

REFORMED WORLD

Volume 69 (2)

*SPECIAL EDITION:
A Festschrift Honoring General Secretary Chris Ferguson*



**World Communion
of Reformed Churches**



**World Communion
of Reformed Churches**

The Catholic Presbyterian (1879-1883), The Quarterly Register (1886-1936), The Presbyterian Register (1937-1948), The Presbyterian World (1949-1955), The Reformed and Presbyterian World (1956-1970), Reformed World (1971-) Volume 69 (2) • ISSN 0034-3056

AIM AND SCOPE

Reformed World is an international journal that provides a forum for sharing and debating theological studies and prophetic witness that seek to engage and transform the realities of our time. The journal draws on, widens, and deepens the treasures of Reformed sources, past and present. *Reformed World* purposefully and joyfully embodies a diversity of voices and contextual perspectives, inspired by ecclesial, academic and grass roots communities. In the understanding of *Reformed World*, theological studies include the biblical, historical, systematic, and practical, as well as reflections on visual art, music, poetry, and other expressions of the human mind and soul that aim at the transformation of the world.

In doing so, *Reformed World* is committed to the mission of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) to be a global *koinonia*, covenanting for justice, and marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. The journal also strives to receive impulses from and give impulses to the wider ecumenical movement, working together with all the partners God provides.

REFORMED WORLD is published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, www.wcrc.ch.

Editorial Board: Reinerio Arce Valentin, Anna Case-Winters, Margit Ernst-Habib, Munther Isaac, Jooseop Keum (co-editor), HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Hanns Lessing (editor), Nadia Marais, Yvette Noble-Bloomfield, Philip Vinod Peacock (co-editor), Rathnakara Sadananda, Dirk Smit, Phil Tanis (managing editor), Heleen Zorgdrager (moderator) **President:** Nalja Kassab **General Secretary:** Chris Ferguson **Officers:** Sylvana Maria Apituley, Samuel Ayete-Nyampong, Raissa Vieira Brasil, Lisa Vander Wal, Johann Weusmann

© Copyright 2021 by the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Except where otherwise stated, the writers of articles are alone responsible for the opinions expressed. No article may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.

CONTENTS:

Editorial

- Editorial: Chris Ferguson – A Festschrift
- *By Jooseop Keum, Hanns Lessing, and Philip Peacock* P. 2

A Tribute to Chris Ferguson

- A Tribute to General Secretary Chris Ferguson - *By Najla Kassab* P. 3

Called to Communion, Committed to Justice

- Called to Communion, Committed to Justice, from a Radical Ecumenical
Perspective - *By Roderick R. Hewitt* P. 9

Transformation Ecumenism

- Transformative Ecumenism: Reverting, Rerouting, and Rebalancing the
Ecumenical Movement - *By Victoria Turner* P. 17

- Discerning and Acting on the Signs of the Time: Diakonia as a Prophetic
Core for Transformative Ecumenism – *By Drea Fröchtling* P. 26

- Transformative Ecumenism Embodied: Chris Ferguson as Paradigm
- *By Lungile Mpetsheni* P. 37

- Contours of Transformative Ecumenism
- *By Geevarghese Coorilos Nalunnakkal* P. 46

Peacebuilding

- Chris Ferguson and His Pilgrimage in the Building of Peace in Colombia
- *By Gloria Ulloa* P. 54

- Global Study on New Models of Ministry (Diakonia) for SangSaeng (相生=
Convivencia-Ubuntu) and Grand Peace (太平)in the Twenty-First Century
- *By Kim Yong-Bock* P. 60

- Peacebuilding in Palestine - *By Mitri Raheb* P. 72

- Peacebuilding in the Philippines - *By Reuel Norman Marigza* P. 80

Living out the Accra Confession

- “Not with Our Heads in the Clouds”: A Witnessing and Confessing Church in
a World Fallen among Thieves - *By Allan Aubrey Boesak* P. 89

- Choosing Life: Full Freedom and Equality for All - *By Ofelia Ortega* P. 100

- Living Out the Accra Confession - *By Eve R. Parker* P. 108

- From Accra to the World: Catholicity, Justice, and Inter-Confessionality
- *By Henry Kuo* P. 117



Editorial

Chris Ferguson – A Festschrift

*Jooseop Keum
Hanns Lessing
Philip Peacock*

“Called to Communion, Committed to Justice,” “Transformative Ecumenism,” “Peacebuilding,” and “Living out the Accra Confession”: these were the headings in the minds of the editorial team when we first met for a *Festschrift* for Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson. You may agree that these are the key areas to which he committed not only during his tenure in the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), but also in his entire career as a Reformed ecumenist. This issue of *Reformed World* is a collection of invited papers that honours Chris Ferguson on the occasion of his retirement as General Secretary of WCRC after seven years of service. *Reformed World* also takes this opportunity to express special gratitude to him on behalf of the Reformed family worldwide for his commitment and contribution to WCRC.

As a global Christian leader, Chris has made prophetic contributions of immense value to the ecumenical movement and mission practice. His ecumenical missionary work stands as an example of mutuality and solidarity for liberation and peace in postcolonial Latin America. He turned ecumenical discourses into actions. He developed an incarnational model of mission in the context of the suffering people in the Global South. Chris not only lived and worked at the margins, but struggled together *with* marginalised people for the transformation of the world. Holding firmly to Reformed unity and voice in a pandemic-stricken world is undoubtedly his most recent significant contribution.

Our deepest thanks to our authors, including Rev. Najla Kassab, president of the Communion, for your valuable contributions to this special issue. Readers will enjoy these vivid sketches of Chris’ life and work, particularly the contributors’ insights into his leadership in WCRC in addressing the most urgent global ecumenical issues and concerns with deep theological reflections. We hope that the papers published in this issue will challenge and encourage the commitment of Reformed churches to communion, justice, and mission as we celebrate the contribution and legacy of Chris Ferguson.

Go in peace into your next pilgrimage, our dear General Secretary!

A Tribute to General Secretary Chris Ferguson

Najla Kassab

I am honored to have this opportunity to recognize Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson for his contributions to the World Communion of Reformed Churches over the last seven years, from 2014 – 2021. Chris’ relationship with the Communion began much earlier, however, dating back to his time with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), where he was active in the “covenanting for justice” process and played an important role in drafting the Accra Confession.

Chris’s enthusiasm for the work of the Communion was a gift that strengthened the organization and affirmed its role on the world ecumenical map. His solid ecumenical networking to sustain the visibility and work of the WCRC was a valued contribution on the journey. His efforts centered around deepening the Communion among member churches, regions, and ecumenical communities through visits, consultations, networking, and contributions to key events. Through renewed participation in ecumenical processes, he established relationships and participated in situations of conflict, assisting churches as both mediator and facilitator.

Chris’s commitment to social justice, economic justice, and peacebuilding is surely a hallmark of his leadership. His emphasis on peacemaking has been clear since his involvement in the Ecumenical Accompaniment in Colombia (2011 – 2014), and his work with the United Nations (2006 – 2010) and Jerusalem (2004 – 2006). His previous experience enriched the work of justice and made peacemaking a central consideration in the life of the Communion. His efforts focused on the oversight and implementation of peace and reconciliation in The Korean Peninsula, working with the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, National Council of Churches in Korea, World Council of Churches, and Korean Christian Federation. Chris supported member churches in the Colombian peace process as well, with direct involvement in ecumenical diplomacy, visits, and advocacy. He also worked toward peaceful co-existence and the protection of minorities’ rights in our member churches and other communities who live in contexts of religious violence.

Chris has also been keen on supporting member churches in the Middle East through pastoral visits and focusing on the Israel/Palestine journey toward justice. His peace efforts with South Sudan, Nigeria, and the Philippines is well recognized, as is his dedication to work on conflict resolution, analyzing roots of conflicts and possible steps toward facilitating dialogue and gaining insights.



Chris started his role as General Secretary in 2014 at the edge of a new moment of renewal and transformation in the life of the Communion. Just as the Communion was moving to a new location—Hannover—Chris was called to be part of this renewed commitment to communion and justice. It happens that Chris leaves at another critical point in the life of the Communion, at which the organization is challenged with facing the COVID-19 pandemic as a new reality, with its full impact on the life of churches around the Communion. This has led the Communion to start a discernment process to envision what the Lord requires from the Communion today. The Communion strives to establish a renewed and refreshed theological understanding of the current crisis through a wide discernment process, one that provides for a prophetic theological response that moves toward a confessing Communion, engaging the whole organization on local and regional levels, providing space for the regions to share challenges, prophetic theologies, and activities of witness on a global level.

Chris leaves at this time of discernment, confession, and witness, for which he laid the groundwork and inspired the Communion to ask the right questions at the right time to set the strategy for this new journey. In the strategic plan, the “COVID and beyond” process inspires the Communion with new breath that helps member churches to get closer and discern together; to hear the cry from different regions and strive to experience strength together. **Chris has played an important role in the process of enabling the Communion to provide a prophetic theological response and move to a confessing moment.**

Chris nurtured the Reformed family with a vision of unity as God’s gift and calling. WCRC’s association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification during the General Council in Leipzig 2017 and becoming part of the widening ecumenical consensus on a fundamental doctrine that already includes the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Methodist churches, is a sign of hope in this vision of unity. It strengthens the bonds of the spirit as the one body of Jesus Christ.

The Wittenberg Witness, another expression of the deepening unity in the body of Christ between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and WCRC member churches around the world, represents the fruits of theological dialogue. It offers gratitude for the unity that the churches already have in Christ and celebrates what they have in common while acknowledging and lamenting still-divisive issues. It expresses the common call of churches to witness in the world.

Chris, in his role as General Secretary, played a valuable role in encouraging the acceptance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) and the Wittenberg Witness as two bold steps toward unity and solidarity with the ecumenical world, envisioning new possibilities of witness and cooperation with the other churches..

One cannot but appreciate **Chris's commitment to the growing movement toward a world without violence against women.** Every Thursday, he is on social media explicitly encouraging men and women to join the movement "Thursdays in Black" to create awareness of practiced violence, and how we are called to take a stand as a faith commitment to eradicate all kinds of gender violence. Chris is committed to encouraging the Communion to put at the forefront gender justice, so that people should not be discriminated against, destroyed, or violated because of their gender. This compassion is at the heart of the Gospel as reflected by biblical interpretations and theologies.

Chris's **leadership was centered more on program work than office work.** He was committed to program involvement, attending meetings to dialogue with and encourage the new generation and to infuse his thoughts in discussions. Working alongside the capable executives and leaders the Communion enjoys, Chris inspired the next generation by encouraging critical thinking. He was also helpful in envisioning for those who planned and executed the programs. His heart for issues of injustice pushed him to be a regular speaker, full-heartedly involved and motivated.

Unfortunately, **Chris's term ends following eighteen difficult months working through the COVID-19 pandemic.** Meeting face to face with churches through visitation was an important part of Chris's enthusiasm in building a stronger Communion. With lockdowns worldwide leading to closed borders, this was a difficult ending for his term. At a time of confrontation with pain and death, the collapse of church life, and the marginalization and exclusion that hardens structures of injustice, Chris adapted to new workstyles and urged the Communion to discover a *kairos* moment to address issues presented in the strategic plan and to stay focused on addressing new forms of injustice.

Despite the enthusiasm, passion, and energy that Chris has, **his daily struggle has always been how to lead the largest Protestant World Communion with the smallest infrastructure and staff.** One of the challenges faced is the enormity of the task with the scarcity of human resources. As he mentions regularly, "We have a very ambitious vision, a small staff, and a diverse body."



This challenged our staff to keep moving, tapping into their capabilities to meet the requirements of the time. A man of vision, Chris continually helped the Communion move forward: to sharpen the strategic plan, to implement it, and to put processes in place that will lead to the next plan.

Chris ends his term with the feeling of unfinished business, where his concern remains how the Communion will emerge beyond the COVID experience—a concern that all Communion churches and regions face and will need to work on together to shape the future. He would especially like to see the Accra Confession have more impact in the move toward a New International Financial and Economic Architecture, in which justice is reflected in healthy change.

Lifting up the Accra Confession, the Barmen Declaration, and the Belhar Confession as lenses to read the signs of the times and calls to prophetic action, engaging in resisting the empire in political, economic and social realms and daily life, and moving into action remain journeys that those who thirst for justice face and recognize. They are long journeys that take time and effort, when every day we are asked “Where is your God?” “Where is God’s justice?”

The **gender justice challenge** is another piece of unfinished business, where encouraging more churches to accept the ordination of women remains a strategic and valued endeavor toward lived justice in the church. Promoting the Declaration of Faith on the Ordination of Women and addressing gender leadership and power issues are at the heart of the continued challenging journey that the Communion faces.

Strengthening **regional work** also remains an essential task ahead for the Communion, through providing member churches support in their work for peace, justice, and reconciliation. Joint efforts and coordinated regional work and platforms, and networking and cooperating with global platforms are inevitably needed.

As the world faces the **ongoing challenges and emerging injustices arising from a rapidly changing reality** in a world fallen among thieves, we continue to live in a scandalous environment, as the Accra Confession claims. The world situation has only become worse and is rapidly deteriorating. Inequality is in such an ethically intolerable place that eight men own the same wealth as one half of the entire world. We also cannot overlook ecological destruction and extreme poverty, wars, violence, erosion of human solidarity, religiously

justified violence, human trafficking, systemic racism, gender-based sexual violence, and cultures of fear, hate, and exclusion. These realities urge the Communion to remain challenged on how to have impact on daily life among the suffering today and have a visible role in changing the reality that surrounds us.

This new reality urges the WCRC to remain “called to communion, committed to justice.” The World Communion of Reformed Churches, with all the partners God provides, remains called for the transformation of the whole world, which is so loved by God but still trapped by multiple injustices and death.

To live as a global *koinonia*, marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together, is at the heart of the Communion’s work. **The seven years of Chris’s leadership continue to be marked by this journey of discerning, confessing, witnessing and being reformed;** he shaped others and was changed himself. This journey continues with unfinished business: The journey of discerning the many injustices that affect people’s dignity in long-lived practices; new injustices emerging due to the changing world reality; the journey of confessing in light of what the Lord requires, the affirmation of God’s presence and call in the midst of the struggle, and moving to witness and engage in the world as churches of the Reformed family, wide and diverse. Thus, we are called to live the continual Reformation within the church for the sake of change that impacts the world with God’s accompaniment.

On this journey there is no end and no finished business, but continual movement toward a better tomorrow for all. The urgency of working together as a Communion to address all that threatens division and to discern the injustices around us remains the unfinished business that challenges us daily.

Although Chris leaves the position as General Secretary of the World Communion, he will remain active in the work of the Communion, whether on a regional or global level. To be in the Communion is a life commitment, which is why we expect that Chris will continue this journey from a different position, with still-steady steps toward justice and a heart that aches with the struggling. Knowing that the Lord who “began the good work..., will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6).

In the text of Mark 10:35–45, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” They were seeking a position, status, and recognition, and Jesus corrected them on how they can be true disciples: not with position,



but with the spirit of service. **“But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

To lead a Communion that strives toward justice is quite a responsibility. We thank God for Chris’s courage in the past years, that he dared to lead such a journey and dedicate seven years to reflect the glory of God—not in the position of a General Secretary, but in a life of servanthood, standing with and serving the struggling and glorifying God in all that he did. Today Chris continues his journey, striving to stand with all who struggle.

Chris will continue to be a gift to the Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, and United churches represented through the World Communion of Reformed Churches. We give thanks to God for Chris’s ministry and trust that the Lord will help him on his next journey as he continues to work toward justice and an abundant life for all.

Najla Kassab, an ordained minister in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, is the president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Called to Communion, Committed to Justice, from a Radical Ecumenical Perspective

Roderick R. Hewitt

Introduction

Any reflection on Christopher Ferguson's contributions to the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and especially on the sub-theme of "Called to Communion, Committed to Justice" must take into account his identity and vocation prior to his ecumenical journey as General Secretary of the organisation. This article explores the WCRC's call to communion/*koinonia* through the character, identity, and vocation of Chris as the quintessential ecumenist, a living example of the Reformed ecumenical understanding and practice. Indeed, he came to the WCRC as a seasoned ecumenist with a sharp and untiring theological mind, a passionate disciple, apologist, and advocate of the politics of Jesus in defense of those who live on the margins of the power systems of this world. Being also a linguist and translator, his theological lens is always set on his faith "seeking understanding," a reformed theologian who is always being reformed through obedience to the gospel of Jesus revealed through the light of His Word.

Formed and Set Free to Serve in a Spacious Place

Many years of ecumenical journeys in which I have observed Chris at work and related to him as a colleague and friend allow me to offer a critical reflection on a fellow ecumenical sojourner. I write this reflection from the perspective of being an African-Jamaican who, like Chris, has been formed within the womb of a United Church that emerged out of Reformed ecclesiology linked to the Reformation. In such ecclesial space, people are set free in an all-embracing community of faith to "becoming the gospel" and to develop and contribute their gifts to challenge and equip the people of God for full participation in God's mission to all creation.

I begin by identifying Chris's ecclesial faith formation as the signpost of understanding his perspectives on the call to communion and his commitment to justice from a radical ecumenical understanding and engagement. The dominant note of United Churches is found in their intentionality in moving beyond a narrow doctrinal or governance definition of their identity toward a deeper and riskier gospel-mandated identity built around the wholesome relationship through a commitment to life-giving unity. Paul challenged the



Church in Rome to “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7). This was never meant to be a mandate for agreement on everything but a higher calling to break through barriers that separate people from each other and from God, whether racial, social, economic, or religious differences. Within this ecclesial community, Chris was formed and his “feet set free in a spacious place” (Psalm 31:8) to live out with others the gift and calling of communion. His missional and ecumenical journeys and formation with communities in Latin America and the wider global ecumenical landscape were foundational in preparing him for leadership of the WCRC. He came to this office as one whose Reformed ecclesiology was shaped through being a church with others and expressing faith through building inclusive communities that seek fullness of life.

The Call to Communion Necessitates Living and Working in Contexts of Plurality and Diversity

Living and working in contexts of plurality and diversity, in which every member is empowered and set free in an all-embracing faith community to serve and equip each other for full participation in God’s mission, is central to understanding Chris as one “Called to Communion and Committed to Justice.” His theology can best be described as constructed through new biblical hermeneutics and the lived experiences of welcoming strangers, feeding the hungry, freeing prisoners, healing the sick, and announcing the good news of the coming of God’s reign (Luke 4:18). The “Call to Communion” originated in the disciples’ calling to be “one in Christ” and further mandated to be memorialized, relived, and recalled each time the diverse community of faith, the ecclesia, gather around the Lord’s Table for *koinonia*. In this signpost of realised communion, the people of faith are empowered to give themselves away in the service of others, bearing one another’s burdens for the sake of the healing of God’s creation.

Rejecting and Resisting Imperial Collusion with Western Christianity

This ecumenical spirituality that undergirds Chris constitutes a radical evangelical theology that renounces traditional privatisation of the Western Christianity bequeathed by neoliberalism ideology and captured by the agenda of political, economic, and military forces of interconnecting power systems of this world. These intersected systems collude and are strategically organised to acquire and maintain power by any means necessary. This means that all

aspects of human life can be commodified and exploited to ensure social control; this is acceptable, even it results in mechanistic dehumanisation and destruction of creation. Being a white male Christian who emerged and benefited from the resources of this imperial system, Chris is intentionally aware of the collusions between religion and empire and how these anti-communion forces thrive upon violence in diverse forms. Through the ideology of neoliberalism, they work together to deny political and economic justice from the majority of God's people. These idolatries of anthropocentric violence are fuelled through the corrupt economic system of capitalism that results in climate catastrophe and ongoing neo-colonial enslavements. Chris's rejection of Empire's delusions of being the source of fullness of life informs his alternative evangelical and ecumenical theology of *koinonia*.

Being an ecumenist, he embodies the fundamental traits of a radical Reformed Christian whose theological discourse is best summed up in the Pauline message to the Corinthian Church:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

From the Accra Confession to the Call to Communion

In his leadership of the WCRC, Chris has guided the communion after its 2010 Grand Rapid Assembly approved the transformation of the organisation from an "Alliance" toward becoming a global "Communion of Reformed Churches." He was handed an ecumenical framework that was earlier shaped by the 2004 embrace of the Accra Confession. This ecumenical document challenged the Reformed faith community to respond, "as a matter of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ," to engage through their theological convictions, mission, and witness for justice in the global economy and environment. Economic justice was placed central to the confession of the Christian faith; it would no longer be regarded as optional but embraced as an imperative. The Accra Confession encouraged churches to relate their faith to resisting the global negative effects of neoliberal capitalism and economic order that deny life to people and the wider creation.

The acceptance of the Accra Confession became a radical shift in contemporary Reformed faith understanding and confession. Indeed, the reformed theological identity has historically carried within its identity an inherent contradiction. On



one hand it seeks radical renewal and transformation in people's lives, yet, on the other hand, it has also accommodated a propensity to legitimize what is evil if it delivers economic prosperity to the powerful elite class.¹ Therefore, the existence and contestations of multiple reformed identities around the world has resulted in an uncritical alliance with neoliberalism and neo-conservative socio-economic, political, and theological discourses that have produced the enslavement of people, especially those who live on the margins.

What Does It Mean to Live in Communion?

