



WCRC Working Paper: “What Does God Require from Us”: Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of Covid-19 and Beyond

We live in a moment of history that presents us with the conflation of at least three calamitous manifestations: (a) a climate emergency which has brought us face to face with the total destruction of the Earth and the extinction of life as we know it. The devastation of the rainforests, the burning Amazon, the desertification of Sub-Saharan Africa, the rising seas drowning Pacific Islands, the floods, hurricanes, and heat waves are the evidence of humankind’s hubris to undo what God has created. (b) Today, in far too many cases, national politics is dominated by narrow, ethnic (sometimes Christian) nationalisms, racism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, legitimized bigotry, and religious zealotry. Globally, we are not faring any better. Foreign policies are characterized by bullying instead of respectful negotiation; forceful capitulation instead of common understanding; enforced submission instead of equal partnership; reckless lawlessness instead of respect for international law. Rabid ethnic and religious nationalism instead of inclusive global security, and xenophobic rage instead of an understanding of our common humanity. Imperialist expansionism instead of peaceful co-existence; destructive, unbridled neo-liberal capitalist exploitation instead of planetary security; internationalized thuggery instead of the promotion and protection of human rights, and nationalistic vanity instead of global servanthood. It is a form of international political vandalism. c) President Trump, who seems to regard himself as the chosen leader of all this, is presiding over a decaying empire. And as with all empires facing its own ignominious end, it presents an even greater danger to the world and to its own people, whom it can no longer distinguish from those it regarded as enemies.

On top of all these comes the coronavirus, ushering in crises of fear, uncertainty, and a devastation not seen before. Over against all of it seems to be one force: the global revolution against injustice, imperialist violence, and greed, and for life, global solidarity and human dignity. Our response, therefore, is not simply to a crisis, but to the whole complex of crises

upon us today. A complex system of dominant and dominating power coalescing to what we dare to name as global apartheid. An exclusionary, exploitative system of death, a scandalous order of a world fallen among thieves.

The coronavirus has itself destroyed the myth that the pandemic is “the great equalizer.” It has not only exposed the criminal inequalities in health care. It has exposed all the entrenched structural, institutional, and systemic economic, social and political inequalities, and the incessant, comprehensive war against the poor and vulnerable, globally and nationally. Whether we are talking about people of colour in the US, UK, and Europe, or Native Americans in the US, Canada, Bolivia, Brazil, or Chile, the racial element in all this, nationally and globally, is now undeniable. Experts say that poverty, hunger, diseases, and violence exacerbated by the pandemic, including gender-based violence, may dwarf the number of those dying of the virus itself. All this flies in the face of the calls for solidarity the World Health Organization pleads for every day. Oxfam calls it “a care crisis.” The WHO calls it a “moral and political crisis.” Thirty years ago, Jürgen Moltmann spoke of “a God crisis.” It seems more relevant now than ever.

The poor are facing intensifying calamities at every level – from criminal neglect by governments to joblessness to evictions; from overwhelming and unpayable debt to illness and death in vastly disproportionate numbers. To say nothing of spiritual despair. They are drowning in a river of escalating impoverishment, while the rich are not only getting richer, but are profiting shamelessly from the virus itself. Jeff Bezos’s 13 billion dollar profit in one day just a few weeks ago is staggering, but really only a drop in the bucket of wealth collection and expansion during these times. Meanwhile, by the end of this year, 12,000 people will die of hunger every day – most of them in the Global South, and in the Third World of the empire.

In the search for a vaccine we hope will stem the tide, and even turn the forward rush of the virus, the rich have already secured their own safety. The United States has cornered the market for the vaccine by securing contracts worth almost \$7 billion with four pharmaceutical companies for 400 million doses of these vaccines. Other rich countries, like the UK, are doing the same. Poor countries are not only way down the line, they are completely out of sight. Never before has Global Apartheid been so glaring. All the subtlety and obfuscation is gone.

All this is truthful, if painful description of what the Accra Confession calls “a scandalous world,” only 100 times worse. The Accra Confession is our own creation, and it is solid ground to return to in the World Communion’s efforts to respond, and to help our churches respond to the multiple crises we are facing. But the urgency is fierce. So I suggest that in our application of Accra today, we must be done with the harmful civility of theological compromise and pacification. We should no longer be hesitant in our embrace of the radical Reformed tradition and of the radical Calvin. On this basis, we must take a clear, firm stand against the harmful fundamentalist theologies mostly imported from outside to which our people in the Global South have been subjected, and which have caused great harm to our societies. These too, the virus has exacerbated. We must learn to open ourselves to the wisdom of indigenous traditions and religions to which many of our people in indigenous communities are now turning in order to create new ways of common understanding, solidarity and action.

