



### **Beit-El Salam Message: A contribution to WCRC Discussions on Mission in the Context of Crisis and Marginalization**

We, a group of twenty-six church leaders, theologians, and activists from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe gathered in Beit-El Salam, Alexandria, Egypt, 7-11 November 2019. We shared our experiences, deliberated and discussed the missiological question of how we can initiate and maintain Christian witness and peaceful co-existence in a context where Christians are the minority, often facing violence and marginalization from the majority community. In doing so we laid the foundations and first steps to fulfilling the General Council mandate of finding a framework for peace, justice, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in the contexts of religious violence.

Meeting in a context where Christians are a minority and where there have been considerable political upheavals in recent times, we also heard the cries of people from other contexts around the world, where people live as minorities, not just from the perspective of being religious minorities but also minorities on the basis of race, ethnicity, caste, economic oppression, gender and language. We understood that we are living in what can be described as global apartheid which is marked by ethno-nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, fundamentalisms and extremism linked to different religions and rising fascisms. Our faith calls us to respond prophetically.

We were made acutely aware of rising religious fundamentalisms across the world and recognize that fundamentalism in one community leads to fundamentalism in another. There is no major religion in this world which is not affected by fundamentalist streams. This has led to state theology and church theology; the religious justification of the politics of hatred and the sacralization and idolization of the political. What we call for is prophetic theology which reflects God's concern for compassionate justice. Without the fulfilling of this justice, peaceful co-existence is impossible.

As participants in this consultation we represented the full range of experience within our Communion, from those in majority and those in minority contexts. As we listened to each other, we began to understand how nuanced the positions of majority and minority are. We define minority not in terms of number but in terms of power and access to resources, decision-making processes and opportunity to develop one's own agency. Minorities are thus those who are excluded from meaningful participation in society and in church.

The consultation offered a comprehensive contextual and global analysis of the crises by hearing the voices from different contexts across the globe. We realize that the context of mission today is mission within the situation of global empire. We understand empire to be the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind.

We heard the voices of those who found themselves on the underside of empire. Our discussions enabled the lifting up of the histories and ongoing ramifications of colonialism. We heard continuing stories of economic and political re-colonization that have resulted in a competition for resources and a pitting of communities against each other. We understood how religion as a rallying point—along with race, language and ethnicity—is being used to polarize communities that are struggling for life, livelihood and dignity.

The stories from those who live within the belly of empire offered us further analysis of how ideologies and theologies of authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism are being used to turn against the most marginalized and are in service of othering the vulnerable. Economic and ecological migration is changing our demographic landscapes, and hospitality is being replaced with hostility.

In such a context we understand that we are called into communion with each other but even more so into obedience of the gospel that calls us into justice and peace.

In these terms the church is called to journey with the marginalized. This is a solidarity of witness; solidarity which goes beyond presence and seeks to hear from and be led by those who have been forced to the margins of society. We recognize that we are also and in particular called into actions of solidarity with those within marginalized communities who experience discrimination and exclusion. We think especially of women, LGBTQI+, migrants and people living with disabilities whose marginalization is multiplied. In these situations, we are called to witness to the indivisibility of God's love and justice.

There are churches who are in minority positions numerically who have access to power and then there are churches who are powerless and persecuted, and even in these communities the churches are involved in the persecution of others, particularly other minorities, even minorities within their own communities.

Even Christians in persecuted situations can find themselves harboring consciously or unconsciously imperialist ambitions arising from the history of Christianity as a religion of exceptionality and conquest. We need to be reminded of the Biblical call "to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

There are churches who are minorities numerically yet have considerable power and privilege due to their global and economic connections. Such churches should understand their call to journey with those who are marginalized and persecuted and to be led by those in such situations.

In all this we hear the cries of the oppressed, and as Calvin states, "this cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictates of justice, is at length heard by the Lord ... [the oppressed] know that this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured. And this feeling, is it not implanted in us by the Lord? It is then the same as though God heard [Godself] when God hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice."

If it is true that God is not just hearing the poor and oppressed when they cry out against injustice, but God is hearing God's own self in their cries, it means that God is not just the God of the poor and the oppressed; but God becomes the poor and oppressed. Calvin speaks of all those "who cannot bear injustice"—not only those upon whom injustice is inflicted, but those

who cry out on their behalf, and therefore do what is right and just. In their cry, as well, God hears Godself, and in their doing of justice and their undoing of injustice the wounds of God are healed.

Understanding that empire exists and that at this time that it works to divide and rule, creating minorities to be scapegoated and feared, which inflicts suffering on many peoples across the world, we are called to the privilege of resistance and struggle (James 4:7). We are aware how difficult this is, especially for small Christian communities in situations of suffering and oppression, but as we have observed the Lord hears our cries (Psalm 34:17). We deliberated and discussed the missiological question of how we can initiate and maintain Christian witness and peaceful co-existence in a context where Christians are the minority, often facing violence and marginalization from the majority community. Our faith proclaims<sup>i</sup> the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death, fear and powerlessness. We shall no longer be afraid (2 Timothy 1:7) and commit ourselves to the task of prophetic witness, led by and journeying with those who are marginalized.

10 November 2019

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<sup>i</sup> See the confessions of Belhar and Accra.