

what does God require of us?

Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

Introduction

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

—Micah 6:8

What Does God Require of Us?

We live in apocalyptic times. The triad of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and authoritarianism, and the climate crisis has not only placed our planet in a perilous predicament, but it also presents itself as *kairotic* moment for the church. This is both in terms of the church's own self-understanding but also its mission.

In times of crises the church is called to find orientation and hope in the Word of God. The prophet Micah emphasizes that in times that might appear to us as turbulent, desperate, and confusing, the direction of scripture is clear and straightforward. We know very well what is required of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Living Faithfully in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

The World Communion of Reformed Churches in its call to communion and commitment to justice seeks to live faithfully to this calling in the time of COVID-19 and beyond and is thus engaged in a process of theological thinking and reflection. The process involves the whole Communion through creative online processes and discernment circles that are ensuring the full and just participation of the Communion.



World Communion
of Reformed Churches

Confessing Circle

By Dianna Wright
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We began this journey of discernment in December 2020. The initial working paper introduced us to three key terms:

1. *Global Apartheid* as described by Allan Boesak as a phenomenon that includes social-economic exploitation and inequalities, political and social exclusion, and racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as gender injustices and heteronormative oppression.
2. *Multiple Crises* that include economic, environmental, racial, political—all that call for a response from the church
3. *Global Revolution* against greed, injustices, and violence, and for life: global solidarity and human dignity.

This second of the four circles, on confessing, runs through Lent and Easter. As noted in our first working paper, “Accra quite deliberately aligns itself with the Confession of Belhar, and asks us these questions: 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.’”

We understand this as a moment of truth, a moment to take a stand and act in justice, love, and mercy.

We continue by introducing our working paper in three segments (see page 20):

1. Engaging with Our Confessions
2. Confessing Guilt
3. Becoming a Confessing Church

We continue as we began, in the words of our president, Najla Kassab, “We gather today to engage in thinking together, ‘What does the Lord require of us?’ We gather to affirm our steady journey toward justice... It is our road to seek new ways of strengthening the Communion and transforming the world, to dream of new alternatives and new visions of a reality based on justice.”



Sharing Session: People Living with Disabilities

Terry DeYoung (*Reformed Church in America*)

This pandemic has shown in stark relief the ableist practices that discriminate against people with disabilities (PWDs) in a world that is neither designed for us nor functions with us in mind. Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue, discriminate, and oppress people with disabilities. This prejudice is subtle, unconscious, and pervasive.

During COVID-19, many people with disabilities have been “de-prioritized” during critical times in favor of those with “greater likelihood of survival,” and subsequently we’ve been denied critical care and resources.

For too long, societies and structures have neglected to equally value the humanity of PWDs. This should have been the time to ensure that the value of every human life is recognized and protected, regardless of ability, by explicitly including our most vulnerable community members in the high-risk category in the vaccination timeline.

In the United States, one in eight direct support workers lives in poverty, and three out of four earn less than the average living wage in their area. The pay that they receive does not reflect the importance of their work. Many workers find that it makes more sense to take on less demanding work for the same wages.

Finally, PWDs are seldom included when we refer to “diversity” issues and “marginalized groups,” even though PWDs consistently represent the largest minority group—one that’s open for anyone to join at any time, and one that cuts across all lines of class, race, economic standing, and religion. Documents distributed in the COVID & Beyond process thus far have perpetuated this marginalization by seldom naming PWDs, even when we are one of the four special focus groups. As usual, PWDs are the ones needing to advocate for their own inclusion!

This needs to change, and we have ample support for this course correction:

- As Jesus says in Matthew 25, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”
- As the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, “Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”
- As Belhar confesses: “We believe that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged... that the church must stand by people in any form of suffering and need, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice.”

As PWDs, we are not looking for pity, but for justice. We’re looking for evidence that we belong and that our gifts and contributions matter. We’re looking for the church to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

“COVID & Beyond” is calling the WCRC to stand with the Reformed confessions, with Scripture, and with the voices of its own members living with disabilities—by joining to advocate with us and for us, “in a world fallen among thieves.”



Dr. Aiswarya Rao (*Pediatrician and Public Health Consultant*)

I am a woman with a locomotor disability and increasingly using a wheelchair for my mobility. I run a shelter for homeless women with disabilities in Chennai, India. We have around 60 women with predominantly locomotor, speech, hearing, and visual impairments. They are mostly young women looking for opportunities—study, work, love, play—and the shelter fills a need until they can become independent. We are also involved in policy and advocacy of women’s issues, particularly women with disability issues on health, education, and livelihood at the state and national levels. We work with various women’s groups and individuals in need all over the state.

The unprecedented COVID crisis—its resultant lockdown and restrictions on mobility and contact—created hardships for us in untold ways. We heard and dealt with increased abandonment, homelessness, and loss of livelihood during this time.

There were also stories of hope. Our shelter’s women were on the frontlines—nonmedical, community work, helping the city in its COVID intervention and containment efforts. We set up a cultural ensemble and went to the streets and the slums around our shelter. We did demonstrations and street plays on mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing.