Accra is clear: we see the world “through the eyes of the powerless and suffering,” because we know that the real scandalousness of this world is only seen through the eyes of those who see it from the bottom of the well. Paragraphs 5 and 28 speak of “the cries of the people.” But Calvin taught us that when the oppressed cry “How Long?” it is “as if God hears Godself cry.” The cries of the poor are actually the cries of God. Par. 5 speaks of “the woundedness of the people and of creation,” but Calvin also speaks of the woundedness of God. Every injustice inflicted upon God’s children, is a wound inflicted upon God. In doing deeds of justice we are then not only healing God’s wounded children, we are healing the wounds of God. Par. 6 reminds us to look at the “root causes” of the scandalous condition. So our critique of “unjust economic conditions” must become unvarnished, pointed, and well-informed critique of neoliberal capitalism in all its forms. Any response to the coronavirus must not just include a call for a Reconstruction Fund, it must include a call for the immediate cancellation of all Third World debt. The work for a Jubilee Year with all its political and moral implications must be urgently revived. (lev. 25, the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our debts” revisited.)

Yet in the midst of all these death-dealing realities is a sign of hope – and I see that in the global Black Lives Matter revolution against empire in the streets of cities and towns across

the world. In all their interracial, inter-gender, international inclusiveness they are a hopeful, courageous, iconoclastic energy against submission to empire and against hopelessness. The revolt against the lynching of black bodies is revolt against the lynching of hopeful, meaningful life. This is the world revolution Martin Luther King Jr. saw beginning to unfold in his day, and called for people of goodwill to be “on the right side of the revolution.” It is a revolution described by Indian lay theologian M.M. Thomas as “the demand of the people for *power as the bearer of dignity* and for significant and *responsible participation in society and social history*.” It is the power of the powerless wresting power from the hands of the powerful. It is the living out of the Magnificat in our times today. It is, in every sense of the word, a Kairos moment.

So the question for the World Communion is not whether there is a revolution going on, but on which side of the revolution are we? What does it mean to “follow Jesus of Nazareth” as Accra demands? The question is not whether we can discern the signs of the times. Those signs are all too clear. The question rather, said M. M. Thomas, is whether “Christians can see God at work through the revolutions of the world” and whether we are “in the grip of the essential truth” that it is about justice, dignity, life, and the creation of a new humanity.

Accra quite deliberately aligns itself with the Confession of Belhar. But are we ready to show the difference between a Confessing Church and a church with a confession? For Belhar that means “that the church is called to stand where God stands: namely with the poor and oppressed, and against *any and all* forms of injustice.” Standing with them means standing with them in their struggles against injustice and for dignity and life. Spiritual empowerment, encouragement, and comfort remain as a given, but offering “thoughts and prayers” are for unimaginative politicians who have run out of platitudes. We should find ways to join the revolution. The power and destruction of imperialism and the revolt against it is not a Scylla and Charybdis through which the church must try to sail safely. It is a choice we have to make. And we should remember: “Many are called, but few are chosen. And the chosen shall be known by their choices.”

Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation for the God who lies behind the veil (?) to be with us. It is a desire for the divine being to journey with us to reveal Godself to us. The

constant sense of wonder that accompanies Advent is that it is not just our desire to journey with God, but God's desire to journey with us, that God actually wants to pitch God's tent among us. But as in the Advent story, we too are stalked by life-threatening shadows darkening our hopes and expectations at every level and in every moment. The good news of the angels to the shepherds is shadowed by the death news from Jerusalem as they journey to Bethlehem. The journey of the magi is shadowed by the tears of Rachel. The journey of Mary to Elizabeth lights up in the glorious joy of expecting life. Yet this moment is shadowed by the deep knowledge that a sword will go through both their hearts. Above, and despite it all though, is the star "rising in the East" and journeying across the skies past the place of dark deceit and deadly politics, to "stop over the place where the child was," the stubborn shining light of hope and joy and life not just hovering over, but enlightening the darkness below, drawing us to what is true and steadfast: Immanuel. God is with us.

And this advent we both prepare to journey with God as well as call on God to journey with us, to pitch God's tent among us as we journey together in a time that calls for new and deeper forms of solidarity and alliance building.

Advent is a time when we remember several journeys. The journey of Mary to Elizabeth, the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the journey of the Angel to speak to the shepherds, the journey of the shepherd to see the Christ child, the journey of the Magi and the journey to Egypt to flee the evil designs of Herod. And it reminds of travel and journeying in our time, where travel spreads the virus, where migrant workers are struggling to go home because jobs have dried up, where home is not a safe space but a space of violence and assault.

Each of these journeys represents human solidarity and resistance to Empire. Each of these journeys can and must be fleshed out in their own right. But there are two common aspects that speak to us in this time. The first is that in each of them salvation is not to be found in the centres of power but rather on the margins and shows us the necessity for us to journey to the margins to be able to find our common salvation.

We know now more than ever that our salvation will not come from Capitol Hill (whatever the results of the election are) but will emerge from the streets of Ferguson where a wall of

clergy worked to separate the protestors from the batons of the police forces. Just as the Biblical story of the Magi showed us our salvation will not emerge from the palace of Herod but instead a manger, we know that we cannot expect hope from the stock exchanges of the world but it will instead emerge from the shanty towns of Central Africa, from the streets of Chile and the indigenous people in Bolivia. That it will not come from old white men in the institutions of higher learning in the who walk the corridors of power but will come from children and babies.

And so, we journey with the one who calls us to him and he is to be found among the impoverished, the enslaved, the disempowered, the dispossessed. That the manger opens for a new space where none existed earlier. And this is the call of advent, to newness to the margins to a God of life that is not to found in the corridors of power.