Embracing the concept of communion as central to the identity and vocation of the Reformed ecclesial community meant that this diverse community of churches acknowledged as inadequate the quality of their global witness to the unity and community of the church and of humanity. The community urgently needed to grow deeper the *koinonia* that Christ promised and to grow bolder in his service. Although there is no generic homogeneous reformed identity, the call and journey towards communion represents a journey of faith because, it could be argued, there exist an inherent dichotomy in the construct of Reformed identity/ies.

Although "communion" has been a familiar term used within the Reformed family, its usage is severely restricted to memorializing the death of Jesus. For many Reformed churches, communion was reduced to the experience of participating in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. The WARC and later the WCRC have had dialogue with other world communions of churches such as the Lutherans and Anglicans; these ecumenical encounters have deepened the understanding and significance of communion in recent decades. The question of what it means to be a communion has moved from a denominational and confessional experience to a deeper and radical gospel-shaped *koinonia* relationship with God in Christ and others living on the margins of society. This has pushed WCRC to journey beyond discerning how to live faithfully as a Reformed communion grappling with inner ecclesial conflicts and divisions, to deepen *koinonia* within and between our ecumenical partners and others working for the healing of the entire creation.

In Chris's Reformed identity, I detect what could be described as a missional mandate of his leadership to transform the WCRC's historical hermeneutical vulnerability. This involved owning up to its inconsistent theological and

¹ Roderick Hewitt, "The Reformed Identity and Mission from the Margins" *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* vol. 3, no. 2 (2017), 99-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n2.a04>.

missional approach to the plight of people living on the margins of society to a radical and costly embrace and solidarity. His articulation of the organisation's call to communion and the need to strengthen communion, was one of the key sub-themes of the 2017 Leipzig Assembly of the World Communion of Reformed Churches: "Living God, Renew and Transform Us." The significance of this focus on renewal and transformation necessitates the strengthening of communion not as a noun but as a verb within the diverse WCRC community. This would mean entering into experiences of the gospel imperative of *koinonia* that finds its source in the life of the Triune God. Communion is much more than a ritual to be observed each month. Rather, communion is in essence *koinonia* found in the church's identity in being the Body of Christ; it must be embraced as a divine gift and calling bequeathed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22). Therefore, it is relational and covenantal, as affirmed through scriptural emphasis on human beings subjected to God's sovereignty and living not for themselves but in mutual relationship with each other and God's created world.² Whether *koinonia* is embraced as a noun (what the church is) or as a verb (how the church acts), its divine mandate cannot be corrupted or neutralised by the church's diversity, disunity, and incomplete or inadequate reception of the gift and calling of *koinonia*.

The challenge that the WCRC faced under Chris's leadership as General Secretary is how to refashion the language of communion to take into account the diversity of the church, which does not in itself militate against *koinonia*. Indeed, the contemporary global reformed landscape faces threats of continuing disunity from churches that are no longer sure how to live out *koinonia* and may even choose to reject and abandon *koinonia* as a missional imperative, especially when they discriminate against others based upon their social, religious, and economic status. Within the diversity of global Reformed churches are different understandings and practice of communion because some churches are fearful of accepting and being honest with other churches because of religio-cultural and political biases.

The challenge of the church living out communion (*koinonia*) as a gift and calling constitutes an existential threat to the WCRC vocation and witness. Chris's leadership has helped churches to embody and nurture the life of *koinonia*. His writings and speeches consistently and with clarity articulate that *koinonia* represents a radical and transformative gift of God to empower the church

² *Koinonia: God's Gift and Calling: The Hiroshima Report of the International Reformed-Anglican Dialogue* (IRAD) 2020. (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2020)



to transform and overcome conflicts, so that people may experience healthy and wholesome relationships in their broken and hurting communities. Chris's ecumenical framework calls for the Reformed community to be "Reformed and always reforming (*semper reformanda*)" thus embracing *koinonia* that exists for the world and not the domestic inner ecclesial needs of the church. This type of *koinonia* begins in the worshipping life of the ecclesia but is always looking beyond self, beyond the faith community, to the world.

Rethinking *Koinonia* in the Light of COVID-19 Vaccine Nationalism

The contemporary global pandemic that COVID-19 has unleashed has further exposed the growing inequality between richer and poorer nations as vaccine nationalism and hoarding confirm the iniquitous state of world affairs. This injustice has called for urgent rethinking of the call to communion and the implications for the practice of justice and ecumenical engagement. The arrival and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since the start of 2020 has also transformed the ecumenical landscape and therefore necessitates a revisiting of perspectives on the call to communion. The global quest for effective vaccines to overcome the threats of the coronavirus has resulted in vaccine nationalism in which the richer nations, with their access to resources for research and development, have commodified access to the vaccine. Underdeveloped and lesser developed nations must wait at the back of the line for access to healthy living. When it comes to matters of health and wellbeing, who lives and who dies, it is the national interest of wealthy nations that comes first. This birds-of-a-feather vaccine club that flocks together has exposed the gross inequity in the current world order!

The spiritual gift of *koinonia* relationships constitutes an antithesis of this mode of existence. *Koinonia* of the Triune God posits that the wellbeing of the *oikumene* necessitates the wellbeing of the all within the *oikos*, not only the privileged few. In the current global vaccine accessibility scheme, in which developed nations have first access to the vaccine table, ecumenical perspectives on *koinonia* must also advocate socio-political and economic implications. If indeed, it is a myopic and unjust policy to overcome a global pandemic by rationing in favour of more power nations, then this foolish policy will ensure that in the long term no one on earth will be COVID-19 safe or immune. If the majority of the world's nations struggle to buy vaccines, then this must become a priority advocacy issue for the WCRC and the wider ecumenical community.

For *koinonia* relationships to produce fullness of life for all, as demonstrated in the ministry and mission of Jesus, radical hospitality is a prerequisite, characterized by openness to receiving the neighbours, especially those who live on the margins of society. In addition, this *koinonia* must prove itself resilient to overcome divisions and alienations tearing the world apart. This reconciling healing must be extended to the entire creation (Psalm 24). At the core of Christ's theological framework is the indispensable reality of God's justice; God's righteousness permeates every aspect of *koinonia*. All areas of human existence and experience comes under the purview of the divine *koinonia*, subjugating all threats to life and making them subject to God's sovereign reign. Since all of creation is groaning for God's salvation (Romans 8:19-23), then fullness and affirmation of life for all is the ultimate goal of God's *koinonia* life-giving mission. Therefore, all life-denying socio-economic and religio-political forces with controlling rights in the institutions that exercise power over the lives of people must be held to account by the churches' *koinonia* mission.

Christ's ecumenical and missional perspective is grounded in the *Missio Dei* and seeks always to be relevant and contextual. Therefore, although fixed upon Christ's example and the witness of the Word, Christ's perspectives are always "on the move," taking risks and "crossing over to the other side." He is always in the quest for deeper understanding and expressing solidarity, especially with vulnerable, suffering people. He embraces risky *koinonia* that is not afraid of the frightening, destabilising, threatening, and unfamiliar environments where vulnerable people are stigmatised and persecuted.

His legacy to the next General Secretary of WCRC will be that of an ambassador that represented well the Reformed Communion in the wider global ecumenical community and clearly articulated its vision and mission. The Achilles heel of the WCRC has consistently been its weak financial base that depends primarily upon northern European funding to maintain its headquarters and inadequate funds to promote global programs among the majority of its membership that comes from the Global South. The call to communion cannot be realised as a pilgrimage into a narrow spirituality experience. Rather, this call propels the disciples and the church into risky engagement with hurting communities. Therefore, although the headquarters of WCRC is located in the rich northern world of Europe, the majority of its constituency live, worship, and work within the communities of the world's poor where the threats to life are most intense. The *koinonia* mission of WCRC is called to bear witness to the power of the gospel of Christ as it engages with human pain, suffering, frailty, vulnerability, and death. The perceived economic weakness of the WCRC could be appropriated



as a missional strength in the demonstration of *koinonia* relationships that work for reconciliation, healing, and renewal among peoples and creation seeking fullness of life. As a communion of churches, the WCRC must engage in risky *koinonia*, not primarily through programmatic initiatives but more through its being, its lifestyle, through wholesome relationships that mutually challenge and equip one another in the *koinonia* mission of Christ.

Roderick R. Hewitt is president of the International University of the Caribbean (Jamaica) and an honorary professor at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa).

Transformative Ecumenism: Reverting, Rerouting, and Rebalancing the Ecumenical Movement

Victoria Turner

Abstract

This article reflects on the project of Transformative Ecumenism and the witness of Chris Ferguson during his time as General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), and argues that he has enabled a rediscovery of the original energy and object of ecumenism. This article is written by a young ecumenist from the West, and it analyses how this new approach, discerning Christ's call from the marginalised, challenges existing ecumenical paradigms to see beyond their own contexts and beyond the safety of the church. It also outlines that, through their daring approaches, Transformative Ecumenism and Chris inspire young Christians to see the relevance of their faith in fighting for a more just world.

Introduction

In 1989, Konrad Raiser posed that the ecumenical movement had gone through a time of paradigm shift.¹ Since that publication, it has felt like the ecumenical movement has instead been only crawling gradually for thirty-two years. Those crawling are constantly met with institutional blockades, internal agendas, and political sensitivities set by the powerful in the churches that leave the ecumenical movement itself with no time to breathe, let alone with the ability to formulate its own voice. This rigidity in the movement has alienated younger generations. Younger theologians gathered for the International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism stated:

The ecumenical movement is in crisis—a deep crisis painfully felt everywhere. It is a crisis brought by a prophetic bankruptcy in terms of the movement, an intellectual bankruptcy in terms of the ecumenical spirit or vision, and a moral bankruptcy in terms of the leadership. The ecumenical movement is no longer strongly rooted in the people and it does not speak a prophetic voice which echoes in the realities of people's struggles for life. The ecumenical movement no longer produces a new and heart-beating vision for the church and the world that are deeply divided and wounded.

¹ K. Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 112-120.



The ecumenical leadership has suffered from bureaucratic and business-orientated mindedness that lacks the sense of calling and devotion.²

This bold and fearless testimony is characteristic of youth engagement in ecumenism.³ My own context, the United Kingdom, has suffered from a complete disengagement of young people with the national ecumenical movements from the end of the 1980s.⁴ This paper will argue that the ecumenical movement cannot be transformed from the inside by the same revered leaders in the same comfortable conference settings. Ecumenism did not originate from the churches, but acted as a challenge to the churches. It was this relationship that caught the imagination of youth, and the vision of young people is integral for the ecumenical movement to go forward.⁵

It must also be outlined that this kind of statement delivered by young people must hurt those who have devoted their life to the mission of the ecumenical movement. Yet Jooseop Keum reflects with an old Korean proverb that “a good medicine is bitter.”⁶ Transformative Ecumenism is built upon a sacrifice. It sacrifices the usual, comfortable methods of ecumenism to venture into the eyes of young people, the Majority World, women, and the marginalised. It moves beyond structures and confidence to be with those who leave their homes to protest on the streets for equality and dignity for life. It values, but also tames, abundances of theological and ecclesiological education to meet people where they are and understand that the Spirit moves beyond our parameters of academia. Ultimately, Transformative Ecumenism is a movement that is constantly critical of power and aims to elevate and listen before acting. This giving up of privilege to discern carefully is what characterises the movement and the Christ’s witness. It is also what will reengage young people with the witness of Christian unity for today’s world.

2 Seoul Colloquium Concept Paper, *International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism*, <https://www.miraeforum.org/20>.

3 See A. J. Van Der Bent, *From Generation to Generation: The Story of Youth in the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), esp. 81-91.

4 It should be noted that in recent years work has been undertaken to rectify this.

5 R. Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007), 1, 5-8, 57, 180-182.

6 J. Keum, “Transforming Discipleship: Faith, Love and Hope After Empire,” *15th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture, 2019* (Indianapolis: Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry, 2020), 8.

Reverting: Returning to the Original Source of the Energy for Ecumenism

It is often proposed that the goal of ecumenism is to bring the churches together. As mentioned, the original inspiration for the ecumenical movement came from outside of the churches. The British historian Brian Stanley has argued that the attribution of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference as the beginning of the ecumenical movement has led scholars to overlook the missional imperative of the conference and paint an ecumenical agenda onto a gathering that was fundamentally hostile against the discussion of intra-church relations.⁷ Edinburgh 1910 did elicit excitement towards ecumenical cooperation and caused the creation of the International Missionary Council (IMC), but this was inspired by the different contexts the churches found themselves in through engagement in foreign missions. The drive toward church unity was most loudly voiced by the youngest delegate of the conference, Beijing-born, twenty-eight-year-old Cheng Jingyi.⁸ His brave plea for “a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions” in China attracted an even greater volume of contemporary contempt than the more fervently remembered plea for egalitarian friendship from V. S. Azariah.⁹

It was not only young people at the conference in 1910 from the Majority World that made an impact. This conference was possible only because of the example of the student movements.¹⁰ Beginning in the 1890s with a highly evangelical impetus, captured with its tagline “the evangelization of the world in this generation,” the student movements enabled young people from different denominations to pray, explore their faith and discuss the Bible together while maintaining their independent denominational ties. John R. Mott, the chairman of Edinburgh 1910, worked with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), and it was the new vision of mission coming from these movements that inspired him to convene the third International World Missionary Conference.¹¹ The secretary was J. H. Oldham,

7 B. Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Michigan: W. B Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 9.

8 ‘Ch’eng Ching-yi’ in H. L. Boorman, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1967), 284–286.

9 B. Stanley, “The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: Sifting History from Myth,” *The Expository Times* vol. 121 no. 7 (2010), 325–331, 329.

10 Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 6-7.

11 C. H. Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: W. B Eerdmans, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), 210, 343.



the educational secretary for the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in Britain.¹² Current students were employed to work as stewards at Edinburgh 1910, influencing William Temple in his career.¹³ It was the model devised and practised by students and young people that was replicated at Edinburgh, where mission was ultimately seen as beyond the independent scope of the home churches.¹⁴

The end of the First World War saw an influx of students who could not have afforded it previously entering higher education with government grants awarded after military service.¹⁵ This created an air of optimism and hope and a feeling of liberal evangelicalism that gradually turned its attention to social problems at home throughout the 1920s. The SCM was fully involved in the world. Students were encouraged to “read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”¹⁶ The link between the student movements and the new World Council for Churches (WCC) (1948) was one that was strong and celebrated. Notwithstanding the personal influence the WSCF had for the majority of ecumenical leaders until the 1960s, it also had its head office in Geneva, and the first General Secretary of the WCC, Visser’t Hooft, transferred from working for the WSCF to the infant WCC, thanks to Oldham’s incessant influence.¹⁷ The student movements emphasised the unbreakable link between mission and unity.¹⁸

Before the creation of the WCC, ecumenism involved the churches, but it was not a movement solely for or by the churches. Conversations that led to the creation of the WCC involved church leaders, lay people, women, youth, and representatives of the existing ecumenical bodies—namely Faith and Order, Life and Work, the IMC, the WSCF and the YMCA.¹⁹ The witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his belief that the ecumenical movement could recognise where the gospel is, holding churches in mutual accountability to each other, implies the need of some distance between the body of ecumenism and the

12 R. Boyd, *Church Ahead of the Church*, 12.

13 B. Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 6.

14 K. Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 75.

15 R. Boyd, *Church Ahead of the Church*, 23.

16 Ibid. 45.

17 K. Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 340-342.

18 M. T. B. Laing, *From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021) 29.

19 K. Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 338.

individual requirements of each church.²⁰ In an opposing direction was the influential work of Hendrik Kraemer. Kraemer pushed that the aim of mission was to establish and develop the presence of the church throughout the world, and the responsibility for mission was entrusted to the whole church.²¹ This theological emphasis eventually led to the integration of the IMC into the WCC in 1961 to equalise the previous colonial relationship between “mission-sending” churches from the West to “mission-receiving” churches from the Majority World.²² Although the claim that the “unity of the church and the mission of the church both belong, in equal degree, to the essence of the Church” is not necessarily at odds with the SCM claim of the indivisibility between unity and mission, the church-centred preoccupation of the ecumenical movement limited its ability for radical witness.²³ Yoon-Jae Chang reflects that “the essence of being the church depends on the church’s responsiveness to the crises of the world... the ecumenical movement is not something that grows from within the church. On the contrary, it is the calling of the Holy Spirit forcefully advancing into the church. It is not an explosion out of the church, but an implosion into the church.”²⁴ The next section of this paper follows the example of the national ecumenical scene in the UK to demonstrate how a solely church-dictated ecumenism closes the door to the outside world.

Rerouting: The Institutionalization of Ecumenism through the Churches and the Distraction of Diversity

Ecumenism in the UK since 1990 has been entirely church-led through English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish national “churches together” models. This has reduced the previously powerful, overarching British Council of Churches (BCC), inaugurated by William Temple in 1942, to the current Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), which acts as “a small agency offering ecumenical

20 K. Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2015), 105.

21 H. Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology, Vol. II: Theologies of Mission* (Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018) 63.

22 K. Kim, “Mission: Integrated or Autonomous? Implications for the Study of World Christianity,” in A. Chow and E. Wild-Wood, ed., *Ecumenism and Independency in World Christianity: Historical Studies in Honour of Brian Stanley* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 62-80, 62-66.

23 “Report of the Joint Committee of the WCC and the IMC: A Draft Plan of Integration,” *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 10 no. 1 (1957), 73.

24 Yoon-Jae Chang, “The Reformation of Jan Hus as Inspiration for Transformative Ecumenism,” *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 69 no. 2 (2017), 225-236, 233.



projects to the churches.”²⁵ Keith Clements, former General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches, who sat on the board of the BCC beginning in 1984, lamented the decision to change the model of ecumenism in the UK to a “churchly” run organism. He despaired at the “churches’ unfaithfulness to the solemn commitments made then [at the 1987 Inter-Church Conference] to journey more closely together on the way to visible unity.”²⁶ The desire of the churches to inspire and challenge each other in mission dissipated as secularism rose in the UK. The large denominations quickly turned inward to increase their own flocks, leaving the Reformed churches, the original motivators for ecumenism, marginalised in structure where they had no agency to move forward beyond uninterested members. The British church scene seemed content with “superficial ecumenism” as Clements reflected. The process of transitioning from the BCC to the national bodies, named “Beyond 1984,” also alienated young people. The SCM were invited to participate, but the delegated students returned from the discussion feeling “sad” and “angry.” Their written contribution was ignored, their leadership skills denied by the view that only church leaders could fill this role, and they felt it was set with an “outdated agenda which failed to notice all that had been happening in the student revolution of the 60s and 70s.”²⁷ Part of the rationale to turn away from the BCC model was to equalise power in the ecumenical movement and move away from having “ecumenical experts.” These experts in ecumenism, however, have been replaced with “ecclesiastical experts” who, in representing their sending denominations, have only that church’s best interest at heart.²⁸ With every involved person on the ecumenical body working to advance the mission of their own church, a unity in heart, mind, and action is hard to produce.

Even more concerning, perhaps, than the ecumenical movement having no agency to act beyond the agreement of all participating churches, is the view that the ecumenical movement should not act at all. Henning Wrogemann proposes that mission as *oikumenical* doxology should not aim to “establish organisational unity, nor achieve unity in confession, nor even necessarily to enable cooperation; rather, the purpose is to maintain contact with other

25 K. Clements, *Look Back in Hope: An Ecumenical Life* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 373.

26 Ibid.

27 R. Boyd, *Church Ahead of the Church*, 134.

28 The reality of the Presidents of Churches Together in England is a good example of this. “The Presidents of Churches Together in England, Churches Together in England. <https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/234710/Home/About/Presidents/Presidents.aspx>

Christians.²⁹ Wrogemann emphasises that the purpose of Christian unity is to praise God in cultural plurality, based upon partnerships in society and of respect that ultimately “avoid all harm and violence to others.”³⁰ Contact with others, however, does not immediately produce a partnership. For people to be partners, there usually has to be an agreed-upon goal, and the implicit idea that different Christian missions are always working for the same thing is dangerous. The Accra Confession of the WCRC bravely states that unity and justice cannot be divorced. It also proclaims, “we humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgement of God’s justice.”³¹ There is a need to subject ourselves to scrutiny with the humility of knowing that we, as churches and mission societies, also make mistakes. This scrutiny needs to come both from other churches and mission bodies and, more importantly, from voices that are not easily heard inside of churchly or institutional structures.

There is a need to see beyond the church that I propose cannot be done only by church leaders. On December 22, 2020, more than 2,800 lorries were stranded on the coast of Kent, denied access to France because of fears about the new strain of COVID-19 in the UK. The drivers were unable to restock provisions while waiting. The local Sikh community and the NGO Khalsa Aid quickly moved to feed the drivers.³² Meanwhile the churches were debating whether it was correct to open for in-person services—a privilege for which many had been fighting the government.³³ The debate about how to keep people safe and connected during Christmas was, of course, an important one, but I cannot help but imagine Jesus feeding the hungry in the rain, not sitting on Zoom by the fire in a church meeting. This is not to throw the church leaders into their fires, but to argue that to really uphold diversity in the ecumenical movement, different gifts need to be honoured equally: gifts that are held by a plethora of people in a plethora of roles that follow Jesus and his mission. And after these alternate voices are invited to the table, their previously overlooked witness needs to be elevated.