Overnight classrooms became virtual and opened the debate, “How inclusive is digital education?” It highlighted the legal and policy gaps in making digital education modes and platforms accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities.

The work-from-home culture was the great leveler. For years, people with disabilities have been urging companies and offices to allow them to work from home and were frowned upon as being unproductive and difficult. Now the whole world has gone to work from home seamlessly. This is our big “aha moment” and our time to say, “We told you so!”

There are so many lessons and opportunities to make this world a better place and a more inclusive one for people with disabilities. The best lesson for me from the COVID crisis is the vaccine story. Can you imagine the unprecedented speed at which the COVID vaccines have been developed, mass produced, and deployed?

The vaccine is the artistic response to death and disease. The COVID vaccine is also a great teacher. It shows us that we cannot leave some people behind. One important lesson that the coronavirus has taught us is that it is no longer survival of the fittest, but the protection of the most vulnerable that is so important to win the battle for humanity. Epidemics hold a mirror to humanity and to society as to who we really are. The main part of preparedness to face this pandemic is that we need to realize as human beings we are in this together. What affects one person anywhere affects everyone everywhere. Therefore, we need to be more inclusive, and respecting diversity is the way forward as we make decisions for the future, be it in health, education, or commerce. We as a human race need to work together, be organized together, care for one another, and understand that the health of the most vulnerable—the poorest and the weakest among us—is a determining factor for the health of all.

Finally, Dr. Tedros Gebresus, Director General, WHO, said that when humanity is confronted with a common enemy like this, it also gives us a chance to bring the best of us: a unique opportunity for solidarity in everything.

Discernment Questions

1. What connections/points of intersection can be made between the COVID-19 experience of people with disabilities and the passion/resurrection of Jesus?
2. How can the church advocate for and model the full welcome and inclusion of people with disabilities?

Sharing Session: WCRC Indonesia

Sylvana Apituley (*WCRC Vice President*)

A multidimensional crisis threatens Indonesia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 10 million people lost their jobs, and there became a new group of the poor. Cases of domestic violence and violence against children increased almost five times. Sexual violence against girls and people living with disabilities, as well as cyber-crimes, have also been reported to increase significantly. Racism and violence due to political conflict in Papua continues, adding to the IDPs [internally displaced persons] and resulting in deaths; political practices and policies that are against the values and principles of democracy continue to flourish.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lockdown and various other policies were announced by the Indonesian government on March 15, 2020, and Indonesian churches have adjusted themselves and their ministries. The understanding and practice of being church (ecclesiology, especially the meaning of *koinonia* as well as the liturgical ritual of the church) experienced a shift, and new changes emerged. Also, the mission and witness (*marturia* and *diakonia*) continue to transform, as churches seek new forms that are responsive to the needs of the congregation and society in the pandemic and afterwards.

The multidimensional crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other disasters (natural, non-natural, social), have indeed created anxiety, fear, and sadness due to the many traumatic experiences. But, as is reflected in the Easter faith declaration of the Indonesian Communion of Churches (PGI), we, the Indonesian churches, are committed to “turn towards the One who is Life” (John 20:14-16), that is to the resurrected Christ. This is the hope that affirms and strengthens churches to continue to serve and witness in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The churches in Indonesia have and will continue to turn towards the One who is Life, in the midst of the challenges and threats of death by the COVID-19 pandemic and all its impacts.

Elifas Tomix Maspaitella, Vin Labetubun, Vebiola Songunpan (*Protestant Church in the Moluccas*)

The Protestant Church in Moluccas (*Gereja Protestan Maluku/GPM*) is an archipelago church in the east part of Indonesia. We have faced disasters several times, including social, humanitarian, and natural and non-natural disasters. In 1999-2002 GPM was hit by a humanitarian disaster (Maluku rioting) that killed thousands of people and damaged inter-religious dialogue between Christian and Muslims. From November 2019 to January 2020, Maluku and North Maluku were rocked by earthquakes thousands of times. COVID-19 was recognized on March 22, 2020, and continues to this date. Peace, trauma, social and economic recovery, political interest, religious theology, local wisdom, and more have been part of our reflection as a church.

We realize that COVID-19 has dramatically changed our life. Stay-at-home and social distancing orders, unemployment and managing work from home have become the new normal, all while thousands become sick and die from the coronavirus. For us as a church, COVID-19 is an extraordinary event introducing truly unprecedented times. We understand that each of us is vulnerable to becoming infected with COVID-19.

The Indonesian churches, are committed to “turn towards the One who is Life” (John 20:14-16), that is to the resurrected Christ. This is the hope that affirms and strengthens churches to continue to serve and witness in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discernment Questions

1. To what extent have the COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters changed our socio-economic-political context as well as the ecclesiology of our churches?
2. How should churches deal with the multi-layered forms and root causes of injustice, discrimination, and violence against the most marginalized groups in society after COVID-19?
3. How can Indigenous knowledge help us to engage with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic?

