations and cultures meet. They come from all corners of the *oikumene*: "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrdne; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs." This represents the entire *oikumene* at the time of Luke, from Persia in the east to Tunisia in the west, from Rome in the north to Egypt in the south including Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. Luke mentions Cretans and Arabs last to indicate that islanders and nomads of the desert are included. No one is left out. No group is excluded.

These diverse groups use their own native languages and do not adhere to the language of the empire. Their identities are respected and embraced. With all these diverse languages one would expect confusion, misunderstandings and even wars. Communication is not only difficult but almost impossible. Yet, the Spirit provides a kind of a software (almost an app "voice translator") for translation and communication so that they understand each other.

Based on this Lukan vision, the role of the native language became key to Christian mission. While in traditional Judaism the Bible was to be read in Hebrew, and in Islam the Quran can be recited only in Arabic and no translation is allowed, in Christianity each people have "to hear the gospel in their own native language." God wants to speak to us in the languages in which we dream. This understanding of Acts 2 became key to Protestant theology—Protestant theologians from Wycliffe in England to Lefevre in France to Luther in Germany.

In a context where Latin was the language of the ruling and oppressing empire (described often as Babylon) the Bible translation became a tool of resistance and liberation. While celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we do not do the Reformation justice if we understood what happened in Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, Edinburgh or northern Italy as a mere religious revival. This was a resistance movement to empire, and the translation of the Bible was one tool of resistance. God had to speak the language of the people and not the language of empire.

This is why the Bible was translated so far into more than 2500 different languages. In fact without Bible translation some languages would not exist in written form. This is not only true for tribal languages only but for most languages as well. The translation of the Bible and the development of written languages went hand in hand, not only in Coptic and Armenian as indicated before, but in most European languages as well. There is an interrelation between the King James Bible translation and the development of the standard English language, between Luther translation of the Bible into German and the development of the modern German language, etc.

In the Pentecost story the rich diversity of the region is embraced and celebrated. It is regarded as a strength rather than a deficiency. The multiple identities of the region are viewed not as contradictions, but as a treasure to save. It is the uniformity of the empire that is the glue to keep things together but rather the unity within diversity. In Jerusalem the people from the different communities from the vast *oikumene* "stood" on equal footing. This equality and the respect of diverse identities is the foundation of the new vision of the new *oikumene*. It is good to see that there are six different supported and equal languages at this WCRC assembly.

The moment Pentecost was taken out of its original context it became a nice story without any particular significance. It became a tale about speaking in tongues, and thus lost its contextual relevance. The church born in Jerusalem was meant to counter the empire; not by creating another but by providing a new vision of a different possible world.

Living God transform us!

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