29 H. Wrogemann, “Christian Mission and Globalisation: Current Trends and Future Challenges,” J. G. Flett and D. W. Congdon, ed., *Converting Witness: The Future of Christian Mission in the New Millennium* (London: Fortress Press, 2019), 209.

30 Ibid. 209.

31 World Communion of Reformed Churches, *The Accra Confession*, (2004). <http://wrcr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TheAccraConfession-English.pdf>.

32 T. Perry, “Generous Sikhs Feed Hundreds of Starving Truck Drivers Stuck at the French Border,” *UpWorthy* (23/12/2020). <https://www.upworthy.com/sikhs-come-together-to-feed-hundreds-of-starving-uk-truck-drivers-stuck-at-the-france-border>.

33 H. Sherwood, “Churches Rethink Christmas Services and Carol Singing Due to Covid,” *The Guardian* (24/12/2020). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/24/churches-rethink-christmas-services-and-carol-singing-due-to-covid>.



The beauty of the ecumenical movement should be its daring nature to explore the difficult questions that individual churches are not equipped to ask. To see things with fresh eyes. And to challenge the churches to engage with the reality of the world.

Rebalancing: The Ecumenical Movement for Others

We cannot go back to the models that preceded the World Council of Churches. This paper has highlighted their ability to see and work beyond the churches, but it has not effectively portrayed how only certain individuals had a voice in these circles. Kirsteen Kim relays that, “The WCC... was a product of the colonial view that presumed that unity between the historic denominations of Europe would, largely in and of itself, unify Christians globally.”³⁴ The ecumenical movement has listened to and integrated postcolonial voices, but now must be brave enough to venture into a process of decolonization. A larger representation of voices is a good start, but we also have to interrogate how current structures allow academia, power, implicit influence, and historical legacies to still set the agenda. The ecumenical movement must question all aspects of what it considers “normal” and must also recognise and call out the negative implications of powerful church structures.

Pauline Webb wrote in 1993, “... there always seems to have been a fear that too much activity on the part of women would rock the ecumenical boat.”³⁵ Transformative Ecumenism flips the boat around. The recent discernment process of the WCRC has prioritised listening, especially to the Majority World and marginalised groups, for the purpose of discerning our present *kairos* moment, imagining a different future, and acting in hope. Similarly, the Korean Institute for Future Ecumenism and WCRC “Discerning Transformative Ecumenism in a Pandemic-Stricken World” webinars and discussions principally explored how to see beyond issues that preoccupy and stifle the ecumenical movement to concentrate on how unified witness can work toward a future that grants life for all.

Johannes (Hans) C. Hoekendijk argued that the church was an “illegitimate centre” for mission.³⁶ God’s mission, he argued, will be enacted in the world beyond the church as *Missio Dei* is about God’s Kingdom, not his church. The

34 K. Kim, “Mission: Integrated or Autonomous?” 63-64.

35 P. Webb, *She Flies Beyond: Memories and Hopes of Women in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 14.

36 Laing, *From Crisis to Creation*, 72-73.

church lives simply for service towards the whole *oikumene*.³⁷ Hoekendijk's "church for others" is best communicated by Chris religiously promoting and wearing the WCC "Thursday in Black" campaign. Aruna Gnanadason passionately writes, "Women are not safe in peace times or in times of war and conflict and even in the church."³⁸ Taking time to remember this every Thursday is the first step. Chris's remembering, however, prompts action. He will not dominate the room with his extensive knowledge; he actively listens to all with equal attention and will ensure everyone in a space is invited to speak. This letting go of the usual procedure, power, and influence is the biggest step forward for the ecumenical movement.

Conclusion

"The prophet is not a rock of brave, stoic solidarity.... We do not rush to the cross, trembling with scarcely contained excitement of eagerly anticipated, triumphant martyrdom. We fight with God, through sweat turned into blood, to take the cup away from us. Nevertheless, the prophet stands against the power of the powerful, not because the prophet is so strong, but because the prophet is overcome by that other power, and by that alternative vision that contradicts the present, and that holds out such an irresistible promise."³⁹ Alan Boesak has the gift of constantly reminding us that the prophetic road is not the comfortable or popular one, but it is one that must be taken when it shows itself. There is a place for lamenting former goals, structures, and visions, but there is also a need to grasp onto new energy that extends and pushes our old ideas. Yoon-Jae Chang implores us to establish justice and peace throughout the whole world and not "settle within a narrow fellowship of the churches."⁴⁰ The authenticity of sitting with and fighting for the powerless and vulnerable is the vision that captures young ecumenists. The role of the ecumenical movement is not to be agreeable to the churches, but to transform the churches to be able to participate in God's transforming of the world. The "irresistible promise" will not be found hiding in church corners, but on the streets of our scandalous world.

Victoria Turner, an ordained minister in the United Reformed Church (UK), is an academic working at the Centre for the Study of World Christianity, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh (Scotland).

37 Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 73-77.

38 A. Gnanadason, *With Courage and Compassion: Women and the Ecumenical Movement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 97.

39 A. A. Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 37.

40 Yoon-Jae Chang, "The Reformation of Jan Hus," p.234.



Discerning and Acting on the Signs of the Time: Diakonia as a Prophetic Core for Transformative Ecumenism

Drea Fröchtling

Transformative ecumenism has many facets and expressions, and diakonia as one facet of “doing theology” is central to it.¹

This article highlights a major contribution to a renewed, transformative, and justice-seeking understanding of diakonia by Chris Ferguson and Ofelia Ortega. It is based upon a 2002 study document entitled *Ecumenical Diakonia*, which the two authors developed for the Regional Relations Team of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The document provides, next to biblical insights on the issue, a thorough and robust analysis of globalization and its often fatal consequences on communities, working with testimonies from a number of WCC regions.

This document, published in Spanish, has had a major impact on further ecumenical reflections and diaconal action, including “Diakonia in Context”² or “Called to Transformative Action.”³

Taking up some previous findings of the WCC Regional Relations Team, Ferguson and Ortega affirm

- a) “the biblical understanding of diakonia as reconciling, compassionate, transformative, justice-seeking and prophetic” (3/11)⁴ and
- b) the “strong consensus that our faith leads us to action, that it is change-

1 Limited space requires a focus on topic, claim, and area of engagement of transformative ecumenism. This means other relevant aspects, players, and themes of transformative ecumenism are, unfortunately, omitted. The websites and YouTube channels of the Korea Institute for Future Ecumenism (KIFE), for example, offer many documents, webinars, and discussions on transformative ecumenism. A brief summary of discourses and consultations spearheaded, *inter alia*, by KIFE and its partners is offered by Mary-Anne Plaatjes van Huffel, “From Conciliar Ecumenism to Transformative Receptive Ecumenism,” *HTS Theological Studies*, vol. 73 no. 3 (2017), a4353. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4353>.

2 “Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment,” (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2009).

3 “Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia” (draft), (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, Act Alliance & World Council of Churches, 2018).

4 Cited according to the English, unpublished draft version. Pages numbers are cited according to the Spanish version, with slight differences in part because of editorial processes preceding the Spanish version. Thanks to Karin Saarmann, Berlin, for providing support with the Spanish quotes. Chris Ferguson and Ofelia Ortega, *La Diaconía Ecueménica: Reconciliadora, Compasiva, Transformadora, Profética, Procuradora de Justicia* (Quito: CLAI, 2006), https://issuu.com/clai/docs/diakonia_ecumenica.

oriented and boldly addresses the root causes of suffering and injustice" (3/11).

Ferguson and Ortega describe ecumenical diakonia as people-centred. It calls for building just relationships and for promoting mutuality (3/11). Ecumenical diakonia is expected to "empower... people to be agents of their own transformation and development" (3/11). It impacts on the world at large, but also reforms and transforms the church that, in itself, "is transformed through the service it offers to the world" (3/11).

In nine affirmations, Ferguson and Ortega highlight major aspects and requirements of a diaconal understanding and praxis that seeks transformation of the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world.

Affirmation 1: Responding to global and local contexts

In their study document, the authors emphasize the "essential inter-relationship between global, regional and local contexts" (4/15) and take their vantage point from those at the receiving end of globalization where "globalization is predominately experienced as a process that excludes, marginalises and fragments communities," (5/17) and as a threat to lives and life in abundance.

Ferguson and Ortega argue "that our understanding of diakonia must be shaped by the changing world situation" (4/15) and must start with "reading the signs of the time" (4/16). To render a faithful service to the world and creation at large, "a clear understanding of our contexts, both local and global" (4/16) is seen as essential.

Ferguson and Ortega identify dominant strands of, *inter alia*, neoliberal economic globalization as a force with major impact on people, context, and the quality of life. Highlighting the excluding, life-risking patterns and disdainful aspects of it, Ferguson and Ortega assert:

"We see so many threats to life and a consistent deterioration of life in all its forms. If we had to identify a common denominator for the whole set of circumstances, we could call it **disdain** for the life of the other. The "other"—our neighbour, in Biblical terms—is social and politically ignored, economically excluded or sexually subjugated. If the 'other' is not the subject of exploitation, they simply don't exist for the record." (6/19)



Ferguson and Ortega strongly oppose these underlying global politics of “othering” by exclusion and disdain, and instead highlight the Pauline imagery of the one body, suffering as a whole when one part of it suffers (4/16). Ecumenical diakonia, then, goes well beyond the classical diaconal approach of merely dressing the wounds of the wounded. Ferguson and Ortega strongly posit that ecumenical diakonia is closely connected to “reading the signs of the time,” and also has the clear task to see to the mechanisms, structures, and powers that exclude, dehumanize, and risk and cause death, stating:

“The reading of the signs of the time reaffirms why ecumenical diakonia must not ignore the root causes of the suffering of those who we seek to serve. Diakonia cannot be detached from peace, justice and transformation.” (7/21)

Affirmation 2: Calling to participate in God’s mission

The concept and praxis of mission forms an essential element in Ferguson’s and Ortega’s reflection on ecumenical diakonia. Both posit that

- a) the “call to participate in God’s mission leads us to work as co-creators, with the conviction that all may have life abundantly” (John 10:10) (9/25),
- b) “service and solidarity are not separable from mission and witness,” (9/25) and⁵
- c) “God’s mission is expressed in a life-centred promise of abundant life for all people and all of the Creation” (9/25).

Thus, Ferguson and Ortega represent an understanding of God’s mission that is biocentric and inclusive of creation at large: “The sending of God is not anthropocentric but biocentric.... It is a question of liberation, salvation, and redemption of life in general” (12/32). This biocentric notion of God’s mission and redemption is based on a theology of life, described by the authors as “the defence of life through human rights in the political, social, economic, cultural, and ecological domains” (10/26). Consequently, Ferguson and Ortega depict ecumenical diakonia as “liberation for salvation” (11/28) based on Christ’s divine salvation of life (13/32), which implied the “healing of the sick, the acceptance of the marginalized, the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of life damaged by the powers of destruction” (13/32).

⁵ For further approaches on a holistic, diaconal understanding of the mission of the church see, e.g., Kjell Nordstokke, “Reflections on the Theology of Diakonia,” *Diakonian tutkimus* vol 2 (2011), 223-233, 227 et al.

Ferguson and Ortega base their perception of a theology of life further on the notion of solidarity, arguing: “At the centre of Christian theology, there appears then a solitary God in solidarity with the victims. A theological interpretation, in this perspective, looks on the event of the cross as a divine act of solidarity with the excluded and the innocent victims of history” (11/30).

Affirmation 3: Prophetic in words and deeds

Ferguson and Ortega introduce ecumenical diakonia as prophetic in nature, explicating in the introduction:

“Prophetic diakonia addresses the root causes of injustice while also addressing human suffering and brokenness, seeking long-term and sustainable responses to urgent challenges and human needs. This diakonia emphasises capacity building, empowering regions to contribute to the building up of the *Oikoumene* and Christ’s service.” (2/8f.)

The third affirmation takes up this prophetic notion. Ferguson and Ortega caution that a distinction between prophecy and diakonia can and must be made, arguing that prophecy “is indeed different from diakonia, but diakonia can be prophetic in so far as it is performed in the name of God” (14). Thus, diakonia can become a signature of God’s presence: “Thus, diakonia, the service of God to our fellow men and women, has as its goal the concrete presence of God. Diakonia is the sign of God with and among us” (14/33).

Ferguson and Ortega spell out prophetic diakonia on three levels:

- a) *Individual*: Prophetic diakonia requires change —structurally, politically, economically and essentially, i.e., in the core of the human being itself. Here Ferguson and Ortega assert that the “demands of prophetic diakonia are ethical. It is the change of the ‘old nature’ into the ‘new nature....’ For this to occur, our ‘hearts of stone’ must be transformed into ‘hearts of flesh.’ God’s promise comes along with this transformation” (15/36).
- b) *Ecclesial*: A prophetic church is called to internalize the suffering of all those who have been “othered,” excluded, violated, and harmed in their pursuit of life in its fullness. Ferguson and Ortega state in this regard: “The Church will not be able to find relief for others without taking over the burden of their suffering in a way that resembles Jesus. Thus, prophetic diakonia must challenge the faith community to develop concrete contextual strategies to fight against the roots of individual, structural, and cosmic suffering. In the pursuit of this purpose, it must turn to all



the interdisciplinary resources offered by the diversity of spiritual gifts. Likewise, it must take into consideration the dimensions of consolation, prevention, healing, and transformation of suffering” (16/38). Here the authors draw a close link between the being of the church and its doings.

- c) *Socio-economic, structural and political*: Ferguson and Ortega describe the function of the prophets, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, “to raise their voices to denounce the evils and to announce the vision of the world and the human being given to them by God.” (14/33). Ecumenical diakonia, prophetic in nature, follows that biblical directive and example.

In the individual, the ecclesial, and the socio-economic-political arena, prophetic ecumenical diakonia strongly bears the aspect of witnessing, as affirmed by Ferguson and Ortega: “We are called to bear witness (*martyria*) to the Risen Christ before the world of Death. God affirms life” (17/39).

Affirmation: 4: Transformative and justice-seeking

Transformation and justice-seeking are core characteristics of ecumenical diakonia. In their fourth affirmation, Ferguson and Ortega link transformation and justice-seeking with issues of dignity and empowerment, explaining in more detail:

Following Jesus we seek a diaconal response that takes into account immediate human needs in such a way as to contribute to the structural change necessary to eliminate the causes of human suffering and distress. So we do not simply attend to structural change and attend to the direct needs of people and communities. Rather we attend to the direct needs of people in a way that empowers them to be agents of change.⁶ Our diakonia of direct service must be transformative and dignifying to those with whom we serve. Our actions must form part of a cycle of empowerment which places the affected people and communities at the centre stage, acting as their own advocates and acting as agents of their own development and service (18/41).

⁶ Here Ferguson and Ortega also engage the prominent notion of “helping”: “The call to justice-seeking diakonia leads us to keep a constant tension between responding to those who suffer in the here and now in terms of basic human needs and doing it such a way as to empower and transform. This implies that we do not ‘help’ in any way that works against justice” (19/43). A further implication of this also entails the respect for the personhood of those requiring assistance: “Our theological understanding of all people being made in the image and likeness of God created with equal worth and dignity means that we can never treat people as objects or mere clients” (18/41).

Ferguson and Ortega strongly emphasize mutuality and equality in diaconal relationships, arguing, “Transformative service must embody attitudes of mutuality and equality while renouncing superiority (especially that which is falsely disguised as humility) and power over others” (19/42). Introducing the notion of *kenosis*,⁷ the self-emptying love of Jesus, the authors view a transformative diakonia as an expression of it (19/42).

The “biblical-theological vision for justice-seeking diakonia” is unfolded by Ferguson and Ortega as a “call... for solidarity with the poorest, the marginalised, the excluded, the oppressed” (20/45). Such a call is not “optional,” but carries the character of a demand if God’s mission is taken seriously:

Justice-seeking diakonia is not one of the many types of diakonia from which we can choose according to our tastes or our situation. Whatever our circumstances, whatever specific needs we are called to serve, our diakonia, if it is to be faithful to God’s mission, must seek to be transformative and justice-seeking (21/46).

Ferguson and Ortega posit that the call to be partners with God in the *Missio Dei* “is not simply a consequence of our faith but is intrinsic to it. The biblical imperative of Social Justice and love of neighbour is at its core theological” (21/46). Being a justice-seeking partner in God’s mission transforms those served, but also the servant church at large (20/44).

Diaconal actors are accountable for their praxis, theologically as well as with regard to “the social and political consequences of our diakonia” (19/42).

Affirmation 5: Inseparable from *Koinonia*:

Koinonia (fellowship) accounts for the inter-relatedness and mutuality in the one body of Christ and in and with creation at large. Ferguson and Ortega see an inalienable link between diakonia and *koinonia*, impacting on ecumenical relationships at large: “Diakonia and *Koinonia* are inseparable. By upholding the expressions of local and regional experiences, and by interpreting the global

⁷ Under their fifth affirmation, Ferguson and Ortega describe *kenosis* as a model for ecumenical diakonia as well as an immersion into the worlds and struggles of those construed as “others”: “God’s self-emptying love of/in Christ, or the self-emptying love of Christ himself is called *Kenosis*. *Kenosis*, in terms of the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-8, is in principle the model for ecumenical diakonia. This kenotic experience is the rebirth of the church as a church of life, a Samaritan church, that listens to ‘others’ and enters into dialogue with them as it serves them—and it does so not ‘from the outside..., but from within others’ struggles, sufferings, and hopes in the name of God’s project for life for all Creation” (25/54).



ecumenical situation at the regional level, we are deepening and broadening the ecumenical fellowship" (23/49), "seeking an expression of visible unity, confessional and cultural diversity of churches" (23/49f.).

Ferguson and Ortega characterize the church as "essentially a community of sharing" (23/49), "prefiguring the fellowship in the Kingdom of God" (25). As *koinonia*, the church "is founded on the participation of all members in the body of Christ, who shared his life with us even to death of the cross" (23/49). Looking in more detail in Eucharistic traditions and mis-developments, for example in the early church, the authors conclude that the Eucharist is "a most powerful paradigm for sharing life" (23/49). Partaking in this sharing of life in the Eucharist, "it gives a new identity to the church, a new covenant in one body" (23/49).⁸

Living out *koinonia* in an inclusive, participatory, and sharing church has its bearings on diaconal work:

Due to the radical character of Jesus' mission in the world, any pastoral work carried out to accomplish this project cannot content itself with harmonious superficial relationships, but has to go to the roots of the domination and exploitation practised by some people and sectors over others (24f./53)

Dehumanizing relationships based on power, dominion and exploitation need to be unmasked, engaged and transformed.⁹

Affirmation 6: Global diakonia for all people and the whole of creation

Ferguson and Ortega affirm that "...justice-seeking diakonia includes 'eco-justice'" (26/55) and clearly point to the intricate entanglement we face with (neo-)colonialism and globalisation, serving particular interests, while the biblical vision "extends God's care to all the nations of the earth. Here again, Paul's image of the body reminds us of the unity and interconnectedness of the whole" (26/56):

The biblical vision of transformative diakonia and *koinonia* is based on a vision of an inclusive community where there is room for all, where women

8 A Calvinist perspective of the Eucharist as a kind of "spiritual banquet" with consequences is explored by Meijers. For details see Erica Meijers, "Come and Eat: Table Fellowship as a Fundamental Form of Diakonia" *Diakonia*, vol. 10 (2019), 85-111, 93ff.

9 For further reflection on communion as "counter-empire," see Collin Cowan, "Keynote: Strengthening Communion," *Reformed World*, vol. 67 no. 2 (2017). 62-71, 65.

and men, boys and girls participate, and where no one is excluded based on race, class, caste, ability, age, sexual orientation or any other barrier (26/56).

In their critical discernment of neoliberal economic globalization, Ferguson and Ortega point to the destructive fragmentation inherent to it: “We have seen the destructive fragmentation of economic globalization. In the face of the competition and division brought by the global market” (27/57). They introduce the notion of solidarity as a means and a way of life that counters fragmentation, exclusion, exploitation of people(s) and the earth, arguing: “The Gospel of Life calls us to build up the body and replace fragmentation, exclusion and disdain for the life of the other with love and human solidarity. Solidarity is a key biblical value based on love and the intrinsic value of all life” (27/57).

Ecumenical diakonia lives out such a solidarity, and it does so in a twofold global sense, described by Ferguson and Ortega as follows:

Ecumenical diakonia is global in that it is called to respond to the reality of globalised injustice. It is global because it calls for the whole ecumenical community to join together in diaconal action worldwide as part of one body. The vision includes the whole inhabited earth, that is to say respect and love for all of creation (27/58).

Given the all-pervasive global patterns of exclusion, disdain, and life-threatening and life-destroying practices inherent in economic globalization, Ferguson and Ortega emphasize the urgency to act, as churches and believers as well as parts of regional and global networks, initiatives, and alliances with “whoever also seeks justice, peace and the integrity of creation” (27/58):¹⁰

In constructing alliance for life in the face of those forces which bring death and destruction, we affirm that ecumenical diakonia goes beyond the church. We have already clearly seen that we are called to serve our neighbour and that diakonia is not about service only to other churches or other Christians. The biblical vision pushes us even farther to affirm alliances with all those who seek the welfare of the *oikoumene* and who seek justice and resist evil (27/57f.).