COVID-19 affects almost all parts of life: economic, theological, social, and educational for our children. The problem of transportation as a result of large-scale social restriction has an impact on food supply and distribution. The poverty rate among local congregations is increasing. There is a shift in theological perspective, especially in the context of liturgy, worship, sacraments, *Sidi* (Confirmation), and Sunday school. There is also a changing social relation, such as labeling and stigmatizing the patients and families suffering from COVID-19. In some cases, the stigmatization has been on whole villages.

In the context of COVID-19 and all the disasters we faced, disaster theology becomes a topic that helps us answer questions about mission and church service itself. What we understand with disaster theology is how to build in the sense of disaster as a result of the environmental and social changes among pastors and congregations.

Through transformative *koinonia*, every congregation can help each other. The government can facilitate the process of improving economic conditions of the citizens. The Church has been called to build disaster management, directing church programs and finances with church regulation, to assist in congregations, classes/districts, and synods, to build community and promote post-trauma healing.

Rosmalia Barus (*Karo Batak Protestant Church*)

In March 2020, Indonesian President Jokowi announced that two Indonesian people had gotten infected with coronavirus. The first impact was panic, fear, and confusion. We did not know what to do. At that time, the government issued the policy to all Indonesian society to obey the health policy: through physical distancing, staying at home, washing hands, and wearing face masks.

Economic and agriculture impacts were the first effects of the beginning of the pandemic. In April 2020, prices of agricultural products were declining. This condition threatened thousands of daily farm workers with joblessness. The stay-at-home policy is difficult to implement, because if people are not working, they have no income.

The church must dare to go out of its comfort zone. Our success is no longer determined by the quantity of those who are present, but by how far we ensure the safety of congregation members and community life, even though it breaks traditional habits.

John Simon (*Protestant Church in Western Indonesia*)

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global community crisis, because it takes a planetary solidarity paradigm, beyond relations within Christianity itself, towards interfaith relations to solve it.

Sharing Session: Israel/Palestine

Shadin Nassar (*Palestinian Christian living in Bethlehem, Oakwoods Bard College senior majoring in international law and human rights*)

I have worked with local and international NGOs on youth empowerment programs, highlighting the role of youth in decision-making in social development, and in human rights advocacy.

The deteriorating situation in Palestine drives many young people to believe that they are trapped in a countless number of concerns posing existential threats. They feel caught, going towards an unclear future with high risks and little certainty, which affects their sense of security and stability. As a Palestinian raised under prolonged Israeli occupation, institutionalized oppression, and systematic discrimination, I have witnessed from a very young age my family's struggles to protect the piece of land that we have, in Area C of the West Bank, from the danger of confiscation by Israeli authorities.

I observed the surrounding Israeli settlements as they expanded, expropriating more Palestinian lands in the area to transfer the Israeli population for a territorial expansionism—while almost seven million Palestinian refugees scattered all around the world are denied the right to return to their homes.

While frustration is high among Palestinians living under prolonged occupation, there is still hope. “*Sumud*,” which is the Palestinian word for steadfastness, became a social practice and a form of everyday nonviolent resistance, pushing Palestinians to maintain physical presence by replanting the trees that were uprooted and rebuild what is destroyed. As long as this battle continues, Palestinians are here to stay.

Palestine undergoes social, economic, and political problems deriving not only from policy deficiencies, but also from Israel's unlawfully prolonged occupation, which leaves the Palestinian Authority with little or no territorial sovereignty or control over policymaking. There is an urgent need for tomorrow's leaders to become part of a reform process in Palestine by acquiring analytical knowledge of different systems of governance and sufficient tools to implement results-oriented policies, to promote human rights, and to put an end to apartheid and occupation policies.

Young people feel stifled by the situation. They feel that their movement is restricted by the Israeli measures that limit their freedom. They demand all restrictions that hinder their activities and initiatives be lifted and all obstacles to their mobility and access be removed. Young people are absent from the process of decision making, community development, and participation in building peace and achieving security, and I'm very passionate about changing that.

Of course, we have a lot of reasons to be frustrated that we are trapped in this victim mentality, constantly thinking that we are unable to do anything. But the



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most important thing is to keep hope alive, to remain attached to the land, which is a part of the Palestinian national identity and narrative to teach our children, the new generation: how to love the land, how to stay hopeful, how to express themselves, how to talk about their struggles and not to wait for someone else to talk about their own struggles.

Munther Isaac (*Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, Bethlehem*)

“Why are we to engage in peacemaking?” If we take the Sermon on the Mount in particular and many other passages in Scripture seriously, we will understand that at the heart of the Kingdom of God is a passion for justice and truth and mercy. In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus puts all of these together for what it means to be children of God, citizens of the kingdom. Many times, we Christians are obsessed with theologically right interpretation, but not much so on how we follow the teachings of Jesus. I wish we invested more time trying to interpret what the Sermon on the Mount and other ethical calls of Jesus mean on the ground.

Why should the church be so concerned about Palestine? Certainly, there are many other conflicts and situations in the world that deserve our attention as a church. The most important reason why the church should be involved in Palestine is that the church is already involved in Palestine. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, we are contributing. Let me be very honest: We are contributing in a very negative way towards peace on the ground and towards even our presence as a church. The church is already involved, and again let me emphasize this, is part of the problem. It is in the theology, and don't think I'm just talking about Christian Zionism.