Describing ecumenical diakonia as macro-ecumenical and macro-diakonia

¹⁰ Theological reflections on interfaith alliances from an Islamic perspective were offered by Farid Esack in his contribution to the 2017 General Council of the WCRC in Leipzig, Germany. Farid Esack, “Keynote: Mission in Communion,” *Reformed World*, vol. 67 no. 2 (2017). 25-39.



(27/58), Ferguson and Ortega call for “social alliances and inter-faith alliance and in those to address the global threat to life” (27/59).

Affirmation 7: Healing, reconciliation, reconstruction

Affirmation seven is closely interlinked with the affirmations looking at justice-seeking and *koinonia*, affirmations four and five. Calling for reconciled, just relationships in a sharing community of life, Ferguson and Ortega state that “...reconciliation and equity are essential to the Eucharistic vision of sharing” (29/60). Basis for reconciled relationships is the reconciliation offered by God to humankind:

The ministry of reconciliation flows from God’s reconciliation with humankind where enmity is replaced by right relationships. In the midst of destroyed relationships, the ministry of reconciliation is part of service and solidarity. The essential elements of reconciliation are truth, justice, forgiveness, and repentance (29/60).

Amidst a broken world, the church should intervene as a “healing community so that Diakonia becomes a healing force in society” (29/60). Reconciliation is fostered by repentance: A renewal of previously unjust, exploitative relationships is possible, healing can take place.

Affirmation 8: Building just relationships, mutuality and sharing

The second-to-last affirmation takes its lead from the 1987 El Escorial Consultation and ensuing processes and guidelines. Various aforementioned aspects related to ecumenical diakonia are also core elements of the vision developed at this consultation:

We must acknowledge and address the unequal distribution of power, including within the ecumenical family itself, and reaffirm that ecumenical diakonia calls for continual struggle for a just and equitable sharing of resources” (31/63). The El Escorial vision is a biblically rooted call to be a Eucharist community of sharing, forging just relationships based on mutuality, power sharing, participation, empowerment and accountability. The theological vision of El Escorial remains a rich source of inspiration for our understanding of Ecumenical Diakonia. Sharing in solidarity requires the building of just relationships and addressing the imbalances of power and access to material resources so that life may be shared! (33/67).

Different from traditional charity-based diaconal approaches that created a stark asymmetry between the “haves and the have-nots,” the “helper” and the “needy” person, ecumenical diakonia does not reduce people to objects of “handouts” in structures of dependency, but rather emphasizes the ability and capability of mutual sharing. In Ferguson’s and Ortega’s words:

Ecumenical sharing fosters true reciprocity by affirming that all have something to give as well as to receive. The spiritual, human, and cultural gifts are as valuable and essential as the material. An essential part of this ecumenical sharing is receiving the rich testimonies of the regions who offer traditions of sharing from their cultures which offer an alternative to the dominant culture (32/66).

Ecumenical sharing in this sense transforms notions of “giver” and “receiver” and challenges diaconal approaches that have a tendency towards asymmetrical relationships.

Affirmation 9: Summary and call

By way of summary, Ferguson and Ortega here bring together the gist of the aforementioned affirmations. Positing that “...true diakonia following Christ’s example and rooted in the Eucharist involves immersion in the suffering and brokenness of the world” (34/68), Ferguson and Ortega, once again, highlight the inextricable link between diaconal praxis, justice, and peace:

We cannot understand or practice diakonia apart from justice and peace. Service cannot be separated from prophetic witness or the ministry of reconciliation. Mission must include transformative diakonia (34/68).

This final affirmation is summed up by the call “to be united in God’s mission in reconciling, compassionate, transformative, justice-seeking, prophetic diakonia” (34/68). Both authors, Ferguson and Ortega, have, in their various ecumenical placements and areas of engagement, sincerely lived up to this very call.

We live and live out our faith in a world of changing landscapes, with neoliberal economic globalization and its empires taking centre stage, while the majority of the world’s population seems to be excluded and off the map. Chris Ferguson, since his childhood, has been active as a scout. He has learned to find ways where there are seemingly none and to seek for signs that could offer orientation. In one way or another, Chris has remained a scout: Where most see no other way than neoliberal globalization, Chris devises a whole map of



alternatives, putting the margin at center stage. Where most see obstacles, Chris sees opportunities. Where most see statistics, Chris sees suffering: people whose lives are at stake.

In his many ecumenical placements, Chris has been a pathfinder for transformation: analytical, discerning, judging, and confrontational when it comes to empire-critique—and warm, welcoming and inclusive when it comes to people.

Ecumenical Diakonia by Chris Ferguson and Ofelia Ortega has, in a number of ways, also served as a pathfinder for transformative ecumenical action. As such, it has had an impact on later discourses, on directions taken and on principles followed.

I would like to conclude with a remark by Chris Ferguson, when addressing students in a course on *Ecumenical Diakonia* at the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology in Hermannsburg, Germany, in 2019. “To be truly committed to justice and transformation, we might also need a kind of Accra Confession for diakonia.” Chris Ferguson’s and Ofelia Ortega’s *Ecumenical Diakonia* would be the perfect basis for such a confession.

Drea Fröchtling is a professor in practical theology with a focus in diakonia in intercultural perspective at the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology (Germany).

Transformative Ecumenism Embodied: Chris Ferguson as Paradigm

Lungile Mpetsheni

Introduction

Over the years, ecumenism has had various mutations and variations, with transformative ecumenism (TE) emerging as a call for ecumenism to adopt a posture of transforming the whole inhabited world. At the heart of it is the invocation of the prophetic prowess of the ecumenical movement to address issues of justice, doing so from its pedigree of being a moral, ethical, and spiritual guide to all of humanity amid other worldviews and values. Ecumenism is also concerned about the issues of perspectives ecology—the physical and natural resources, the economy and financial resources. Ecumenism should scan those environments continuously to find out certain truths and untruths, and proffer propositions for continuous improvement.

Ecumenism has always fallen and risen in accordance with the leadership at given spaces and times. Jesus Christ became a model leader who presented and piloted a model of transformation that Christianity has been built on. TE is also to be shaped by the leadership who share the vision. The conceptual framework of TE stated the following about the centrality of leadership:

Leadership in TE is of essential value. In order to promote, protect, and nurture life, transformative leadership needs to be purpose-driven, see it as its main task to serve the life of community and find a people- and justice-centred answer to the question why a certain person is occupying a certain office. Transformative leadership requires preparation and the readiness to embed leadership in the contextual struggles, visions, and challenges of people. Leaders need to be able to read the signs of time. Transformative leadership requires passion for issues of justice and life. Leaders need to be humble and be prepared to be in uncomfortable places and be led by those who are the experts of their own situation. Transformative leadership is based on a servanthood model and needs strategic positioning in the agendas of communities as well as in advocacy-approaches.¹

¹ Transformative Ecumenism, “Topical Report of the 3rd International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism: Growing Together in Transformative Ecumenism,” June 12, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/TECharter/posts/1701746783262008>



This extensive quote on transformative leadership underscores the contribution of Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson as the General Secretary to the leadership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) as an embodiment of TE. The approach of this paper is, therefore, from the Reformed perspective, and TE will be situated in the context of the empire². The four verbs of the WCRC strategic plan feature in the paper, namely: discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed³. The paper is also written during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic, which is prevalent in the last days of Chris's leadership of the WCRC.

Transformative Ecumenism: A Brief Introduction

The conceptualisation of TE has been based on the need to address the issues of justice. The proponents, led by the Korean Institute for Future Ecumenism (KIFE), identified, in the ecumenical movement, the challenges of “prophetic bankruptcy in terms of the movement, an intellectual bankruptcy in terms of the ecumenical spirit and vision, and a moral bankruptcy in terms of the leadership.”⁴ The concept paper states:

The ecumenical leadership has suffered from patriarchal, bureaucratic, and business-oriented mindedness that lacks the sense of calling and devotion. And yet, the world is still suffering from injustice, violence, and war. People are crying for water, food, and life in dignity. Indeed, the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

2 “The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany, after much deliberation, have come to a definition of empire in the following terms: ‘We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind. An all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while exploiting creation, imperiously excludes, enslaves and even sacrifices humanity. It is 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. It is a colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.’ Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, eds., *Dreaming A Different World: Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth—The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (2010), 23.

3 In the outline of its overarching goal, which is part of its strategic plan, the WCRC states: “By 2024, the World Communion of Reformed Churches will strive to be significantly strengthened and increasingly effective in living out God’s call to communion and commitment to justice. As a global *Koinonia*, we are marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing and being reformed together.”

4 Concept paper of the First International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism held in Seoul in 2013.

The *oikumene*, the whole inhabited world, is too vast and too dynamic, and the interests of the role players vary accordingly. This phenomenon started with the Roman Empire's recognition of Christianity as the official religious institution. After that, ecclesiology has been fraught with many complexities. Vellem observes that the most glaring of such troubles had to do with "the divisions and schisms that continue to bedevil this institution to this day."⁵ Such divisions and schisms manifest in and influence the character of the ecumenical movements in different contexts. In the context of South Africa, the challenges and handicaps of the church included the colonial origins and legacies. In the post-1994 South Africa, the church has been in close proximity to the ruling party and took the stance to be in critical solidarity. The church has, thus, found itself being a microcosm of the society. Hence, Vellem advocated for the unshackling of the church:

The church must be unshackled from the pigmentocratic structures that have gone on for more than 21 years into our democracy. The church must be unshackled from being an instrument of cultural domination by those who perpetuate the hegemony of ecclesiological insights and theologies that present their culture as normative in the interpretation of the gospel of Jesus including those who grudgingly accept that the heartland of Christianity is now in Africa. The church must be unshackled from its complacency with a life-killing capitalist exploitation, with its attendant cultural and psychological maladies that continue to assimilate, co-opt and destroy the cultural and psychological resources on which the previously oppressed have continued to survive.... The church to conclude this tentative list must be unshackled from false consciousness.⁶

Vellem's assertion is in the context of the church in South Africa. It is possible to apply the same to the church catholic. The church needs to be unshackled. It follows, therefore, that the unshackled church would translate into unshackled ecumenism. We have already made a claim that "the unshackled church should help people to rediscover who they are and to be proud of themselves, to have self-love and get 'self-identity'" and that "the church should end antagonism and enmity among the people and help the people to realise that they are interdependent."⁷

5 V.S. Vellem, "Unshackling the Church," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 71 no. 3 (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.3119>

6 Ibid.

7 L. Mpetsheni, "Ubuntu: A Soteriological Ethic for an Effaced *Umntu* in a Post-1994 South Africa: A Black Theology of Liberation Perspective" (Unpublished 2019), 291. This is a PhD thesis submitted at the University of Pretoria.



TE unshackles ecumenism to be pro-life and to address the issues of justice. Plaatjies van Huffel contends that TE is “a life-centred understanding of the *oikoumene*.”⁸ Hence, the Concept Paper gave a full understanding of the content of transformative ecumenism, arguing that “to live out transformative ecumenism” is “to respond to the call from the margins to seek justice, ...to live inclusively in solidarity with each other, ...to actively seek first the kin-dom of God, ...to empower mutually, ...to live out the subversive nature of the Gospel, ...to be rooted in the dynamic spirituality of life, [and] ...to live and love, struggle and celebrate always hopeful in God’s power to transform.”⁹

Chris has become an epitome of transformative ecumenism. His ministry centred on transformative justice. The former WCC General Secretary, Dr. Olav Tveit, acknowledged this in his congratulatory letter to the new WCRC General Secretary in 2014. He wrote:

As a communion of churches deeply committed to justice, the long tradition of this ministry is well assured with the election of Rev. Chris Ferguson. His Gospel commitment to social justice, economic justice and peacebuilding will surely be a hallmark of his leadership.... Rev. Chris Ferguson has spent a lifetime of solidarity with people seeking justice and struggling for peace around the world.¹⁰

Indeed, Dr Ferguson’s ministry has been rooted among the struggles of the impoverished and the marginalised. This point will be developed further in the section below.

Transformative Ecumenism Is Incarnational

TE is founded and rooted in incarnational theology, on the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, and his glory was beheld. Incarnation is irruption, defying the protocols for the liberation of all of creation. Incarnation was an insurrection, as it challenged the authorities and the systems of oppression towards an emancipated humanity. The Word who dwelt among us saw and identified with the poor, the downtrodden, the prisoners, and many who were

8 Plaatjies van Huffel, M.A. 2017. From conciliar ecumenism to transformative receptive ecumenism. *Herv. teol. stud.* vol.73 n.3 Pretoria 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4353> p 13

9 Concept paper of the second International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism in Manilla 2014.

10 “Congratulatory Message for WCRC’s New General Secretary,” May 18, 2014. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/congratulatory-message-for-wcrs-new-general-secretary>

placed on the margins, as per his proclamation in Luke 4:18-19.

That proclamation remains the clarion call for the church and the ecumenical movement to be prophetic and transformative. The ecumenical movement should address continuously the issues of life. Hence, the Concept Paper calls for the ecumenical movement to focus on the North-South divide and identify with the “struggles of the global South” to accompany people towards full realisation of the “fullness of life and community.” The Concept Paper identifies the twenty-first century questions as including “universal justice in many dimensions; holistic peace among all living beings, including ecological justice; and life together in conviviality.” It introduces the concepts of “radical transformation of the ecumenical vision” and “a macro-ecumenical transformation.”¹¹ These and other similar concepts are the heart of the gospel and, thus, constitute the nexus with and the pinnacle of the social gospel.

Chris has led the Communion that has upheld the Barmen Declaration, the Belhar Confession, and the Accra Confession, among others, and has thus become a proponent of racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, and ecological justice for the fullness of life; in the context of the WCRC that is “Called to Communion and Committed to Justice.” He led the WCRC to its successful 26th General Council in Leipzig, Germany, June 29 through July 7, 2017. The theme of that Council was “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” Writing about that Council, Chris observed that it happened in “the context of a deeply troubled and rapidly changing world dominated by massive threats to the wellbeing of all of God’s creation” and that context manifested in “the worship, witness, discernment and action of our meeting.” He further observed:

It was heartening and hopeful to see the WCRC family growing into a shared vision where God’s call to unity, justice and our ecumenical vocation inspire us to boldly embrace our Reformed tradition while weaving a new identity for common witness inclusive of our Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, United and Uniting and First Reformation traditions.

Chris’s leadership of the WCRC has catapulted the Communion to transformative ecumenism. At the same Council, Dr Ferguson, on behalf of the WCRC, marked the WCRC’s association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) in Wittenberg. This followed a decision of the meeting of the WCRC Executive Committee that was held in Havana, Cuba, in

¹¹ Concept paper of the first International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism.



May 2016 to add as the condition for associating with the JDDJ the clause: “We wish to underscore the integral relation between justification and justice.”¹² For the WCRC and for Chris, communion and justice are inseparable. That is consonant with transformative ecumenism which “is rooted in the people’s struggle for justice and life; an ecumenism that envisions not only the unity of the church but also the unity of whole humanity and creation; and an ecumenism led by passionate and issue-oriented leaders who can clearly stand with the suffering and struggling people.”¹³

Chris has thus provided servant leadership to align the WCRC with the struggles of the people in the streets, an archetype of the incarnational church. His ministry is with the marginalised people, thus ensuring that the church is not just on the margins but the church of the marginalised. This is *kenosis*, which is about servanthood, as presented by Paul in Philippians 2:5-8. The eternal Son of God was “found in appearance as a man” and identified himself with human beings in all their sufferings as a servant. *Kenosis* is transformational. John Jillions said of kenotic Christology, “The Lord embraces the one who is ugly, weak, and sinful—beginning with ourselves—not just because he embraces the fallen human condition, but because he sees past that to the beauty of the divine image that can never be eradicated.”¹⁴

An interview with Chris after he was appointed as WCRC General Secretary reveals much of servanthood traits. From it, we learn that the young Christopher’s baptism was when he attended a camp that was held in Vancouver and run by the United Church of Canada. The camp was attended by “the poorest of the poor; kids on the edge, with all sorts of tough stories.” His interaction with those people opened his eyes to the realities of our world, the inequalities and injustices that are suffered by many. This question was asked: “What, if any, learnings, experiences, knowledge from your time as a parish minister do you still carry with you?” Ferguson said, among others, “The first response of ministry is to go to where the people are, to where the pain is, go and be physically with those who are suffering and who are hurt.”¹⁵

12 JDDJ Association. WCRC Executive Committee that was held in Havana, Cuba, in May 2016

13 Concept Paper of the first International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism

14 John A. Jillions, “Kenotic Ecumenism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, eds (September 2018). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600847.013.46. 13

15 “An Interview with Chris Ferguson,” World Communion of Reformed Churches. <http://wrcr.ch/general-secretariat/an-interview-with-chris-ferguson>

Dr Ferguson's ministry has, thus, been incarnational. He has an eye and a heart for the marginalised and impoverished. That is why he has taken up appointments in places where he could be of help and service to those people. His love for humanity made him volunteer to be an ambassador for Thursdays in Black. In an interview on this task, he was asked, "Why did you decide to join Thursdays in Black?" Chris highlighted violence against women as against the will of the God of life; the violence cannot be justified by any means. He had seen women victimized and brutally tortured and killed. He gave the context of this violence:

One of the major places in which our world is off track is with these supremacies and the religious justification that particularly attack women, and this is getting worse, not better, in terms of how gender has been weaponised. Our imperative now is to confess the God of life in a world fallen among thieves. So, we want everybody to wake up and, every day as part of their Christian spirituality, say "the world is not as God wants it and it can and must be changed."¹⁶

From the interview, we learn that TE invokes a certain kind of Christian spirituality that throws us into the depths of human pain and suffering. Chris has consistently described this world as having "fallen among thieves." With that kind of spirituality, we are called to redeem this world from the "thieves." That is an expression of Ubuntu, to which we switch in the following section.

Transformative Ecumenism: An Expression of Ubuntu

In Africa and in isiXhosa,¹⁷ it could be said of Dr Ferguson, "ngumntu lo" (he is human) and "Unobuntu lo mfo" (he is all about Ubuntu). Desmond Tutu had this to say about one who has Ubuntu:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as they were less than who they are.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Rev. Chris Ferguson: 'Wake Up to How This World Is' and "'Ambassadors Lead Thursdays in Black Solidarity'" (September 5, 2019), World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/ambassadors-lead-thursdays-in-black-solidarity> <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/rev-chris-ferguson-wake-up-to-how-this-world-is>

¹⁷ This is one of the indigenous languages in South Africa, the home language of the author.

¹⁸ D.M. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).



Ubuntu is an African philosophy arising from the maxim, *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, which describes obtaining full standing as *umntu* (human being) by belonging to others and by being ready to be of help to others. Hence, in contrast with René Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), Ubuntu upholds, I belong therefore I am. We speak of Ubuntu as wholeness.¹⁹ We are informed by Ramose's assertion that Ubuntu is about "be-ing," "whole-ness," and "one-ness."²⁰ In isiXhosa, we speak of wholeness as *Inqibelelo*—which denotes completeness, uprightness, perfection, and other qualities. By *inqibelelo*, we also refer to an environment of fulfillment, where human and nonhuman beings live together in harmony and with dignity. Chris demonstrated full traits of Ubuntu during the COVID-19 era. Moving from the analysis of a world fallen among thieves, he has supported the initiative to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic. In that process, the concept of "global apartheid" has been exposed, and it needs to be tackled jointly. There can be no wholeness when some suffer under global apartheid.

Chris has become a friend of Africa, as he has identified with the struggles of the Africans for freedom and recognition as human beings with dignity. He has, indiscriminately, called for African epistemologies and for the theologies that are borne in Africa to be brought to the world stage to collaborate with world theologies in striving to emancipate humanity. This is propounded in the background of exponential church growth in Africa, which is recognised by the proponents of TE in the Concept Paper, as they argued:

In the midst of this situation, we discover that the Christian population, especially in Africa and Asia, continues to grow exponentially. In fact, there are some predictions which state that the growth of Christian churches in Africa will be even stronger than they are at present.... These currents and trends are not simply a matter of shifts in Christian demography but represent a clarion call for a qualitative transformation of the ecumenical movement.²¹

The African Communion of Reformed Churches (ACRC) has taken up the challenge, and this is work in progress. The leadership Chris has provided to the ACRC as a mentor and a coach has been phenomenal.

19 L. Mpetsheni, "Ubuntu: A Soteriological Ethic for an Effaced *Umntu* in a Post-1994 South Africa," 39.

20 B.M. Ramose, B. M., *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999).

21 Concept Paper of the first International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism

Conclusion

Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson is indeed an epitome and a paradigm of transformative ecumenism. Transformative ecumenism can thrive when there are warm bodies who are available to give it expression. Chris's legacy can be preserved when all in the WCRC commit to show concern about this world that has "fallen among thieves," work to redeem it, and promote peace, justice, and love. Let us strive for the fullness of life.

Lungile Mpetsheni is an ordained minister in and general secretary of The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.



Contours of Transformative Ecumenism

Geevarghese Coorilos Nalunnakkal

Introduction

The global ecumenical movement is at a crossroads, experiencing bankruptcy on multiple levels. At one level, there is a prophetic bankruptcy in that the ecumenical movement shows signs of fatigue in addressing issues of injustice, particularly social, economic, and ecological injustice, basically due to its bureaucratic and corporate-style structures and modes of functioning. The institutional structures of ecumenism have effectively replaced the movement character of global ecumenism. It also suffers from an intellectual bankruptcy. The language and concepts engaged by the contemporary vehicles of global ecumenism appear to be somewhat outdated and far from sufficient to address the signs of our times. At a still deeper level, there also appears to be a leadership bankruptcy in the current ecumenical institutions. Corporate logic has infiltrated and influenced ecumenical governance, resulting in ecumenical leadership that is detached from people's movements for life. Such leadership also betrays their proclivity to be conditioned by the values of neo-liberal corporatism where money (Mammon) seems to have taken control over the ecumenical agenda. An alternative vision and praxis of global ecumenism, therefore, would warrant nothing short of a radical reimagining of the systems and currency that are in place. What is offered here are some random pointers toward such an alternative vision.

Transformative Ecumenism: An Anti-Empire Movement

The etymological irony in "ecumenism," or the close connection between the concept of *oikoumene* and the Roman Empire, has been a matter of much theological consideration.¹ Imperial Rome had laid its claims to the *oikoumene* by the first century BC. The expansion of the *oikoumene* was then understood as the geographical and political expansion of the Roman Empire. Romans were then called "the Lords of the *oikoumene*" (*kyrioi tes oikoumenes*). *Oikoumene*, in other words, was used as almost a synonym for the Roman Empire. Christianity that evolved out of this imperial locus, particularly after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, inherited and gradually internalised the values of the *oikoumene*

¹ For a detailed discussion on "empire and ecumenism," see K. M. George, "Beyond the Frontier Complex: The Reordering of Christian Mission in India," *The People of God Among All God's People*, ed. Philip L. Wickeri (Hong Kong: CCA, 2000), 206-208, and Gladson Jathanna, *Decolonising Oikoumene* (New Delhi: ISPCK/CWM, 2020), 1-6.

in its ethos and life. It is worth mentioning here that the first universal councils were called “ecumenical” councils, primarily because they were convened by the Empire/Emperor. It is this notion of an “imperial *oikoumene*” that dominated the agenda and deliberations of the Edinburgh Mission Conference (1910) out of which the modern ecumenical movement originated. Its call to “evangelise the world in this generation” was nothing except a call to conquer, colonise, and convert the whole world to the values of the imperial West. One should not forget that this coincided with a particular time in history when the Western colonial missionary enterprise held enormous sway over the rest of the world. In other words, the context, the logic, and the influence of empire was very much an integral part of the original milieu of the formation of the modern ecumenical movement. Barring a few exceptions, the contemporary expressions of global ecumenism continue to be influenced and governed by the language and logic of empire, of the corporate world. The financial architecture of the current manifestations of ecumenism seems to be determined mostly by the forces of market and Mammon.

This implies that any attempt to develop a transformative version of ecumenism must begin with a categorical denunciation of the logic and praxis of empire. Of course, the ideas and manifestations of empire have changed drastically since its inception. Gone are the days of the old empire, particularly its military versions. Describing contemporary empire as a post-globalised human condition, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define empire as “an imaginative geography of globalisation of world space, where boundless flow of capital, labour and information transcend the older imperialist order and yet at the same time plant the seeds of destruction and transformation of the empire.”² While military force was the main weapon of the old empire, the neoliberal market economy constitutes the major driving force behind the new empire. Through its profit-oriented, pro-elite, and anti-ecological economic policies, the new empire has pushed the marginalised people and the environment into further impoverishment. The current expressions of the ecumenical movement seem to be hesitant to address the manifold challenges posed by the new empire. Worse still, as indicated already, is the fact that the logic and legacy of the empire has come back to haunt the ecumenical movement and, at times, hijack its agenda.

Transformative Ecumenism as an expression of anti-empire movement must encounter its prototype in the early church, which was essentially a moral community—a people’s movement. Sociological research has established that

2 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 137.



the earliest Palestinian Christian communities actually came into being as a result of social protest: through resistance movements against systems of empire, of capitalism, of patriarchy, of racism, of clericalism, and so on. It was a countercultural movement where worship and sharing of resources went hand in hand. The early church possessed the moral stamina to take on the might of the Roman Empire. It also exhibited courage and commitment to defy the dictates of the empire and to announce its fall as well (Revelations 18). The fall of the empire was announced as if it had already occurred. In a context where empire(s) is striking back with its dictatorial requirements of allegiance to Mammon and market, movements of Transformative Ecumenism must develop the same ethical credentials to challenge, contest, and confront the forces of neo-imperialism. This would require nothing short of a revolutionary reimagining of the ecumenical movement. Y. T. Vinayaraj offers one such attempt³ when he proposes to supplant the notion of “*oikos*” with that of “Commonwealth,” originally mooted by Hardt and Negri. The commonwealth, “life in common,” here stands for a radical space for political democracy where anti-imperial social relations flourish. It is a democracy that invites everyone to share and participate in the common—nature and its resources—in a just manner. It is an egalitarian space where all beings—humanity and nature—live and interact with interdependence. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would call this a space of “radical democracy of equals.”⁴ This would be a transformed space as well as a space for transformation. Giorgio Agamben describes it as “a community of those who have no community at all.”⁵ This should be the “ecospace” that a Transformative Ecumenical movement must imagine and actualise.

Transformative Ecumenism: A Movement from the Margins

An ecumenical movement that is transformative must be a subversive movement, where the marginalised and the excluded take over the agency and leadership. The biblical vision of the divine reign suggests that “the last would be the first” (Matthew 20:16). This should challenge the dominance of the traditional power centres such as the Global North and the hegemonic powers of racism, sexism, capitalism, casteism, and clericalism that have characterised the nature and content of the worldwide ecumenical movement for many years. Negri’s idea of the “Multitude” is pertinent for a vision and approximation of

3 See Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Church and Empire: Detailing Theological Musings* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2019), 11-20.

4 Quoted in Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Political Theology in Transition* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 15.

5 Quoted in Gladson Jathanna, *Decolonising Oikoumene*, 67.

a subversive movement of ecumenism.⁶ Multitude is offered by Negri as an alternative to the logic of empire, a kind of counter-globalisation or globalisation from below. Multitude, unlike conventional concepts like “the proletariat” or “the poor,” offers a political ontology that is anti-imperial, an ontology that affirms the primary agency and subjectivity of the margins. Multitude in the Commonwealth is neither an object of mission (the missional “other”), nor a diaconal space where the marginalised are treated as objects of charity. Instead, Multitude (or marginality) is interpreted as a “kenotic space” where decolonisation of power takes place. Multitude is endowed with constitutive power (*potentia*) that enables the subjectivities of the margins to assume political potential. All this suggests that a transformative movement of ecumenism, ecumenism of the Multitude, is one where the margins and the marginalised will assume subjectivity, agency, and leadership. As Gopal Guru said, “Only the marginalised have the moral stamina to bring in transformation and social change.”⁷

Therefore, transformative ecumenism must spring from the margins, where struggles for justice are lived out. Or, as the statement on Transformative Ecumenism published by the Korea Institute for Future Ecumenism (KIFE) would have it: “It [Transformative Ecumenism] asserts that the transformation of the society must begin not as per the plans and schemes of the powerful and the privileged but with the visions and aspirations of those who are yearning for life with dignity and freedom.”⁸

Yet another aspect of conventional ecumenism that requires interrogation is the whole notion of oneness/unity, which is often deemed the ultimate goal of ecumenism. A transformative vision of ecumenism that is anti-imperial and margin-driven must problematise the idea of oneness/unity and move towards an ecumenism of “manyness.” As we have already seen, empire has been a project of globalisation of homogeneity, oneness modelled after the imperial West. The new empire of economic globalisation is no exception to this trend. The Lutheran World Federation statement on global economy brings home this concern sharply:

Globalisation brings a competing vision of the *Oikoumene*, the unity of humankind. But the unity of humankind promoted by globalisation is one of

⁶ See Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Political Theology in Transition*, 10-11.

⁷ Gopal Guru, in an unpublished presentation given at a WCC Consultation on “Caste and Culture” in Kochi, India, 2000.

⁸ “Fourth International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism” Report (Seoul: KIFE, 2019), 48.



exploitation and domination, while the unity envisaged by the *Oikoumene* is one characterised by solidarity and justice. Our vision of the *Oikoumene* puts greater value in plurality and cultural diversity for mutual enrichment and for affirmation of life experiences as expressed in traditions.⁹

The conciliar model of global ecumenism, with its distinct focus on the visible unity of churches, has effectively reduced the global ecumenical movement into a theological project of ecclesiological discourse and, as a consequence, taken much of the movement character away from it. The KIFE statement on Transformative Ecumenism puts it succinctly: “The problem of Conciliar Ecumenism is not fellowship per se but fellowship without movement, not unity per se but unity without justice.”¹⁰

History has revealed that the concept of “the One and the Many” has been a complex one to interpret and comprehend. In most instances, “the many” has been swallowed up by the greater “one,” itself often identified with the hegemonic versions of the “one”—the racist, the sexist, the casteist “one.” There was empire logic even in the convening of the early ecumenical councils, at which dissent and difference of opinion were dismissed outrightly. This trend has continued overtly and otherwise in the ongoing journey of ecumenism. An ecumenical movement that is bound by the ideals of oneness and consensus cannot be a transformative ecumenical movement, as it tends to evade issues of conflict and injustice in various spheres of life.

A transformative version of ecumenism needs to go beyond the conciliar mode and give its spirit to articulating issues of life—especially life at the margins of our planet.

Here again, the notions of commonwealth and multitude provide us with helpful tools to reimagine ecumenism vis-à-vis polyphony. Commonwealth, according to Hardt and Negri, is a “democracy of multiplicity” where the multitude is able to be and become, express themselves with their own distinct subjectivities. Commonwealth does not denote homogeneity but alterity. Multitude is plurality. It is composed of many “irreducible singularities” of cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. Unlike the concepts of “the working class” or “the poor,” multitude does not function as a meta theory within which marginalised categories get subsumed. It is not a mere collection of many voices, including those of dissent, but a counter political and anti-imperial space where

⁹ Quoted in Gladson Jathanna, *Decolonising Oikoumene*, 58-59.

¹⁰ “Fourth International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism” Report, 19.

life in common is affirmed, where moral energy is generated to “create social relationships in common.”¹¹ Globalisation, the new empire, cannot reconcile with the values of pluriformity and manyness. Margins, on the other hand, constitute a sacred space where the possibilities of polyphony are celebrated. This is a space where the logic of manyness disrupts the logic of oneness. This is the sacred space where Transformative Ecumenism must be rooted. It is a movement of movements, where all creative initiatives for life—life in its fullness—find their creative space. More than a structure, ecumenism from the margins would be an inclusive movement of those struggling for life. Margins, in other words, disrupt our traditional perceptions of what the ecumenical movement is all about. It invites us to take a radical turn to en flesh a spirituality of life that affirms differences, human dignity, justice, equality, and the integrity of creation.

Transformative Ecumenism: An *Agape* Movement

One of the most important global signs of our times is the sweeping culture of fear and hatred. This has assumed fascist dimensions in several contexts where people belonging to a certain race, caste, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity are subjected to xenophobia and discrimination, resulting, in many instances, in violence and genocide. Transformative Ecumenism must confront this ideology of fear and hatred and offer an alternative to this alarming trend. The biblical concept of “love” has the potential to deal with the ideology of fear and hatred in an effective manner. “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). There is no fear in perfect love. Therefore, the meaningful way to combat fear and hatred is through the expression of love in action, which is nothing but justice. It is Christ’s love that moves the world, as the theme of the forthcoming WCC General Assembly implies.¹² The biblical and theological antonym of fear and hatred is love. However, love that is devoid of justice is not *agape*. The dialectical relationship between love and justice is what makes love a theologically and ecumenically pertinent category. It is the inherent presence of justice within love that enables it to turn the world upside down. As Reinhold Niebuhr holds. “Since love is the spirit at work in the community of reconciliation, the work which love prompts is to be done in actual history where the neighbours met.”¹³

11 Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Political Theology in Transition*, 10.

12 “Christ’s love moves the world into reconciliation and unity” is the central theme of the forthcoming WCC General Assembly, to be held in Germany in 2022.

13 Quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Bangalore: FCPC, 1991), 505.



This, Niebuhr argues further, means that to love is to be involved in the issues of political justice. Differently put, justice is the order which love requires. While the “love” aspect protects us from making the quest for justice a mere political project (what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed “the secularist temptation”), the justice element saves our ecumenical vocation from becoming purely a spiritual and personalist project—hence the need to understand love in terms of justice and vice versa.

A perfect example of this blending of love and justice (*agape*) is encountered in the Genesis story of Abraham and Sara receiving and offering hospitality to the three strangers (Genesis 18). This is a classic case of *agape* being shared with the alien, the other, the foreigner, the marginalised. When you receive the outcast and the excluded, you receive the Triune God itself. One of the Greek words used for hospitality and love for the other is *philoxenia*, and this is what Abraham and Sara offer here. The opposite of *philoxenia* is xenophobia. In a world marred by fear and hatred (xenophobia), a transformative movement of ecumenism will be able to counter these evil forces if it is founded on the love of Christ: love with justice (*agape*).

The aspect of Christ’s love “moving the world” has implications for discipleship and, therefore, for ecumenism as well. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ the New Testament sense of discipleship has to do with the vocation of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The context then was that of the Roman Empire and the disciples of Christ trying to challenge imperial dictates and values. In the contemporary global scenario where neo-imperialism in the guise of economic globalisation and neo-fascism, expressed through xenophobic fear and hatred of the other, an *agape* movement of ecumenism—transformative ecumenism—must turn the unjust world order upside down.

Here again, Hardt and Negri help us in conceptualising love in anti-imperial terms. Over and against the capitalistic understanding of love as a private affair, Hardt and Negri provide a political reading of love where the personal becomes political.¹⁵ For them, love is communitarian and has the potential of transformative power inherent in it. Love creates community—life in common—or the commonwealth. It is not paternalistic love, but one that demands sacrifice, even martyrdom. In biblical terms, it is love that seeks justice (Micah 6:8). Transformative Ecumenism that is based on God’s love (*agape*) seeks God’s

14 See my “Address by the Conference Moderator” in *Moving in the Spirit*, eds. Risto Jukko and Jooseop Keum (Geneva: WCC, 2019), 59.

15 Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Political Theology in Transition*, 5-6.

justice, justice that is biased towards the margins. The ecumenical vocation of the pursuit of justice is not simply an act of socio-political engagement. Rather, the love aspect makes it a deeply spiritual commitment. It is a concrete expression of Christ's love which is subversive and transformative. Justice is the natural consequence of this love. Christ's love moves the world and turns it upside down. Transformative Ecumenism that is love-centric (*agape*) is expected to do likewise: to turn the contemporary world of neo-colonialism and neo-fascism upside down.

Conclusion

Ecumenism as a vision and a movement is meant to be a vocation of transformative discipleship, a sign of the divine reign where peace, justice, and integrity of creation prevail and prosper. However, the current manifestations of global ecumenism appear to fall short of this vision. One of the major lacunae of contemporary expressions of global ecumenism is that they continue to be conditioned and swayed by the logic of empire, especially that of the market and Mammon. The institutional, bureaucratic, and corporate structures of worldwide ecumenism have basically neutralised the movement character of ecumenism. It is in this context of serious moral crises faced by the global ecumenical movement that this essay proposes a radical reenvisioning of the ecumenical movement. It argues that a transformative movement of ecumenism must be an anti-imperial movement of the oppressed, a movement of the margins, of the Multitude, geared towards an ideal of the reign of God: life in common, the Commonwealth. It argues that the ecumenical movement should move beyond the framework of "conciliarity" and consensus and journey toward "communion of the margins." It also proposes that an *agape*-based movement is the need of the hour as the contemporary world is being challenged by the ideology of fear and hatred. Margins are the sacred spaces where all this can materialise. Margins are fountains of hope where struggles against empire(s) of our times are taking place; where life in common—nature and its resources—is shared equally and justly; where multiple voices for justice and life are celebrated; and where the evil forces of fear and hatred are overcome through creative expressions of love built on justice. Transformative Ecumenism, in other words, is a celebration of life at the margins: a banquet, an *agape* feast where none is excluded and where all share and participate with equality and dignity.

Geevarghese Mor Coorilos Nalunnakkal is metropolitan of Niranam Diocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in India and serves on the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches.



Chris Ferguson and His Pilgrimage in the Building of Peace in Colombia

Gloria Ulloa

Chris Ferguson, passionate about peace and justice and following the calling of Jesus of Nazareth, has travelled Colombia up, down, and across not only geographically but also across two decades in its pursuit of peace with justice.

Colombia is a South American country, found in the north by the Caribbean Sea, with the Pacific Ocean to the west. It has about 50 million inhabitants. It is rich in fauna, flora, minerals, water, and jungle. Having been colonised by the Spanish with both the Cross and the sword, it suffered the devastation of its aboriginal cultures, their beliefs, their wisdom, and their riches, to the point that the culture of violence has permeated life in all its forms and expressions. During the twentieth century, various insurgent groups emerged and, by the force of arms, tried to introduce social structural changes that would consider the large majority of farmers and the impoverished. For decades, different governments had combated these groups with no success. Finally, in 2016, the Havana Peace Accord was signed between the Colombian government and the FRAC-EP, a vitally important agreement for the people of Colombia. It has, however, been massively upturned by those who continue to nurture war, with guerrilla groups in both the fields and the cities seeking to attain their aims through violence.

In the midst of this violence, Chris's involvement in Colombia as a teacher, pastor, prophet, and General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) has supported peace initiatives. He has managed to help the Presbyterian Church of Colombia with both human and material resources to keep these initiatives strong. His commitment led Chris and the WCRC Executive Committee to be present in Havana, Cuba during the peace process between the Colombian government and the guerilla group, FARC-EP.

I met Chris early in the twenty-first century while working for peace through the Colombian Ecumenical Network, and then in a closer way when he came to Colombia as Coordinator of the Ecumenical Programme of Accompaniment for Peace in Colombia (PEAC in its Spanish initials), which was organised and led by the Ecumenical Network and supported by the World Council of Churches and various other ecumenical agencies.

The Lutheran Church of Colombia, the Mennonite Church, the Methodist Church, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, and faith organisations such as the Justapaz Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace and the Community

of Sisters of the Sacred Heart were all part of the Colombian Ecumenical Network. This network created spaces of reflection for the churches to impact governmental agencies and to accompany peasant communities threatened by displacement due to violence. In 2010, the network requested support from ecumenical organizations to create the Programme for Ecumenical Accompaniment in Columbia (PEAC), a program Chris coordinated. Similar to the Accompaniment Programme for Peace in Palestine and Israel coordinated by the World Council of Churches, the aim was to engage people in support of those communities threatened by armed conflict to live and actively participate in those communities.

As part of the coordination of this program, Chris lived in Medellin and then in Bogota in 2012 and 2013, where he had the opportunity to work closely with the Church Community of Hope of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, which in turn was working closely with a peasant community in Catatumbo, Santander. The region of Catatumbo is near the Venezuelan border; it is rich in oil, fit for crops, and under the control of the National Liberation Army, a guerrilla group strong in the region and in constant armed conflict with the peasants there who seek their autonomy. Chris's pastoral activities while living in this area are too many to count: He walked with the peasants; attended peasant assemblies; slept in hammocks or very simple beds; travelled in uncomfortable and unreliable vehicles on complicated and rough roads in intense heat; confronted an army man who was treating a peasant unjustly; helped wounded peasants; spoke out passionately in prayer and reflections to challenge the peasants to demand economic justice while seeking fair life earnings—always seeking justice for the communities. These were times of large national mobilizations of peasants, and PEAC was invited to act as guarantor of the peasant march and the assembly of coca growers who wanted to negotiate with the parties in conflict. This way PEAC presented the peasants with the face of God who walked with the people in their daily struggles, to the point they said, "This is a church we want here."

It was not only to Santander that Chris travelled in his role as PEAC coordinator. Between Bogotá and Santander, he went through Boyacá, a potato-growing area. At that time, the potato-growing peasants organised a series of anti-government protests demanding subsidies for the crops and opposing the Free Trade Agreement allowing processed potatoes to enter the country. Their organizational strength went on for two whole months, and they received the support of farmers of the Cundinamarca and Nariño Departments, two of the country's larger potato-growing areas. Chris accompanied the peasants in their rightful demands to the departmental authorities and the national



government. His pastoral presence, his thinking, and his prayers all came together to strengthen the peasant movement.

As part of PEAC's commitment, Chris accompanied the churches when they were received by the Ministry of Interior, so that they would be heard by the national government, the senators, and directly with the President of the nation, always sharing the churches' message of peace based on Jesus' calling. Through dialogue directing matters to an agreed negotiation of the armed conflict, based on Jesus' calling to be builders of peace, special emphasis was placed on opening negotiations with the FARC-EP and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Chris's calling as General Secretary of the WCRC coincided with the peace agreement achieved between the Government of Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces, and FARC-EP, one of the oldest guerrilla groups on the American continent. This agreement was signed September 26, 2016, in Havana, Cuba. The WCRC Executive Committee accompanied the Presbyterian Church of Colombia to the dialogue in Havana, with representatives of the Colombian government and leaders of the FARC-EP around the negotiating table. They listened and learned in a clear and direct way the motivations, difficulties, and struggles, and in an incisively insisted on the need to keep all parties involved in this dialogue to reach a final agreement.