It's easy to blame everything on those Christian Zionists who are obsessed with prophecy and end times and the fate of Israel and the Jewish people, and they're



certainly in the forefront. But when I say theology I think of also the silence of the church about many things that are happening. I think also of the fact that many churches have a presence here, but say nothing about the injustices that take place here.

I want to get to the heart of the issue and challenge the way peacemaking is understood in many churches today. Peacemaking is certainly not about diplomacy, and I use this because, again, this is one of the issues we face many times in our churches: the way they deal with the issue. They want to be balanced. They want to listen to and pray for both sides. They want somehow to play the role of a mediator, thinking that if they facilitate a gathering between Palestinians and Israelis, they contributed to peace. They want, as I said, to play it in a safe way, without offending anybody.

And with all due respect, that is not peacemaking. That empowers a status quo in which one is suppressing the other. And to me this peacemaking involves taking sides. You certainly have to listen to both sides, you certainly have to be fair, but at the end of the day if you are truly about peacemaking, you have to take sides, not based on nationality or religion or ethnicity. You take sides with truth and justice, you take sides with the oppressed. You speak truth to power. Many Christians are not willing to do so.

We should get serious about ending the occupation. But we end occupation not because we want to end a nation—that's not the goal. The goal is to reach this biblical image, if I may use that phrase, where there is sharing the land, sharing the Holy Land; where we create a reality in which all people are treated equally after the same law; where all people have the same rights.

In other words, the idea is not to get rid of Israelis, but the idea is to reach a situation in which Israelis, Muslims, Christians, and Jews share the lands under the same law and live as neighbors. For that to happen, we must begin by challenging the current status quo by challenging the occupation, by challenging all the other policies that are disempowering and preventing us from reaching towards this. I feel that's prophetic peacemaking pointing towards the end result.

It is so easy to pray for peace. It's much harder to act for peace, to invest in peace, to speak truth to power, and to even revisit the way we do pilgrimage as churches. I think the church should be serious about revisiting all of these issues and partnering with us on the ground, as we partner with other peoples of faith towards this: yes, ending occupation first, but then reaching toward a political reality of truth and reconciliation and sharing the Holy Land.

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Sharing Session: Middle East

Hadi Ghantous (*National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon*)

I am originally from Damascus, the capital city of Syria, which has been going through a long, destructive, and painful civil war, which has lasted about ten years. It is a war that has left its marks everywhere and on everyone in the country; a war that has left the country full of ruins, death, pain, injuries, displacement, immigration, divisions, sorrow, hunger, loss, despair, hatred, and enmity; a war, from which the country is struggling to emerge now with great difficulties.

People are struggling in Syria to meet the basic needs of life. They run daily to get their “daily bread.” Syria is a country where people stand in very long crowded lines, disregarding the dangers of being infected with COVID-19, to get bread, fuel, and other basic necessities. It is a country where people suffer, the most important reason being the sanctions the West is imposing on Syria, and which affect before anything else the Syrian people, way more than they affect the Syrian authorities, as the West thinks or hopes.

I believe that the word that best describes Syria nowadays is waiting: waiting for the full end of the war, waiting for the situation to get better, waiting for the reconstruction, waiting for the chance to go back home, waiting for bread, waiting for electricity, waiting for fuel, waiting for basic needs, waiting for death, waiting for bad news, waiting to be infected with COVID-19, waiting for a room in a hospital, waiting for the world to have mercy on them and allow them to get the COVID-19 vaccine, waiting for chances to immigrate, waiting for news from those who immigrated, waiting for news about those who disappeared, waiting for the major international and regional powers to reach an agreement concerning Syria, waiting for a better future with not much hope, waiting for any sign of hope anywhere from anyone.

The Syrian people are in a continuous stage of waiting, which is marked with lots of failure, dissatisfaction, disappointment, ineffectiveness, loss, and despair. And the whole situation in the Middle East, as well as in the world, is not very hopeful and does not offer much perspective about a better future soon.

However, in the midst of all that, we believe, and we experience, that our God is alive, is present, is faithful, and is active. We believe that our God is accompanying the Syrian people in their journey, in their waiting, and in their search for hope. We believe that God is with those who suffer, accompanying them, touching them, and stretching a healing hand toward them. We believe that the final word is for our God and not for the powers of death and suffering of this world. And we believe that our God is calling the church to be a messenger of love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, and hope in face of despair.

We believe that our God is accompanying the Syrian people in their journey, in their waiting, and in their search for hope. ...And we believe that our God is calling the church to be a messenger of love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, and hope in face of despair.

Thus, in the midst of this difficult time that Syria and the whole Middle East are going through, we cannot but hear God's promise of a better life for the whole creation, and we cannot but sing with the Book of Joel:

- ²¹ Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!
- ²² Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.
- ²⁴ The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
- ²⁵ I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.
- ²⁶ You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame. (*Joel 2.21-27*)



Discernment Questions

1. How can the global community have a prophetic stand towards the current injustices in the Middle East?
2. How can the Church be a channel of hope in the Middle East and the world today?
3. What does God require of us regarding the issues that we have heard during this session?