In this way, Chris, together with representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC), accompanied the Inter-church Dialogue for Peace (DIPAZ) in meetings with representatives of the FARC-EP and the government, presence especially important at times when negotiations seemed to be collapsing due to violence from either the guerrilla groups or the Colombian armed forces. The Colombian Church, together with the WCRC and the WCC, steadily urged those around the agreement table in Havana to continue seeking progress toward an end to the armed conflict, working in such a way that the Final Agreement cites DIPAZ as a facilitator of reconciliation actions that were collective, public, and solemn.

The collective acts will be formal, public and solemn, and will take place at a national level as well as regional level, and for these acts we will invoke the presence of the National Episcopal Conference, which with the support of the Inter-Church Dialogue for Peace (DIPAZ) and other churches, to coordinate these act, in dialogue with Human Rights and Victims organizations, among others. Those that coordinate should make sure these acts respond to the expectations of victims of the conflict and of the communities; they should avoid all forms of re-victimisation and empower victims; and should contribute to set the foundations for the task that will promote peaceful living

together and that will avoid all repetition of violence, that will be developed by the Truth, Co-existence and Non Repetition Committee. (*Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace, page 188*)

In early 2017, when the ex-combatants began moving from the guerrilla camps to the Veredales Areas of Re-incorporation, Chris came to Colombia and, with a team from the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, travelled the Veredal Area of Icononzo, Tolima. There we saw how little the Colombian government had complied with the agreement. Families experienced terrible conditions in the new resettlement areas, exposed to the unknown, the cold, without drainage systems or running water; women ex-combatants were still in military uniforms and small children had inadequate clothing. In dialogue with United Nations Verifying Committee representatives, we worked to collate information on the government's lack of fulfillment of the agreement. In Bogota, we met with ex-combatants who had signed the Peace Agreement, and we participated in a press meeting to report on the difficulties suffered up and down the nation. Our voice as Presbyterian Church and the WCRC was there to support, to remind them they were not alone. They could count on our support in their determination not to return to armed conflict and to participate in the dialogue and political discourse necessary to build a way of being a country.

In 2018, with the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and representing WCRC, Chris participated in meetings with the Ministry of the Interior and then-President Juan Manuel Santos. These visits were to encourage the government to fulfill the Peace Agreement. In the same way, Chris was part of the Colombia Peace Forum, including the role of churches and faith communities in building up peace, which took place in Cartagena on February 28. Chris made a passionate call to the Colombian government to affirm the spirit that had been present around the table in Havana, a spirit of openness and friendship toward those previously seen as enemies, and to continue to extend open arms during the process of re-incorporating the ex-combatants who had signed the Peace Agreement into civilian life. It was very interesting to hear President Santos during the Forum, when he fully recognised the role of the WCRC and the WCC, who had always encouraged him to sign a peace agreement and seek out dialogue as the best way to end to a war that had destroyed too many Colombian lives and crushed too many dreams. It was especially important to hear him openly mention that, during the 2016 referendum in which many churches had voted "no" to peace, against the Havana Agreement, that many other churches played a valuable role in reaching the furthest areas of the country and encouraging people to vote in favour of the peace process—a crucial part in reconciliation through a committed church leadership.



The WCRC supported the Peace Commission of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia in the many projects that helped incorporate ex-combatants who signed the Peace Agreement back into civilian life. The three Presbyteries that form the Church Synod have accompanied the Regional Areas in Training and Re-incorporation, the areas where the ex-combatants settled and are beginning to build new lives. All around the country, the people working toward new lives are committed to this work. They study, marry, have children, and live in faith communities, having an impact on the communities around them with access to health programs, sustainable projects for families, tourism initiatives, social programs, and political party representation. Chris's knowledge of the armed conflict in Colombia has been crucial to this process. The Presbyterian Church in Colombia and DIPAZ have received the the WCRC's pastoral encouragement, developing workshops for training and development, and providing computers and internet both for youth education and for adults completing secondary education to prepare for university careers. There have also been agricultural and community organization projects, prayer and reconciliation between victims and victimisers and between different organizations of the Colombian state and civil society, and even poignant celebrations at Christmas, International Women's Day, Easter, and other special times.

In 2018, with WCRC's support, the Peace Commission of the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed University Corporation developed a Peace Diploma directed to members of the three Presbyteries, with about 30 participants. The Diploma's content not only benefited the unity and integration of our three Presbyteries but, most importantly, provided training in biblical-theological knowledge, sociology, and practical theology. This helped increase direct involvement in the construction of new ways to be socially involved in Colombia in the post-Peace Accord era. Chris, as General Secretary, and Rev. Jerry Pilay, then President of the Executive Committee of the WCRC, played active roles teaching for this Diploma, sharing their theological and pastoral interpretation of God's presence in the peace process, from ancient Israel through the current situation in Colombia. They shared the role played by the WCRC, the WCC, and the churches of South Africa and other world regions in ending different armed conflicts, all part of a ministry of reconciliation and peace to which they had been called by Christ.

It is also crucial to point out the support that the WCRC has shown the Reformed University Corporation (CUR), a higher education institution of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia. This higher education centre was founded by the Presbyterian Church in 2002, and one of its aims has been to teach with a new vision of building peace in a less violent, more fraternal and just society. From the

very beginning, Chris's understanding of the armed conflict in Colombia and clear empathy towards this church educational project was of great importance in defining the curricula and teaching methodology that worked not only with the students but also with the whole university team, contributing to the deeper commitment in involving all areas of the institution in the church's peace project.

Chris has been a frequent guest lecturer on the Peace course and in many international theological institutions, where his voice has both inspired and challenged. Students have greatly appreciated the church's involvement in peace processes throughout the world; its high level of connection with governments and NGOs such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the Vatican, and different world church councils; and the faith communities and expressions of the aboriginal people of the world.

Just as important as these high-level examples of Chris's leadership is his involvement in local church projects that have sought help to tackle their own work. I would like to mention here the Presbyterian Church in Cartagena, which, in 2017, presented a project of musical education for children and youth living near the church. This project aimed to provide hope for more fraternal and just ways of living. They learned alternatives to delinquency, drug addiction, domestic violence, and any other painful realities they experienced. With the support of the WCRC, this project has allowed children and youth access to musical instruments and a good music teacher, and participation in a musical band that has worked with the Youth Worship Ministry of the Presbyterian Church (MAJUP). This group shares music during worship and takes part in music festivals in Cartagena and other north coast Colombian cities. In the summer of 2019, they traveled to Ohio, in the United States of America, to participate in a festival of religious music with the support of the Miami Valley Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church USA.

Rev. Christopher Ferguson has been a peace pilgrim in Colombia, a walker for peace, a teacher, and a preacher in our Presbyterian churches and many others. He has been a prophet in each of our three Presbyteries. Chris has been present, carrying a message that challenges the churches in their commitment and involvement in the construction of peace.

Thank you, Chris!

Gloria Ulloa, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, is the executive secretary of the Colombian Northern Coast Presbytery and president of the World Council of Churches for Latin America and the Caribbean.



Global Study on New Models of Ministry (*Diakonia*) for *SangSaeng* (相生= *Convivencia-Ubuntu*) and Grand Peace (太平)in the Twenty-First Century

Kim Yong-Bock

Traditional modalities of ministry for Oikonomia Convivencia (SangSaeng) and Grand Peace (Taepyeong) are inadequate for practice in the twenty-first century. With twenty-first century civilization, dominated by Western modernity, having entered a process of suicidal omnicide by human agency, there is urgent need for radical transformation of modes of ministry

The history (story) of living beings over the past 5,000 years and their destruction is the context for our reflection, investigation, and action in search of sustainable life for all living beings. This story may be termed “zoegraphy,” which includes “thanatography.”

This comprehensive historical framework, including the story of all living beings in the *Oikoumene*, is necessary because Earth’s civilizations are in a crisis of omnicide, and we urgently need to search for a new *Kairos* for a fresh beginning, a new civilization.

We begin our review of history from the perspective of the people of the Korean peninsula, a concrete abode of living beings, rather than relying on general historical references such as the modern framework of world history.

In the recorded five-thousand-year history of the Korean peninsula, we find major experiences of life and the destruction of life. The first recorded history includes the story of *SangSaeng* (Conviviality), expressed as *Seongye* (선계)¹ in the various ancient tribal communities in and around the Korean peninsula interacting with the lives of people in Central Asia and the surrounding Chinese continent.

SangSaeng, or *Seongye*, is a legacy of the web and the cycle of life. It represents the garden of living beings and was transmitted as the foundation saga of the ancient Chosun tribal community, through a text called “*Cheonbukyeong* [Heaven-given, 天符經] Scriptures.”

1 선계 (仙界) or 선경(仙境).

In subsequent periods, the three kingdoms of Goguryeo, Shilla, and Baekje were established, and their history involved tribal wars, wars among the kingdoms, and wars with kingdoms on the Chinese continent. During these times there were various creative efforts to live out the world of *Seongye* in convergence with Buddhist traditions, which were transmitted from China and India. The legacy of *Seongye* was fused with the Buddhist Maitreya teaching (Buddhist Messianic Pure Land). It teaches respect for all living beings, and the importance of overcoming greed. This teaching was particularly strong in the Hwarangdo (花郎道) youth education of the Shilla Kingdom. *Seongye* was reflected in the popular culture of the common people as fiestas or festivals (饗宴 and 風流), which pervaded traditional life during the Three Kingdoms period. However, the three kingdoms engaged in wars for unity, resulting in establishment of the Koryeo Dynasty.

A similar legacy continued in the succeeding Koryeo Dynasty, the Palgwanhoe (八觀會). In its later period, Korea experienced 40 years of invasion by the Mongol Empire. In this period, the Korean people went through their first and most brutal experience of imperial invasion and siege. The *Seongye* legacy was a decisive resource of resistance when the Mongol Empire invaded the land and kept it under siege. The Korean people resisted the invasion, supported by their spiritual culture of *SangSaeng*, as recorded in Seonkyeong (Ilyon's History of the Late Three Kingdoms).

The legacy was sustained throughout Korean history. It played an especially crucial role in the Korean Independence Movement against Imperial Japan's colonial occupation of Korea, and was reflected in the March First Declaration of Independence. During the Chosen Dynasty (1300~1900), Korea was pulled into the vortex of wars in East Asia, of military encroachment by the modern Japanese empire (1876), the Sino-Japanese war to suppress the Donghak Peasant Uprising (1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1905), Japan's colonization of Korea, Japan's invasion of Manchuria and the second Sino-Japanese War (1937), and Japan's participation in World War II (the Pacific Asian War), this time involving total mobilization of Korea's human and economic resources.

It was during this period that the Korean people and their diaspora engaged in the national independence movement, culminating in the March 1, 1919, Independence Movement, in which two million people participated throughout the peninsula.

After World War II, the US and USSR military occupations of Korea divided the country, planting the seeds of the Korean War and the global Cold War. Now, at



the apex of global geopolitical hegemony and global military rivalry, already 5 million people have lost their lives and 10 million have become refugees.

In South Korea, after the end of World War II, Christian anti-communism and military technocracy (the military as modernizing agency) were used to create the modern economy. These dynamics were applied to Korea, Brazil, Indonesia, and Nigeria, in an extension of the military technocracy of the United States under the Cold War regime. The outcome is the global economic regime of permanent war under the global empire.

It is reasoned and even predicted that a third world war may take place in East Asia, involving the Korean peninsula. The memory of the Second World War and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed nearly a million people including 100,000 Koreans, haunts the people of East Asia. Given the geopolitical hegemonic struggle and possible military confrontation among the four big nuclear powers surrounding the Korean peninsula, and given the concentration of nuclear power plants in Japan and Korea, there should be grave concern about the prospect of extermination of all life on earth. This context reveals the relevance of zoography as a method of historical hermeneutics to posit the future of human civilization.

To develop a global hermeneutical perspective of history based on Korean experiences, we need a comprehensive understanding of how the cosmic web of life is being radically eroded in all dimensions.

The globalized economic market regime in its neoliberal stage is committing great violence against the *Oikonomia of Convivencia*, affecting the economic life of human communities and the rest of life on earth.

What is neoliberalism? It means the primacy of private and corporate persons (the subject of liberal polity), giving them unlimited freedom. In the context of globalization, this has led to absolutism. Authentic spirituality—the core of all living beings—which makes them the subject of their own existence—is disparaged by the new enlightenment of modernity. This “enlightened” viewpoint is busy converging technologies such as artificial intelligence, communications and computer technology, nanotechnology, and synthetic biology, all around the world, in support of despotic satellite states, global economic monopoly, and military domination. We could also call this process neo-despotism or neo-imperialism.

Globally, economic industrialization and colonial conquests have destroyed the lives of tribal and ethnic communities. Korea's experience with the globalized economy was driven by the military technocracy during and after the Korean War, bringing about economic growth based on the global market—that is, export-oriented economic development. The iron logic of industry and market has come at great cost to Korean farmers, workers, and the natural environment.

The globalized market regime is characterized by its absolute logic of profit maximization through the monetary system seeking infinite growth of economic power. This logic permeates not only the manufacturing industry, but also the real estate business, encompassing land, sea, and air—all the spaces of life.

The key problem is the technocracy that dominates the globe today. It is sequentially connected with the technocracy of despotism in the ancient empires of West Asia and East Asia, under the Egyptian and Chin empires. In those times, it was manifested in the building of the pyramids and the Great Wall, both of which were civil engineering projects using forced labor. The context of these empires was the hydraulic civilization, which depended on civil engineering technology, forced labor, and absolute despotism.

Initially, Western rationality was brought to the Korean peninsula via the Japanese colonial economy and the US military technocracy in symbiosis with the Korean military dictatorship. Military regimes have been indicated as the modernizing agencies in Korea, Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia, and Nigeria. In the case of Korea, the Japanese empire combined Western-style modernization of science and technology with the traditional despotic ideology of empire, carrying out its colonial invasion and exploitation through the modernization of the economy and society after the European model.

Just as the symbiosis of Soviet culture with modernity in the casting of communist totalitarianism was called “pseudo-Islamic polity” (Theodore van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*), we must also address the question to Western Christian spirituality, which has embraced similar dynamics—as in Christian imperialism, colonialism, and fascism. The gospel of prosperity is a similar case, and fundamentally, the private person and private property are a “Christian ideology” inherent in neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a mammonism of greed plus modern rationality; it is manifested in the market economy, the global finance regime, the military-



industrial complex, and the invasions into the web and cycle of life on earth. This global neoliberal economic regime has become totalistic, dominating through violence the whole human community, with all living beings turned into natural resources for the industrial market.

The current economic regime is a force opposed to *Oikonomia Convivencia*, damaging the economic life of human community and the rest of the web of life, as Ulrich Duchrow explains in his thesis (“Transcending Greed”) on the erosion of the global economy and the culture of life. Exploring the wisdom of the *SangSaeng* Economy in East Asia, the *Ubuntu* Economy in Africa, the Economy of the Circle of Life In South Asia, the Economy of the Web of Life in Native American communities, the *Seon* Economy (선계) in Central Asia, and the Christian social economies at the opening of the Enlightenment Age, Duchrow argues that the religious fermentation in the “Axial Age” may be a source of inspiration.

True enlightenment is human creativity, given by God. But that creativity is not supposed to depose the spirituality of God and all living beings. In the context of the industrial economy, colonialism, and neoliberal globalization, human rationality has committed apostasy, by dismissing and denying the wellspring of spirituality of God and of all living beings.

Modern civilization, centered in the West and characterized by reductionist rationality, has accelerated the erosion of the foundations of the human civilizations that have developed throughout history, and has eradicated the habitats and life patterns of other earth-beings. A fresh foundation is required for a new civilization of life. Parag Khana, in his thesis “The Future Is Asian,” suggests that Asia’s primordial civilizations may point to a “Silk Road” for future civilization, transcending the current Western hegemonic domination.

Modernity has become the fundamental agency converging the different dimensions of economy, but also integrating cultural and political life, and transforming the modern nation state into a political regime that serves propertied agents in the individual and corporate dimensions. So-called liberal polity is designed not to protect the natural human being as a subject (rather than object) of life, but to exert control and regimentation, keeping everyone in line with the order of power in the liberal economy. The modern liberal nation-state is based on the abstract individual person who is sustained by the right of private property, and the “corporate person” is derived from this foundation. This liberal polity operates in the market through exchanges of goods that are

produced by legal persons, both private and corporate. Thus there is an innate symbiotic relationship between liberal polity and the modern market regime of exchange.

The geopolitics of omnicide, or zoecide, are at work in the cascade of global military struggles for hegemony led by the Western powers: the colonial wars, World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and now “Permanent Total War.” The convergent complex of military, industry, media, academia, and technocracy (MIMAT Complex) around the globe is preventing the realization of peace on earth.

The modern nation-states, in symbiotic convergence with the industrial market economy of modernity, have expanded their territory through colonial conquests of non-Western continents. This global process created the West-dominated geopolitics that now spells imminent zoecide. The engine of the modern military technocracy of global geopolitics is driven by the modern nation states, which are controlled by the global neoliberal economic regime. The MIMAT Complex is an integral part of this regime, its corridors of operation interlinking with the nation-states by way of the 800-some US military bases scattered throughout the world. Thus wars have to be continued, as we see in the doctrines of total war, permanent war, and war on terror. The Korean peninsula is caught in the vortex of this perpetual war.

The situation demands a new vision of “grand peace,” based not on hegemonic military geopolitics, but on a *SangSaeng* economy owned by and responsible to all living beings. Such a vision was apparent during and after World War I, when colonized peoples were envisioning peace for the whole world, a world without wars, to be realized through self-determination for all peoples.

The ecosphere—the web of life of all beings on earth—is being eroded along with the human web of life. The modern technocratic worldview and globalized modern economy have created a disconnect between human community and our ecosphere, tearing up the web of life, objectifying and subjugating earth's living beings to the market regime and industrial technocracy. The recent COVID-19 phenomenon shows that the entire web of life is being manipulated (through genetic modification of organisms and synthetic biology) and controlled by the market system, including the medical and pharmaceutical industry. The whole web of life, not just human community, is dominated by the modern neoliberal market. Climate change is only one dimension of the destruction being inflicted on the ecosphere.



Korea's development, the consequence of the Korean War and the Cold War regime, has devastated the land, rivers, and sea around the Korean peninsula, bringing nuclear pollution, impoverishment of agricultural communities through urbanization of 83 percent of the population and the loss of 67 percent of original forests.

The liberal polity (political regime) of modern nations does not allow earth's beings to live as subjects. The secularized state, subverted by the military industrial media academic complex, now converged with technocracy, cannot grant the space needed by all living beings to exercise their rights as autonomous participants in a secure web of life. We need to completely remodel the polity, by generating political wisdom toward a convivial community of all the subjects of life.

The polity has been warped into a totalistic domination complex of modern nation-states, proceeding from the tyrannies of traditional kings and empires, to the colonial dominions of politically Westernized nation-states, and to the global hegemonic complex of modern empires. The selfhood and sovereignty of all living beings including humans are beaten down by the oppressive political "totalism" of nation, ideology, and modern technocracy—in both liberal and socialist states—turning everyone and everything into an object of the market. The very constitutions of modern nation-states go against the web of life, leaving no space for the creative participation of all living beings and their essential contributions to the life of the web. Instead, living beings are viewed and treated merely as "resources" for the global industrial market economy.

Modern Korea has experienced the imperial regime of Japan, successive authoritarian and military dictatorships, and persistent political rivalry between two ideological systems over the past 75 years. Historically, however, the Donghak Peasant Movement and the T'aiping Peasant Movement, as well as peasant movements in the colonized continents, and their original agricultural practices, were clearly aware of the interdependence of all living beings in the web of life.

Korea's social web is plagued by violence, due to the cross-sectional dynamics of human rights violations and injustice (in ethnic, race, gender, economic, and political relations). Life is threatened by destruction and denial of social networks of solidarity and security based on creative and right relationships

(justice). Gender justice and caring relations of conviviality are essential for creative, full life, but many living beings have lost their living places and relationships as social networks are reduced to market mechanisms of transaction. The dynamics of neoliberal economy, dictatorship, and geopolitical rivalry have intensified the vortex of violence in Korean society.

Living cultures are being eroded as life is taken over by modern science and technocracy in convergence with the economic, military, and political forces of domination and violence. Cultures are the very source of creativity and wisdom for all living beings. But in modern times, life has been reduced to the single dimension of modern scientific civilization, which is devoid of the soul and spirit essential to all living beings and lacks the wisdom of life necessary to sustain the web of life.

There must be a restoration of cultural creativity, to realize true security and fullness of life, and to transform and “tame” the ever-advancing technocracy.

As living cultures are broken down and replaced with the profit-making inventions and systems of technocracy under the heavy influence of US military and economic forces, we have now reached the point where natural life itself is being replaced. Modern scientific and technological advances have led to the creation of trans-human organisms and their convergence with artificial intelligence, information technology, nano-technology, and synthetic biology. This is a transgression of the limits of the natural web of life, in both the human community and the ecosphere as a whole. The modern culture of science and technocracy has become a trans-human, trans-zoetic architecture bereft of actual life wisdom and convivial relationships.

In place of subjective identity and spirit, living beings—though essentially spiritual—have been reduced to rationality and the mathematical point of “cogito,” no longer blessed with their natural energy as subjects of their own existence. The spiritual foundations and wisdom of the web of life have been eroded by religious conflicts and fragmented by the complex powers of modern civilization, undermining the source and foundation of the web of life. Religious communities have been integrated into the regime of the global market, the global geopolitical regime, and the liberal polity of nation states.

Religious communities such as Protestant Christianity in Korea have been submerged in anti-communist Zionism and the religion of prosperity under the influence of the global market. This is a very different faith from the Christian



movement for self-determination and national independence during the time of resistance against the Japanese colonial regime.

We need a spiritual foundation that acts as the wellspring of our community of earth-life, transcending the complex forces of modern civilization, and enabling all living beings to regain their paradise, by turning the technological wasteland back into a garden of life and creativity.

Based on the above understandings, I would like to suggest that our twenty-first century needs a globally convergent ecumenical model, tentatively named *Diakonia for SangSaeng (Convivencia-Ubuntu)* and Grand Peace (태평). For the development of this model, comprehensive study is needed, because:

1. We need to discover and develop a vital spiritual foundation and wisdom for the cosmic web of life “outside” of the dominant Western regime of modernity and in resistance to modern Western totalism, before Western modernity has complete sway over our “garden of life” on earth.
2. We need to converge the diverse visions and wisdom of “local” communities of humans and other living beings, toward a creative, open web of life free from modern technocratic civilization.
3. We need to learn about the resistance dynamics of living beings, human and natural, that can sustain the web of life in new, creative historical transformation.
4. This study can help open creative space for all living beings to envision and enjoy a sustainable web of life, and to celebrate life as a fiesta of diverse forms and styles, enhancing the quality of life and opening pathways to new civilization and a new earth for all its beings.

Based on the Paradigm of Life (Zoesophia) this study can also explore new models of ministry (*diakonia*) of *SangSaeng Grand Peace* for the whole web of life. A brief description of this paradigm:

The agency, or capacity to act independently, of all living beings is manifested in the cosmic web of life. Every living being is a subject, living interdependently in a web of life that constitutes the household and community of all living beings. The essential nature of this web is the conviviality of all living beings in a network of mutual service. The foundation underlying each living being as subject is the spirituality of all living beings and therefore the web of life is founded on spirituality. All living beings are spiritual beings in conviviality, forming the

cosmic *Oikonomia of Convivencia and Koinonia*. The birth and evolution of life itself constitutes the creative dynamics of the web of life.

Living beings grow for themselves, and heal themselves when injured or ill, sometimes with the help of other beings. They learn and cultivate their own wisdom of life together with the other beings around them. This *koinonia* (convivial participation) of life is the *SangSaeng* Polity. All parts of the web interact in mutual service, making every living being a subject. This service, enabling the participation of all living beings as subjects in the convivial web of life, is essential for the political web of life. Political dominion and power—royal, imperial, state, global empire—must be tamed and transformed into service to all living beings as political subjects. The essence of polity thus is the “covenant” of mutual service. It may be expressed as the right of all living beings to enjoy conviviality and communion (*koinonia*).

A crucial component of the web of life is the *SangSaeng* Economy. There needs to be an integration of the human socio-economic sphere and ecosphere into an organic web of life with a shared spiritual foundation. The *Oikonomia of Convivencia* (상생경제) includes health economy (보건돌봄), ecosphere economy (생태경제), and community (social) economy of the family, village, and society. Such a web of life constitutes a secure social network of just relations, free of violence, oppression or segregation. In it, relations of class, caste, gender, ability, ethnicity, nationality, race, status, and education are free of violence and injury; healing and reconciliation are always happening; and just and right convivial relations make life secure. This web of life must tame and integrate modern science and technocracy by overcoming their harmful convergence of power, especially with regard to the industrial economy, the hegemonic military regime, the dominant political forces, and the information and communication regime, as well as the forces that exploit and destroy the natural web of life.

The web of life is filled with dynamic creativity in history, culture and the arts, and with *SangSaeng* wisdom and spirituality, bringing these together in convivial relationship. Spiritual resistance practiced by peasant movements has been manifested in religious faiths that sustained the web of life under feudalistic, royal and imperial domination. The web of life comprises the dome and household and community of living beings.



Ministry for Peace and *SangSaeng* in the twenty-first century should:

- I. **Clarify new foundations of spiritual wisdom by discovering convergences among the traditional histories of peoples in the global community, the historical and contemporary experiences of colonized peoples, and the history of modernization of the world. There are five phases of this history:**
 - A. The original and archaic vision of conviviality in the web of life.
 - B. The peasant movements of resistance and their search for conviviality against the powers of feudalism, kingdoms, and traditional empire.
 - C. The convergence of the peasant movements of resistance in the context of colonial encroachment by the West, two examples being the T'aiping and the Donghak peasant movements.
 - D. The religious social movements at the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, such as the Jan Hus peasant revolution, Thomas Muntzer, the Waldensians, Diggers and Levellers in England, and Russian peasant movements against Tsardom.
 - E. The anti-colonial resistance of national independence movements, in convergence with traditional faith movements and Western religions.
 - F. The Bandung vision of *Oikonomia Convivencia*.
- II. **Explore models of education and training for the ministry of Peace and *Convivencia*, including management of ministry. The methodology should recognize the creative convergence of all aspects of the web of life. Superseding modernity, primacy should be given to all living beings as subjects in the web of life, from the local grassroots perspective.**
 - A. The primary mode of ministry is discerned in the base communities of the web of life. What is to be discovered is the modality that fosters the spirituality of living beings in the local web of life.
 - B. A second dimension of modality in ministry focuses on service to the web of life of living beings in response to powers at the level of local authority, such as chiefs, kings and emperors, in traditional societies (kingdoms and empires).
 - C. A third dimension focuses on service to the living beings of the web

in response to colonial regimes throughout history, especially in the Western colonization process—service that came from the hearts of peoples resisting colonial domination.

- D. A fourth dimension of search for modalities of ministry targets the experiences of peoples in modern times who aspired for freedom, justice, and peace over the last three centuries, when humanity experienced two world wars and the Cold War.
- E. A fifth dimension of modalities of ministry for the web of life is discerned in the context of global industrialization of the economy and its effects on the people and other living beings in earth's six continents and five oceans. This dimension focuses on *diakonia* for socio-economic restoration, and on socio-economic security nets.
- F. A sixth dimension focuses attention on service promoting the security of the web of life in the context of wars and military violence, through healing, restoration of justice, reconciliation, and recovery of wholeness of life for all living beings. This dimension notes such historical experiences as the post-World War II ideological and military wars for hegemony, especially the Korean War and its development into the Cold War. This is the peace and reconciliation dimension.
- G. A seventh dimension is related to cultural actions such as education and creative arts, for the cultural web of life. This dimension also responds to the processes and effects of science and technology (technocratic regime) including media and communications at societal and global levels.
- H. An eighth dimension of modality for ministry and *diakonia* is the creative convergence of spiritual life towards a spiritual foundation that transcends Christian and other religious regimes and goes beyond religious as well as secular realms. The idea is to expand the boundaries of the traditional ecumenical paradigm of service and ministry, to embrace the web of life of all living beings.
- I. A ninth dimension of modality for ministry focuses on generating hope and imagination for future visions of the web of life. That future cannot be a simple extension of past and present, but will involve a new creation and new evolutionary process for the whole web of life.

Kim Yong-Bock is the chair professor at Hanshin University and chancellor of the Asia Pacific Center for Integral Study of Life.



Peacebuilding in Palestine

Mitri Raheb

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to contribute this article to this *Festschrift* in honor of Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson, the General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), not only because I consider Chris a friend, but for Chris's deep commitment to Palestine and its people. It must have been in the late eighties, during the First Palestinian Intifada (uprising), that Chris became interested in the Palestinian issue. At that time (1987 – 1991), Chris was beginning his international career and serving as global mission personnel for the United Church of Canada, teaching theology in San Jose, Costa Rica. It was during this period that the Palestinian struggle captured the world's attention and sympathies through a photo of a child holding a stone and facing an Israeli tank. Maybe it was not purely coincidence that during the Second Intifada, Chris had to deal closely with Palestine in his capacity as the executive minister and ecumenical officer of the United Church of Canada's Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit (2002 – 2004). Chris evidently felt a call to serve in Palestine, which he did in 2004 – 2006 as the representative of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Jerusalem. This experience gave deep roots to Chris's connection to Palestine, its people, and its churches, and his commitment to justice in Palestine remained strong over the years. He attended the launch event of Kairos Palestine in 2009, created a visible space for Palestine in the WCRC General Council in Leipzig in 2017, and he remains active to this day.

Few people I know have Chris's extensive understanding of the situation in Palestine. This understanding emanates from four key aspects of Chris's life: his awareness, as a Canadian citizen, of the history and practices of settler colonialism in North America; his engagement in the drafting of the Accra Confession, with its emphasis on empire; his theological understanding and commitment to justice globally; and his relationships and friendships with real people in Palestine. Based on these four experiences, Chris has always attempted to analyze the big picture, and always from the perspective of the most vulnerable. In this essay, I would like to draw on Chris's experiences outlined here to ask why the situation in Palestine has deteriorated so much after all these years, including two uprisings, a "peace process," and hundreds of peacebuilding programs. To answer that question, we need to understand the nature of the Israel occupation and the true intentions behind the "peace

process” and peacebuilding. We conclude by looking at these concepts from a theological perspective.

The Nature of the Israeli Occupation: Settler Colonialism

Much of Western literature persistently refers to the occupation of Palestinian land as the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” This label is misleading to say the least. It portrays the situation in Palestine as if it were a conflict between two parties. While some may view it as a religious conflict, the majority see it as a political conflict over land. Yet even this perception is misleading. A conflict implies disagreement over an issue, a fight between two more or less equal groups or a dispute over an asset—in our case over land. Yet no one would ever describe colonialism as a conflict. Colonialism is not a conflict between colonizers and colonized. Colonialism is defined as a “policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.”¹ The colonization of Palestine in modern history was facilitated by the British Empire through the Balfour Declaration and continues to be made possible by the American empire. In this sense, the imperial project that began in the mid-nineteenth century is continuing today.

Thus, we need to see the State of Israel as an integral part of empire or empire by proxy. Empire is bigger today than one state, nation or military power. The Accra Confession defined “empire” as the convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful. Empire today is linked to a Western hegemony that built its wealth over centuries of colonialism. Empire today is linked to a vast military industry. Empire today is linked to the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition that became a code for cultural as well as ethnic supremacy. Israel is part of this empire. Israel is sustained by the empire, which provides Israel with the hardware of submarines, F35 fighter jets, the Iron Dome, and also political backing. Israel is seen as part of the Western world, serving their interests and one of their main allies. Today Israel is the seventh biggest exporter of military and security equipment worldwide. Additionally, the empire provides Israel with the software of a biblical blueprint that paints colonial practices with theological justifications of a “promised land” and “chosen people.” Another aspect of the software is the depiction of Israel as a shining

¹ “Definition of Colonialism in English,” Lexico, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/colonialism>.



example of the so-called democratic world and Western values. A key part of the software is language that describes the colonial reality as a conflict.

The reality in Palestine is a distinct form of colonialism, namely settler colonialism. The main elements that distinguish settler colonialism from classical or neo-colonialism is the fact that settler colonialists come to settle in an occupied land permanently, and exercise state sovereignty and juridical control over the indigenous land with the ultimate goal of eliminating the native people. The natives become extraneous while the settlers are cast as natives. To achieve this, settler colonialism has developed different mechanisms, ideological and biblical constructs, and social narratives. The indigenous land is described as *terra nullius*, empty or barren land just waiting to be discovered, thus becoming the private property of the settlers. The native people are depicted in racist constructs as savage, violent terrorists, while the settlers are portrayed as the civilized and brave pioneers. To defend the settled property from the savage, a police state is created and is granted extraordinary power over the native people, including power over their civil affairs. While settler colonialism theory was first used in contexts like North America, Australia, and South Africa, several major writers published works recently applying settler colonialism to the State of Israel, among them Lorenzo Veracini,² Steven Salaita,³ Shira Robinson,⁴ Elia Zureik,⁵ and, most recently, Rashid Khalidi in his comprehensive work, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917 – 2017*.⁶ The State of Israel has to be seen within this lens of settler colonialism, while Palestine must be understood as one of the last anti-colonial struggles in an era regarded as post-colonial. This understanding of reality requires that we employ decolonial hermeneutics.

2 Lorenzo Veracini, *Israel and Settler Society* (London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006); Lorenzo Veracini, "The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel, and the Occupation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 26–42, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2013.42.2.26>; Lorenzo Veracini, "What Can Settler Colonial Studies Offer to an Interpretation of the Conflict in Israel–Palestine?" *Settler Colonial Studies* 5, No. 3 (July 3, 2015): 268–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2015.1036391>.

3 Steven Salaita, *Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006); Steven Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016).

4 Shira N. Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State*, 1st ed. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

5 Elia Zureik, *Israel's Colonial Project in Palestine: Brutal Pursuit*, 1st ed. (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

6 Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

The prevailing concept of peacebuilding in Palestine

This year coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of the Middle East Peace Conference, started in Madrid on October 30, 1991, and to which both the United States and the Soviet Union had been invited. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War in that same year had left the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) weakened. This was the perfect chance for the empire to co-opt a liberation organization into a “peace process” similar to the events that took place with the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa a year earlier. Israel’s image internationally had been damaged by its practices during the First Intifada. Ergo, both the PLO and Israel needed image rehabilitation, and this led both parties into peace talks. On September 13, 1993, the PLO, represented by Mahmoud Abbas, and Israel’s foreign minister Shimon Peres signed the “Declaration of Principles in Internal Self-Government Arrangements,” known as the Oslo Accords, in the presence of Bill Clinton. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin were witnesses. A weakened PLO saw this as an opportunity to rehabilitate itself and win acceptance from the West and its allies. This interim agreement led to wishful thinking that a Palestinian State could be established on the borders occupied by Israel since 1967, ending the Israeli settler colonial project on 23 percent of historic Palestine land. For the Israelis, self-rule was meant to be a final status. The idea was that Palestinians would “rule” over the densely populated areas (Area A), while Israel would keep Area C (over 60 percent of the West Bank) under its control. Thus, the whole of historic Palestine would be under exclusive Jewish sovereignty. The Israeli rationale was that of a colonial settler and it sought to confine the native Palestinian population in isolated pockets similar to those of the Native American reservations and South African Bantustan territories, while keeping the less populated land in the West Bank for future Israeli settlements. This settler colonial concept was to settle as much land as possible with as few Palestinians as possible. For this reason, four crucial issues were not dealt with in Oslo and were postponed to the final status negotiations: borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and water. These four issues are integral to a settler colonial mindset that does not accept that borders are to block settlement activities and does not accept the return of native people to their land, because the basic premise is to replace the native people on the colonized land.

It is not surprising that the number of Jewish Israeli colonizers in the West Bank has more than quadrupled since the signing of the Oslo Accords. These Accords enabled Israel to retain four key factors of production under its control: land,



labor, water, and capital. Thus, the occupied Palestinian territories serve the Israeli economy while relying on life support from the donor community. The 368 treaties signed between the United States and the Indian tribes were not honored because the US was determined to expand westwards and slice up native lands bit by bit; the same thing has happened in Palestine over the years. The highly celebrated and so-called peace process that resulted in Arafat, Rabin, and Peres receiving the Nobel Peace Prize actually gave the Palestinians nothing but more process and less peace, buying time for Israel to further its settler colonial project in the West Bank.

The highly celebrated peace process triggered massive “peacebuilding” programs that pumped tens of billions of dollars into the occupied Palestinian territories. So what went wrong? And why are we further from peace today than in 1993? There are several reasons. One of the prominent international scholars who have researched this question over many years is Mandy Turner, Professor of Conflict, Peace and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester in the UK. Turner came to the conclusion that Western peacebuilding was ultimately conceptualized with a colonial mindset.⁷ One aspect of this colonial peacebuilding is a modern version of *mission civilisatrice*.⁸ Peacebuilding meant preparing Palestinians for self-governance and state building through “good governance” programs, while rehabilitating the Palestinian economy for entry into the free market economy.⁹ This was a colonial practice implemented in many countries placed under mandate after WWI to prepare them for statehood while simultaneously ensuring that the emerging state would maintain colonial interests. In the case of Palestine, the aim was to serve Israeli interests.

Security was the top Israeli priority, and an important aspect of colonial peacebuilding in Palestine was, therefore, counterinsurgency.¹⁰ The Palestinian resistance was depicted as brutal and requiring pacification by “securing” the Palestinian population and ensuring acquiescence in the face of violent settler colonial dispossession. One-third of the budget provided by the donor community went into building the Palestinian security forces, and there is now

7 Mandy Turner, “Completing the Circle: Peacebuilding as Colonial Practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,” *International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 4 (n.d.). 492–507.

8 Roland Paris, “International Peacebuilding and the ‘Mission Civilisatrice,’” *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 4 (2002). 637–56.

9 Michael Pugh, N. Cooper, and M. Turner, eds., *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*, 2008 edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008).

10 Mandy Turner, “Peacebuilding as Counterinsurgency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,” *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 01 (n.d.). 1–26.

one security person for every 75 Palestinians, one of the highest ratios in the world. This heavy investment in Palestinian security was less about security for the Palestinian people and more to provide security for Israel and its settler colonies. While donor investments were given to the Palestinian Authority, they were really intended for Israel's security. An important aspect of settler colonialism is the creation of a police state to control the native colonized population, in this case both directly by Israeli military forces as well as through a proxy, i.e., Palestinian security forces. In this sense, peacebuilding in the occupied Palestinian territories succeeded in silencing any credible resistance among the Palestinian population to the Israeli settler colonial project. Even non-violent resistance such as boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) was discredited by the donor community while decolonial Palestinian theologies were avoided by churches and their hierarchies.

Towards Decolonial Peacebuilding

This analysis of the context of Palestine rejects a naïve perception of the reality as a conflict between two parties, or of peacebuilding as a means to accommodate settler colonialism. If Israel is part of the imperial structure, the question must be posed as to whether peace with the empire is possible? The Bible struggles with this question at multiple stages and reaches different answers. In the Book of Revelation, written at a time of great persecution, John does not see any possibility of peace with the empire. It is God that will dismantle the empire and create a new reality and a new Jerusalem. Some people believe that peace with Israel is not possible under the current imperial configuration and only a dismantling of the empire can bring the required change. The Book of Jonah reaches a different conclusion. God shows Jonah that the empire is not predestined to destruction and is not necessarily a hopeless case. Preaching and advocating in Nineveh could bring about a change of mind and heart, and lead to repentance. There are many groups whose main mission today is to address the Israeli and American public and clarify the reality in the hope that this may influence Israeli and American politics and praxis. A third vision is offered by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 11:6-9:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,*



*and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

The wolf, leopard, and lion are symbols of the empire. Isaiah imagines the unimaginable: a peaceful existence made possible by a vegetarian lion that does not harm or live at the expense of the ox. This vision of two states living side by side in peace is still envisioned by many groups, provided that Israel ends its military occupation, settler activities, and exploitation of Palestinian human and natural resources.

In the Bible, peace can only be the fruit of justice. Justice means nothing less than a radical redistribution of resources and the abolition of unjust structures. Peacebuilding must be a movement for justice that helps the colonized to regain their rights, land, and sovereignty, while preventing the colonizers from doing harm until a new healthy relationship is established with a status of peace for all. Unfortunately, over the last thirty years, peacebuilding measures have been directed to pacifying Palestinians while enabling the settler colonial project to continue and a neoliberal economy to be imposed on the Palestinians. The Accra Confession stressed the centrality of justice for the Christian church, for “God is a God of justice.” “In a world of corruption, exploitation, and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused.” Taking a stand against injustice was made a matter of faith by the Confession. The Confession clearly rejected “any claim of economic, political, and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule.”

For peacebuilding to succeed, the Confession needs to be translated into concrete and genuine peacebuilding activities that employ creative resistance to empire and enhance Palestinian resilience in the face of the Israeli settler colonial project. Palestinian resilience was demonstrated in the rejection of the Trump “peace plan” that tried to legalize the de facto annexation of the West Bank and the Israeli settler colonial project. Church-related organizations (around 300 of them) have continued to provide educational, health, and cultural services, in addition to developmental aid, to sustain Palestinian steadfastness (*sumud*). These are important vehicles in peacebuilding. We are, however,

at a point where a paradigm shift in peacebuilding is needed. The post-Oslo peacebuilding measures have proved inadequate for a settler colonial context, and a new model of peacebuilding based on the concept of justice is required to attain peace. Christians are called to commit themselves, their time, and their energy to this just cause, a commitment that the Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson has exemplified throughout the last thirty years.

Mitri Raheb is a Palestinian Christian, the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, and the founder and president of the Diyar Consortium.



Peacebuilding in the Philippines

Reuel Norman Marigza

Background

The Philippines has been faced with a national democratic revolution waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP); its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA); and the united front, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), for over five decades. Established in 1968, the CPP aimed to stage a protracted people's war with a socialist perspective. It grew in number when it was forced to go underground during the Martial Law declared by then-President Ferdinand Marcos, who used the Communist bogey as one of the main reasons for imposing martial law. Marcos's regime would then become a one-man rule.