Tharwat Wahba (*Professor of Mission, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Cairo*)
I want to share with you God's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us again. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."

Yes, we are facing a sentence of death. In Egypt people are very sad, suffering, and worried because of COVID-19. The third wave of the virus is very serious. Many people are suffering; health care cannot handle the difficult situation. There are many areas these days, especially in the south of the country, where people are suffering; many churches have closed their doors. Many families are sad because they have lost loved ones, but in the midst of that we don't have anything but to put our hope in but God, to the risen Christ who is the only one who can give hope, so please, brother and sisters, please pray for those sad families, for the sad people, for those who are sick in hospitals or at home.

Please pray for the leaders of the country to have wisdom, to leaders of the church to have wisdom to be able to continue to be a blessing and spread the message of hope; please pray for the kids who lost time being educated in school, and for the educational system that is collapsing.

Also please pray for the Egyptian people as they are struggling with and fighting the Ethiopian plan to build a Nile dam that will potentially bring great damage to the Egyptian people. Please pray for wisdom and a peaceful solution, that God will bring peace and wisdom to the hearts of the leaders in this region, both for Egyptians and Ethiopians and for international leaders.

In the midst of that let us also pray for the church and God's people to be a source to bring love and forgiveness and above all hope: We need this hope, so please continue praying for Egypt and for the rest of the Middle Eastern countries. Our need these days is hope, and the hope is only in Christ. God bless you.

Farouq Hammo (*Iraq*)

Peace be with you all, wherever you are. We went through a hard time during the last fifteen months because of the coronavirus. In early 2020, we began to hear about a new virus coming from China, and then spreading to our neighboring countries and Europe. In March, we heard about a nationwide lock-in. On March 17, 2020, we stopped our church, by law; all the churches, all the mosques were closed. It went on for a long time. We didn't meet in the church until October, when we reopened and went on until early February this year. Then we were locked in again for four weeks; we opened on Palm Sunday, and we still go. But in the last period of time, since we were locked in, as a church we started to have activities on social media. We started a daily devotion, a Sunday service on Facebook, a weekly Bible study for two hours. We did many sets of books. And we start an intercessory prayer meeting on Friday, on social media.

We have projects in which we serve our community, like preschools; we have a school as well, the Good Shepherd School. The preschools are closed, last year and this year as well. They have to follow the rule of the government in all of our churches. Our community was infected by COVID-19, and we have been losing people to it. The coronavirus meant a curse for many people, and it was a curse for the economy. But spiritually, it was a kind of blessing, because people started to think about death much more than before.

In the past, when we invited people to church, they would always say, "We don't have time." always say they don't have time. But now they have all the time, they have nothing to do, and fear has started to approach everybody; and everybody has started to think about death in a different way. One day they will pass away. People have started to be energized to reach for others. During the last fourteen months we have had many more souls saved than before, and I consider that a blessing. People start to be more mature; they start to spend more time on their knees praying, asking the Lord for mercy. I would say that God was forced to allow this virus to attack the world, because people were careless: They didn't care about the Word of God, they wouldn't be within or pray or meditate on the word, but now it's different. They notice that the wealthy person and the poor people have the same fate.

They will struggle for the cheapest thing on this side of the world, which is air. And there are many Western countries, which have been considered Christian countries for ages, who will be embarrassed before God because many non-Christian countries will present more souls being saved during this period of time. I pray that we understand the mentality of God and the will of God, which is to have souls saved and sanctified, because sanctification is the word of God. May God bless you all.



MALAYSIA

INDONESIA

AUSTRALIA

NEW

Worship Resources

Confessional Washing

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:37-39)

Jesus gave a loud cry ...

Confession is at once rage and defiance

And it is the cross that calls us to root our faith in rage and defiance

To be resilient in the face of the old order and cursing it with the blessing of our resistance

Just like Ma Kyal Sin* and several others in Myanmar, others around the world

Confession announces a judgment which cannot be silenced and a new world which can only be delayed

*Ma Kyal Sin ‘Angel’ the 19-year-old Myanmar protestor murdered by the riot police.

Symbolic act (the worship leader invites us to wash our hands with these biddings/invitations)

Let us wash our hands

Mindful of the cruel indifference it exposes at the heart of the current order

Mindful we too will need to prepare the dead in this struggle

And washing our hands of the insipid faith we must repent

(Silence)

The curtain was torn in two...

Confession is at once irruption and disruption

The resurrection requires an insurrection

The truthful word-deed breaks open the old order and invites the new world

And we remember Korean comfort women, their perseverance, their refusal to be silent, their irruption; in breaking silence they opened the way for a new world still being resisted

How could the people come to the Temple again and not see a repaired or replaced curtain as ever torn?

Symbolic act (the worship leader invites us to wash our hands with these biddings/invitations)

Let us wash our hands
Mindful of the cruel indifference it exposes at the heart of the current order
Bathing in tenderness those who are wounded
And washing our hands of the insipid faith we must repent

(Silence)

Truly this man was God's Son!

But our confession has also been co-opted. It has been used by Empire to further the causes of global apartheid. Confession has become idolatry that is masked behind a veneer of orthodoxy.

The centurion who confessed Jesus as the son of God. Of course, looking up at the man dying on the cross and comparing him to Caesar was an anti-imperial stance. But the Church has taken this same narrative and fixed Jesus on the cross, the Christ becoming the legitimization of suffering, the emblem of imperialism that calls for suffering and seeks to take away life.

Symbolic act (the worship leader will perform this outpouring act)

Let us take these waters
Font of failure
Cup of suffering
Waters of new birth
Promising to pour out the waters and ways we have
Allowed our systems, lives, and faiths to be
cruel and indifferent
Self-loving and idolatrous
Drowning and overwhelming
Let us
Pour out our spirit in the rolling waters of God's promise
In a world which thirsts for justice

Prayers from the Middle East

Opening Prayer

Let us pray to the Lord.
We have heard the cries of injustice:
The cry of the single mother
Working at night so she can feed her children
The cry of the old woman, who just lost her job,
The cry of the young woman
Who was promised a land of milk and honey,
And found only violence
The cry of the woman with a mobility disability
Because our buildings are not accessible
The cry of young women in Palestine
Who hope for another future instead of annexation and annihilation
The cries of those who have been torn by war and weapons of destruction
Those who suffer the violence of colonization
Those who find themselves caught in the midst of religious conflict

Yet we have been led to believe that this is normal
Not out of the ordinary
We have been taught to not get involved
And we have obeyed
Unquestioning, believing
Having faith,
Not in God, but in the lords of this earth
Help us to question Lord
To not follow blindly
But to ask the difficult question
To expose reality
To doubt and through doubt
To come to true faith in you.

Prayer of Confession

O righteous and gracious God, lover of justice and peace, we confess that we have not loved you as you love us. We have failed to obey your teachings and have not treated our brothers and sisters as your children. *(Silence)*

Leader: Living and most merciful Creator, we confess that we have not allowed your presence to shine among us; failing to understand your way of life, we have acted in shallow pride and self-sufficiency. *(Silence)*

Leader: We acknowledge lack of concern and apathy for those who are subdued by forces of oppression, robbed of their rights and dignity, wasting your gifts and wandering from your ways, failing to understand the sacrifice of the Risen Christ for all humanity. *(Silence)*

Leader: We confess that we are complicit in perpetrating the sin of the Israeli occupation by accepting the unjust measures imposed on the rest of your children, and especially in your city, Jerusalem. *(Silence)*

Leader: O Lord, as we pray for the land that you loved, in the country where you lived and taught, that was even then known as Palestine: grant us the grace and wisdom to see clearly and understand deeply that all that you suffered was for the sake of redeeming humanity. *(Silence)*

Leader: We thank you for your promise of forgiveness of our sins, merciful and loving Savior. Through your life, death and resurrection, you have made it possible for us to have life, and have it more abundantly.

All: Amen.



Closing Prayer

All: God, our Father and Mother,

Leader: Creator of all of us in your wonderful, diverse human family, loving all of us as your children, men and women, black and white, Palestinian and Jew, sending Jesus who resisted empire, paid with his life, and was resurrected to empower all of us with life in abundance, inspiring us with his creative and prophetic spirit;

All: Hallowed be your name –

Leader: You revealed your name in a blaze of fire from the midst of a bush, calling Moses to liberate his people from the oppression of slavery, to face Pharaoh with God's word of warning. You revealed your name as “hearing the cry of the oppressed,” as “God being with them now and in the future,” Yahweh;

All: Your kingdom come –

Leader: Your new just world, where no one fears a checkpoint, where no woman is stopped on the way to the hospital, where no child is taken in the middle of the night, where no farmer is violated by colonists, where no peaceful protester is shot by a military sniper, where no citizen is hit by a rocket;

All: Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven –

Leader: Your will, revealed in the *Torah*, in the words and deeds of Jesus' and the Apostles, in the *Qur'an*, the book of our Abrahamic brothers and sisters, your world of love and justice and mercy and care, inspiring Jews, Christians, Muslims, and people of all faiths to resist injustice, racism, and inequality and to work for peace, healing and a new beginning, and for the common future of Jews and Palestinians in the Holy Land. Help the Jewish people heed the prophets of justice in antiquity and today, guide the West to stop supporting Israel's violation of international law and human rights;

All: Give us this day our daily bread –

Leader: Let no one die of hunger, with enough food for everyone. Liberate the Palestinian economy from the strangulation of occupation. Lead us to a financial and political order directed towards the well-being of people and earth, cooperative forms of working, sharing, and caring;

All: And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors –

Leader: Break the dominance of the owners of capital and weapons, pushing whole societies into the slavery of debt.

Empower us to discover the power of forgiveness,
a new beginning in all dimensions,
forgiving the oppressors and establishing new lines of communication,
loving even enemies, enabling their liberation from
the evil of dominance and oppression;

All: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil –

Leader: All of us are tempted by the lust for power:
men over women, parents over children, white over black, educated over non-
educated, politicians over civilians, and all other forms of domination;
At this moment we are tempted to lose hope,
as the Israeli government, together with the power of empire,
violates international law by annexing, once again, land that is not theirs,
deepening the apartheid system in the Holy Land, heaping violence upon violence;

May civil society and the governments of the West awake to this lawlessness
and cease their financing of the occupation through
military aid and trade agreements;
Let cooperation proceed only when international law
is followed and human rights restored,
strengthening the hope and resilience of the Palestinian people;

Especially we pray for Christians and the churches around the world
to hear this Cry for Hope and Call for Decisive Action.
May they realize that we cannot serve God and the oppression of the Palestinians.
Grant that their silence end, that they act faithfully
for the rights of the Palestinians,
that they stand up against the misuse of the Bible for
justifying the theft of Palestinian land.

**All: For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

Working Paper: Confessing Circle

As we enter into the second wider circle of answering the question, what does God require of us in Discerning, Confessing and Witnessing in a time of COVID19 and Beyond, we must ask the question, what does it mean for us to confess? For the Reformed Communion, at this critical juncture, perhaps, the idea of confession can be fleshed out in three ways.

I. Engaging with Our Confessions

Firstly, we are a confessional body. The World Communion of Reformed Churches is a communion of churches that draws from the protestant traditions of the sixteenth century and particularly from the theology of John Calvin. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was not only a religious reformation, but it asserted certain theological principles that emerged from and engaged with economic and political ideals.

In many ways, the Protestant Reformation was a reaction to the increasing commodification of society in which everything, including salvation, was reduced to a value in the market. It is precisely in this context that grace (*gratis*) emerges as a theological principle to indicate that not all of life can be reduced to a monetary value and that salvation was not for sale. It was a strong assertion that not all of life could be monetized.

To own Calvin's legacy is to assert that the economic system serves human interests and particularly the interests of the poor. Calvin's gift in the present time should encourage us to engage with economic systems contextually and pastorally from the perspective of justice, ensuring that our economies serve people's interests and not large multinational companies. And today we once more assert that we cannot monetize faith or let it be co-opted for the sake of profit. The legacy of Calvin calls us to place life





before profit, to put back the protest in protestant.

But the Protestant Reformation also had political and specifically anti-imperial implications. It was a move away from Rome's hegemony to assert the independence and autonomy of the city-states. While it is undeniable that the city-states had their own systems of exploitation, particularly of the surrounding rural areas, this was a significant move away from the imperial logic of the Roman See. It was also this anti-imperial logic that paved the first in-roads for democracy, autonomy, and human dignity. This logic came into its fruition in the Synod of Emden, which rejected a hierarchical church structure and instead suggested that "No congregation should claim priority or rule over other congregations, no pastor over other pastors, no elder over other elders, no deacon over other deacons."

To be a confessional body is also to claim our communion and our unity. There is a need to theologically resignify our understanding of unity. When we argue that the Church is one, we are claiming a unity of which Christ is the head. This implies that

the unity of the Church is directed to the ends that Christ himself taught us. That is to say that we are united not for exerting power but rather for the sake of powerlessness. This can be expounded as a Christology of *kenosis*, where Christ, in the giving up of his divinity, reconciles the world to himself and each other. It is in the giving up of power that true communion is achieved. It is an active act of humility that brings into question the evil machinations of power. Moreover, communion is to be directed towards the sake of justice. The unity that the Church is called into is the unity of and for the sake of the oppressed and the marginalized of the world. It is a unity that has at its heart the decentering of illegitimate power and drawing the focus to the margins.

II. Confessing Guilt

But to confess also means that we confess our sin, our complicity in systems of oppression. The Reformed churches bear the double edge of the theological basis of oppression as well as offering the theological resources of resistance to it. Reformed theology was the theology of the slave owners and was the basis on which opposition to slavery also emerged. Apartheid was a Reformed theology, but resistance to apartheid again emerges from the Reformed traditions. Our collaboration is in our silence and in the active oppression of racialized communities, the poor, the marginalized, women, and people with sexualities that question the normative.

Bonhoeffer reminds us, the church confesses that it has witnessed the arbitrary use of brutal force, the suffering in body and soul of countless innocent people; that it has witnessed oppression, hatred, and murder with-

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out raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways to rush to help them. It has become guilty of the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

We speak much against empire, but we are also churches that often act as empire, which in the first circle we identified as global apartheid; in some contexts, the national Church has sided with imperial designs. We are no longer a minority being hunted down by empire, but 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. I would argue that we have to unlearn our privilege and see our privilege as our loss. When 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. We have to learn some

humility and set out to learn from the very people we intend to teach. To confess our sin is to be able to unlearn and listen to those voices from the margins and allow ourselves to be led by them.

But we also account for the silent among us who are forced into silence, those whom violence has forced silence on, victims of brutal systems of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, casteism, whose silence is not complicity but a confession of resistance and non-compliance.

III. Becoming a Confessing Church

But we also need to move away from both these notions of confessional and confession towards being a confessing church, a living confession. We need to embrace the spirit of resistance that is to be found in the Barmen, Belhar, and Accra confessions; to affirm that Jesus is Lord and that all other claims to lordship are idolatrous; that neither the market, political system, race, or



gender has the right to lord it over others, because only Jesus is Lord; that we are called to reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

The Accra Confession calls the faithful to understand that justice is a matter of faith; it is a matter of confession. It is the very heart of God. 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 our faith's integrity is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization. Therefore, we confess before God and one another."

In our outline of the COVID and Beyond process, the ideas of confession are designed to align with Lent and Easter. In preparing this document, we were reminded that the Church tends to move too quickly beyond Lent, past Good Friday and Holy Saturday and into Easter, to embrace hope without the pain of passion. Good Friday is too close for many of our communities, and Easter Sunday is yet too far away, in a context where dominant forces have co-opted hope to maintain rather than challenge the prevailing social structures.

But we also learn from the women around Jesus, women present at the birth, his ministry, and the cross of

Jesus in his crucifixion. Women in the gospels are shown to be models of discipleship, although never believed, never listened to, not in the gospels and not in our times. Those who carried perfumes and spices swaddled and anointed, while the men misunderstood, denied, and brought whips and nails. While the men were staring at the semi-darkness of the upper room and the mesmerizing gloom of Saturday, the women were already turning their faces to the rising sun of Resurrection Sunday.

In the gospels, the passion of Jesus is met with two confessions, one of the centurion who confessed Jesus as the son of God. Of course, looking up at the man dying on the cross and comparing him to Caesar was an anti-imperial stance. But the Church has taken this same narrative and fixed Jesus on the cross, the Christ becoming the legitimization of suffering, the emblem of imperialism that calls for suffering and seeks to take away life. But there is also Mary's confession, who confessed Jesus as Rabboni, as he wanted to be approached: no longer as master, but as a friend who had laid down his life for the other; not a glorification of suffering but instead as Immanuel, as God with us, who walks with us, accompanies us; to answer us when we ask, what does God require of us?

And the answer is that we confess a cross that is a revolt against a scandalous world. In the cross we find the power of God, who acts to annul the power of the forces of death. It is powerlessness confronting illegitimate power and emptying it. The cross and the resurrection are not events meant to be venerated but are instead God's revolt against a scandalous world. It is a call to action, for the church to join

The cross and the resurrection are not events meant to be venerated but are instead God's revolt against a scandalous world. It is a call to action, for the church to join the revolution of the powerless against the powerful, to be with the people's movements on the margins.

Discernment Questions

1. Which of the traditions in churches and ecumenical organizations do we see as resources that inspire and sustain us in the current crises?
2. Where do we see the protest in the Protestant tradition?
3. Where do we see churches and ecumenical organizations witness oppression, hatred, and murder without raising their voices for the victims?
4. Where do we see churches and ecumenical organizations acting as Empire, by abusing power and privilege and by calling for, justifying, and condoning exclusionary violence?
5. Where do we see churches and ecumenical organizations acting as living confessions resisting global apartheid, which is hardening in many parts of the world?
6. How can the WCRC join the joyful Christ procession to enter Jerusalem with Jesus, riding on a donkey, surrounded by the poor and oppressed, to challenge the violent, destructive, and exploitative powers?

the revolution of the powerless against the powerful, to be with the people's movements on the margins.

It is the power of Jesus that is the power of the powerless, and this is made true to us in the story of the passion. As he enters Jerusalem from the east, it is a counter procession to the one the governor and the Roman legions are staging from the west, with armies, horses, chariots, and weapons of war representing the empire of oppression, exploitation, and enslavement. Jesus enters, riding on a donkey, surrounded by the poor and oppressed. But the clang of weapons and the sounds of might on the other side of the city are no match for the songs and the shouts of joy of the poor. The Roman procession is a show of violent, destructive, exploitative power. The Christ procession is a display of joy, faith, and courage that the empire cannot begin to comprehend.

That is the power of the powerless.

Before Pilate, the governor (the hegemon) and before the high priest, Jesus stands as the accused. He is expected to bow to their will, to plead for mercy, to beg for his life. Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" is not innocent. He is giving Jesus an "out," an opportunity to deny,

thereby willingly (pleadingly) putting his life in Pilate's hands. Jesus refuses. "You said it." In other words, "You know I am, which means I am challenging the authority and legitimacy of your Caesar and your empire. What I am cannot be diminished or taken away by you."

That is the power of the powerless.

On the cross, Jesus annuls the power of death and of the principalities who put him there. They think they have accused, judged, and found him guilty. That they now have the right to condemn him to the most horrific death the empire could conceive. But the crucifixion is the death Rome reserved for runaway slaves, rebels, and revolutionaries, whose threat to the empire was so severe that this was the empire's only way to "stop" them. Even in the crucifixion, they acknowledge that his is a power that threatens the mightiest power on the face of the earth. This is the power of the powerless.

Becoming Involved

While hundreds of people are participating in the process virtually, all members of the Communion are invited to join. This booklet provides highlights from the Discernment Circle, including excerpts from presentations, worship material, and discernment questions. Highlight booklets from the inaugural session and each circle will be made available.

All are invited to utilize these materials in their own contexts and join in the conversation by sending their responses to require@wcrce.eu.

More information on the "COVID and Beyond" process can be found at wcrce.ch/require.



World Communion
of Reformed Churches