When Marcos was deposed in 1986 through the so-called People Power Revolution, there was hope that the issue of revolution would be addressed. Initially, the government established by Aquino was broad enough to invite possibilities of an open door to a peaceful settlement of the conflict. As a confidence-building mechanism, amnesty was granted to leaders of the underground movement, including NPA top commander, Bernabe Buscayno. But eventually, the progressives in the Aquino government were pushed to the margin. The Mendiola massacre, killing more than a dozen peasants asking for land reform right at the doorstep of the Philippines' seat of power in early 1987, dashed hopes for peace. Subsequently, Aquino "unsheathed the sword of war" (her words) to try to end the revolution, but failed.

Philippine presidents from Marcos to Duterte attempted to quell the revolution but did not succeed. There was a brief respite during the presidency of Fidel Ramos, a former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, when he reopened initiatives for peace talks. It was in this period that the framework of the peace process was laid down. The substantive agenda, known as The Hague Joint Declaration, was approved in 1992. Also included was The Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG), which provided protection and immunity to peace consultants and security staff of the NDF and the government.

The Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) was a concrete outcome of the peace process. It is proof that peace talks can produce concrete results. President Joseph

Estrada, who succeeded Ramos, signed the CARHRIHL in 1998. But before his term ended, Estrada also vowed to crush those in armed opposition to the government. Subsequent presidents also attempted to do the same, but failed.

The ascendancy of President Duterte to the presidency gave hope to peace advocates, because even before he sat down, Duterte had initiated contact with the CPP-NPA-NDF and offered five seats in the Cabinet for them. The CPP-NPA-NDF declined, but nominated others from the open progressive movements. Unfortunately, even these were eased out from their posts.

The reopened and reenergized peace talks started with the Comprehensive Agreement on Socio-Economic Reforms (CASER). But peace spoilers won the day. President Duterte issued the “whole of nation” approach, declared the CPP-NPA as a “communist terrorist group,” and terminated the peace talks.

Failure to Address Root Causes

At the early part of her term, even President Corazon Aquino recognized that the roots of insurgency are in economic conditions and social structures that oppress the people. The Philippine revolution is poverty-driven and deeply rooted in the feudal system and structures. The CPP frames the basic problems of Philippine society as feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic capitalism.

The real threat to peace is found in the unjust socio-economic political structures that breed insurgency. In 1986, I was asked to draft a statement on peace, which the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) Council of Bishops issued as “Peacemaking: Our Ministry.” In part, it stated that “real peace happens when the roots of conflicts and violence are removed, when a just social structure is built, and when human rights and dignity are held sacred.”

Then it went on to assert:

Genuine peace comes when justice is served . . .

For as long as peasants remain landless,
 for as long as laborers do not receive just wages,
 for as long as we are politically and economically dominated by foreign
 nations,
 for as long as we channel more money to the military than to basic
 social services,
 for as long as the causes of social unrest remain untouched,
 there will be no peace!



That was true then. That is true even now!

By failing to address the root causes, the seed for insurgency and the revolution will find fertile ground. As the UCCP statement states, “genuine peace can be attained only when founded on justice.”

Present Roadblocks to Peace

The prospect of peace in the Philippines at this time appears to be dim and elusive: There are just too many obstacles placed on the road to peace. The formal peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) had been terminated by the GRP, which has moved backwards to pursue a militarist approach. This could be seen in the following:

- Imposing Martial Law in the whole Mindanao, using the Marawi siege as a justification;
- Memorandum Order 32 declaring a state of emergency in Negros Island, Samar, and the Bicol region;
- Executive Order No. 70, creating the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and institutionalizing the “whole of nation approach” to counter insurgency, which spurred extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and illegal arrests and detentions;
- The passage and signing into law of RA 11479, the so-called Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which further encourages and provides legal cover for such operations, despite its highly questionable Constitutional and legal basis; and
- Other grave human rights violations.

The death knell for the peace talks was sounded through Presidential Proclamation 360, issued November 23, 2017, which unilaterally terminated the peace negotiations. The issuance of Executive Order 70 on December 4, 2018, abandoned the peace negotiations on the national level with finality, purportedly substituting in its place localized peace talks.

Proclamation 360 was followed by Proclamation 374, issued December 5, 2017, declaring the CPP-NPA as a terrorist organization and the Department of Justice petition in a Manila Court to proscribe the CPP-NPA as such.

With President Duterte closing the door to a comprehensive political settlement for a just and lasting peace, his administration, through the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), is attempting to rally the entire nation behind a militarist solution to the armed conflict, employing the entire civilian bureaucracy and mobilizing the private sector for this purpose.

Significant steps had been taken by the parties in the past, steps designed to be building blocks in erecting structures of peace. Such achievements must not be squandered and just set aside. But the Duterte administration, with a growing penchant for renegeing on previous agreements entered into by the Philippines, has made the peace talks untenable by setting aside the prior mutually agreed-upon framework, guarantees, and procedures for holding formal peace talks.

Such steps started in 1992 with The Hague Joint Declaration “to resolve the armed conflict” with the “common goal... the attainment of a just and lasting peace.” This declaration set forth the substantive agenda for the formal peace talks, namely:

- human rights and international humanitarian law,
- social and economic reforms,
- political and constitutional reforms, and
- end of hostilities and disposition of forces.

Addressing these reforms ensures the comprehensive basis for a just and enduring peace.

The Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) had provided the guarantees that would ensure that participants in the talks would not be the subject of government reprisal at any point. While the armed conflict still continued, both parties had agreed to abide by the standard of respecting Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL). Yet several peace consultants have been arrested or re-arrested and some have been killed.

Following the agreed-upon substantive agenda, the talks moved to the crafting of the Comprehensive Agreement on Socio-Economic Reforms (CASER), which is the core and the meat of the peace talks, for it addresses the root causes of the conflict. This is where the parties make or break the talks, for this area delves into the issue of landlessness, the systemic and structural poverty experienced by the vast majority of Filipinos: the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity.



But the question has always been and still is: Are those in power and privilege, many of whom are in the corridors of Congress and in the Executive Branch of government, willing to craft laws that will alter and lessen radically their power and privilege? Will government have the political will and resolve to carry out and implement such laws and reforms? In other words, are those in positions of privilege and wealth willing to change the power dynamics in Philippine society? This is the crux of the matter. This is the biggest obstacle.

The Participation of Churches and Faith-based Groups

That is not to say, though, that because there are difficulties and obstacles, peace advocates and peace builders just give up on the quest for peace. The Biblical directive is clear: “Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14, 1 Peter 3:11). The call for a just, true, and lasting peace is a legitimate call, especially for a land embroiled in conflict for a long, long time.

The cause of peace and for peace is much larger than the obstacles thrown our way. The cause of peace and for peace is far weightier than what the State can do to those who work for peace. If there is one thing we have learned, it is that the cause of peace and for peace is much wider than the peace talks itself.

A peace process that goes beyond the formal negotiation for peace, that goes beyond even the Duterte administration, needs to be installed and solidified. It requires more work and effort—in building a peace constituency, in helping peoples and communities realize their power to push for things that make for peace, in creating and building spaces where the longings and aspirations for peace are given concrete expressions.

In 2007, the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP) was formed to develop a peace constituency and to accompany the peace talks being facilitated by the Royal Norwegian Government.

PEPP was able to bring together a diverse group of churches and faith-based groups to become the largest ecumenical peace movement of church leaders in the Philippines. It is composed of church leaders from five member federations:

- Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines,
- National Council of Churches in the Philippines,
- Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches,

- Ecumenical Bishops Forum, and
- The Association of Major Religious Superiors (Men/Women) in the Philippines.

Its local partners include The Citizens Alliance for Just Peace, Sulong CARHRIHL, Pilgrims for Peace, and Waging Peace. PEPP also works with other peace groups, such as Sowing the Seeds of Peace in Mindanao and Inpeace Mindanao, and partners with the different dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant and Evangelical churches, and other church-related organizations.

PEPP encouraged and continues to press the conflicting parties to resume formal peace talks and to comply with their obligations under previous agreements to address the root causes of the armed conflict. PEPP efforts include activities such as :

- Peace Fora,
- Regional workshops on the Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms,
- Training of Trainer via PEPP's own Peace Module, and
- Networking and alliance-building at local and regional levels.

PEPP notes with alarm the constricting space for peace. With the termination of the formal peace talks and the creation of the government's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), red-tagging and vilification have become the order of the day. It has been noted that such red-tagging is a prelude to worse human rights violations, such as the filing of trumped-up cases, arrests, or even killings. In the recent Ecumenical Leaders' Summit on Peace held in March 2021, Church leaders and peace builders came out with a Pastoral Statement entitled, "Respect for Human Rights and God's Gift of Human Dignity: A Cornerstone for Peace."¹ I include the full statement here to illustrate the current situation and underscore the need to pursue peace.

The Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP) is very concerned about the growing state of violence in the country that is fast spreading like the

¹ Ryan D. Rosauo, "Religious Leaders Alarmed at Violence 'Fast-Spreading like COVID-19'; Tells Security Forces to Respect Human Rights," Inquirer.net. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1405614/religious-leaders-alarmed-at-violence-fast-spreading-like-covid-19-tells-security-forces-to-respect-human-rights>



deadly COVID-19 virus. As church people, we are seriously alarmed that human rights, which protect God's gift of human dignity and an important cornerstone of peace, are sadly being ignored and desecrated.

On March 7, a day before International Women's Day, coordinated "*tokhang*" style raids by the police and the military in Calabarzon, resulted in the death of nine activists and arrests of six others. Most were killed in their homes but the police claimed that there was an "armed encounter" and the alleged members of "communist terrorist groups" fought back (*nanlaban*). Prior to this, on March 4, two union leaders were arrested in Santa Rosa and in San Pablo City, Laguna, respectively. We offer our sincere condolences to the bereaved families of those killed and our prayers for those arrested and their families and colleagues who are working for their releases.

Human rights groups have dubbed the chilling crackdown as "Bloody Sunday," redolent of the government's war on drugs. They also noted how the attacks came two days after President Rodrigo Duterte ordered police and military to "kill" and "finish off" members of the New People's Army (NPA)—and "don't mind human rights."

Rights violations and attacks on members of civil society organizations have increased these past few days and weeks. On March 3, 2021, Atty. Angelo Karlo Guillen, Vice President for Visayas of the National Union of People's Lawyers, was almost killed when two men in Iloilo City stabbed him. Atty. Guillen is the lawyer for the survivors of the Tumandok and Sagay massacres and his laptop containing files of said cases was taken by his attackers. Other disheartening rights violations include the killing of Julie Catamin, the barangay captain who came forward to counter the claims of state forces that the "Tumandok 9" massacre victims were rebels, and the arrests of Lumad students and their teachers in the University of San Carlos, among others.

We call on the government, especially those in the security sector, to fully respect human rights and strive to protect God's gift of human dignity. We also call on the Filipino people to pray and work for the resumption of the peace talks between the government and the NDFP. Like the vaccine, which is a crucial solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, principled negotiations that address the roots of the armed conflict in our country are likewise the best option for a people-centered peace settlement. It is written: "For God is not

a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

The contribution of the World Communion of Reformed Churches

Prior to the start of one international online convocation, several of us already in the “room” were chatting, and I mentioned that red-tagging even of peace advocates and human rights defenders was rampant. Even I, as General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and a former General Secretary of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) was not spared.² Immediately, the Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson proposed that we hold a similar online international convocation on the Philippines and its current situation. On his encouragement, we held not just one, but two such convocations: one that featured the experiences of the UCCP, and the other, spearheaded by the NCCP, on the broader ecumenical body.

The WCRC and its member churches and networks, through the initiative of the General Secretary, were able to highlight the plight of the Philippine churches as they sought to live out faithfully the mission of God entrusted to us. We are grateful for this holding out of the torch as we traverse a dark period of our history.

Prior to his being WCRC General Secretary, the Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson had been to the Philippines and kept it close to his heart in his involvement with the Peace for Life, which had an office in Manila. He had also visited and held lectures for seminaries and the ecumenical movement. I personally have worked with him in the Partners Council of the United Church of Canada, and have noted his passion and clear articulation for peace based on justice wherever injustice and un-peace is found. His encouragement and words of wisdom stemming from his wide experience and faith motivations and imperatives will always be cherished and remembered.

Despite Difficulties, Peacebuilding Must Continue

Difficult and elusive as it may seem, those of us who are peacemakers and peacebuilders must persevere all the more, must strive and work all the more, and continue the struggle to attain a true, enduring and just peace!

As the UCCP “Peacemaking: Our Ministry” puts it:

² UCCP is a member church of the WCRC.



The ministry of peacemaking is an imperative of the faith we profess. [Our faith] calls us to participate in the establishment of a meaningful and just social order. Hence, the peace we seek should result from our active participation in building structures that promote human development and uphold human dignity.

Reuel Norman Margiza is a bishop in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and general secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines.

“Not with Our Heads in the Clouds”: A Witnessing and Confessing Church in a World Fallen among Thieves

Allan Aubrey Boesak

I

In 2004 in Accra, Ghana, at the meeting of the General Council of the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Chris Ferguson fought hard to have the phrase “a world fallen among thieves” included in the Accra Confession. He did not succeed. Instead, the General Council opted for two other expressions: “empire” and “a scandalous world.” These last two are powerful expressions in and of themselves, expressing as they do the workings of our modern empire—the American Empire—under whose skirts the rich nations of the world hide and from whose power they benefit immensely, causing the scandalous world the Accra Confession identifies, laments, and judges.

In the ongoing debates within the Communion, in which Chris continued to play a major role, we came to define empire as a calculated coalescing of global forces harnessing their economic, political, military, and cultural resources in unprecedented and frightening ways.

They are, as the Bible describes them, powers and principalities, representing crushing realities of domination, oppression, and control. They are murderous powers, but not by accident—euphemisms such as “free trade,” “market democracies,” “collateral damage,” “humanitarian intervention,” or “enhanced interrogation” are the arrogantly transparent veils with which they seek to mask their calculated homicidal, ecocidal, and cosmocidal intent. For these reasons we call these powers “lordless,” not meaning an egalitarianism with no “lords” or “underlings,” for that is precisely what they create and maintain, and they demand absolute submission. But, the Accra Confession and the church insist, these lords are not the Lord Jesus Christ. Over them, above them, ruling, judging, overcoming, and empowering us, is the One we confess as Lord: Jesus the Christ.

These imperial lords have created the “scandalous world” we inhabit. In 2004, this world was scandalous enough. Now, in 2021, it has become infinitely worse. What we have come to call “global apartheid” has tightened its grip on our world in general and around the throats of the poor and vulnerable in particular. “Global apartheid” is best understood in the all-encompassing, global expression of what we call “empire,” a reality we can no longer afford to keep out



of the discussion. The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the world's population says the Oxfam 2020 report, "Dignity, not Destitution." Global inequality is not just growing, it is "shockingly entrenched" and "out of control." On top of it all, the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic could push half a billion more people into poverty unless urgent action is taken to bail out developing countries.

Oxfam's 2020 report focused more tightly on yet another form of global apartheid: gender injustice, gender vulnerability, and gender oppression. Women and girls are among those who benefit least from today's economic system. They spend billions of hours cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly. Unpaid care work is the "hidden engine" that keeps the wheels of our economies, businesses, and societies moving. It is driven by women who often have little time to get an education, earn a decent living, or have a say in how our societies are run, and who are therefore trapped at the bottom of the economy.

The situation, at all levels, in all countries of the world, in every imaginable way, is getting worse even as we speak. The irresponsibility of so many governments and their leaders is beyond shocking, but not at all surprising. In three African countries incumbent presidents have abused the crisis to force and manipulate elections to stay in power, in two cases claiming an unconstitutional third term. The "Shock and Awe" doctrine executed so ruthlessly by the imperialist powers against the vulnerable, poor peoples of the Global South, has now turned upon its masters, and they are powerless against it. Politically, I suppose one could speak of "blowback" as American political scientist Chalmers Johnson did. Theologically, one could remind the world that the Crucified One among the crucified ones today, has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross" (Colossians 2:15). The question here is, "Can the church sense, discern, and act upon this *Kairos* moment the God of history has placed before us?" That is the question at the heart of the Accra Confession, and the question that marks Chris's remarkable tenure.

But Chris had hoped it could be put even more sharply. Why? Because, I believe, he takes Accra's intentions of discernment and confession so seriously: to see, understand, and interpret this world "through the eyes of those who suffer" and then to give witness. Through those eyes, this world is scandalous not just because it is, in traditional Reformed formulation, "fallen." It is scandalous because it has fallen "among thieves." The poor and the oppressed know that

this scandalous world did not “just happen.” The world God had created has been invaded, it has been stolen. The destitute and the excluded, the despised and left-behind know the reality of evil and the power of evil human agency. They know, as Jesus knew, those who “come only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). They know Jesus is not dramatic, cleverly using hyperbole to catch attention. They have seen those thieves come from their faraway lands. They know what it means to be invaded, set upon, and enslaved. To have their lands, their bodies, their children stolen, all of them sold on auction blocks. Their dignity stolen; their stories, their hopes, aspirations, dreams, and future stolen. They saw their cultures destroyed, their religions denigrated and cast aside; they saw genocide and ethnic cleansing, and they buried their loved ones in graves dug in land no longer theirs. They know Jesus spoke not one word of a lie. Jesus knew the truth because he saw the truth through the eyes of those who suffer, those being robbed, killed, and destroyed. The theft is of a grandiosity that continues to stun the mind.

But the verse is so powerful because it name not only those who “come to steal and kill and destroy.” It also uplifts the One who “came that they may have life.” The poor and oppressed know that this is not some accidental juxtaposition. Jesus is the very opposite of the thieves and killers. *They* come to steal, destroy and kill. Jesus comes to give abundant life. Jesus speaks, and stands, in *opposition* to the destroyers of life. Here speaks the incarnation of God on earth, amongst God’s people: the incarnation of God’s justice, of God’s revolt against evil and injustice, against destruction and death. Jesus’s speech is enacted revolt. He is in rebellion against those who steal dignity and life. Jesus rebels against those who have come to steal the glory of God to claim for themselves in their idolatries of supremacy and power.

Jesus knows that they have come to steal what John Calvin, in his commentary on Acts 5:29 called “the rights of God”: God’s right to liberate God’s people from bondage, God’s right to protect the dignity of God’s children, God’s right to be a God of justice, love and mercy, and to demand justice from us. Jesus means to stand up for God’s right to be in a special way the God of the poor and the oppressed, the discarded, the defenceless, and the destitute, and to stand by them in the their struggles against any form of injustice wherever it may occur, and by whomever it may be perpetrated. Jesus is fighting for God’s right to fight for what God had bestowed on God’s children at creation: full humanity, a humanity that requires freedom. The thieves know that Jesus is the one standing between them and their prey. Jesus is not the stranger; his sheep know his voice and feel protected and comforted. Jesus is not the hired hand who flees when



danger comes. Jesus is the gate they must break down to get to the people. Jesus is the Good Shepherd the empire must kill first, in order to get to the flock. And it does, but he “takes up his life again,” because he is Lord.

The struggle we are in is not against nameless powers, nebulous evil phenomena who somehow had just befallen us. We know their names. The struggles are against thieves bent on stealing from God, from God’s creation: that is why it is groaning.

Abraham Kuyper, that intrepid Dutch theologian and political leader, though honoured in white South Africa for all the wrong reasons, still knew the truth when he saw it:

When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus never takes his place with the wealthier, but always with the poorer. He is born in a stable; and while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.... Both the Christ, and also just as much his disciples after him as the prophets before him, invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury and for the suffering and the oppressed.

It is this Jesus who speaks this truth in John 10:10. This is what makes this text so powerful. And that is why Chris wanted it in there. Fortunately, the phrase “a world fallen among thieves” has been taken up to anchor another WCRC document, *Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen Among Thieves*. And I for one, rejoice that this phrase is living on in the work of the WCRC.

II

The Accra Confession calls upon churches to discern, to confess, and to witness to what we see through the eyes of those who suffer. Our witness to the world flows from our confession of the God of Jesus Christ. In the Accra Confession, God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life, the God of the covenant who is sovereign and who calls us to account. This God is a God of justice and judgement, Accra proclaims.

Standing before *this* God, we see through the eyes of those who suffer. We can do that because God self is the One who sees. Just as Yahweh sees the misery of enslaved Israel in Egypt (Exodus 3:7), so Yahweh sees the suffering of the Egyptian slave woman Hagar. So at the dawn of ancient Israel’s history it is made crystal clear: the God of Israel chooses for the oppressed against the oppressor, stands by the slave against the enslaver. Yahweh hears the voice of the voiceless

and through her, the slave woman and her son, it will be made manifest who the God of Israel really is. And as God sees, the world and its powers will be made to see. They can no longer act as if they had not seen, because the God who sees is the God who acts on behalf of those whose pain and plight God has seen. The slave woman and her child foreshadow Israel's slavery in Egypt.

When God sees, God does not see the glory and the wealth of imperial Egypt. That is seeing through the eyes of the perpetrator—the powerful and the privileged. God does not see Egypt's splendour, its palaces and temples, its military might, its standing in the world. God sees Egypt through the eyes of the enslaved: "I have seen their misery.... I have heard their cry.... I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...."

The God of the exodus comes as no surprise: it is the God of the wilderness of Beersheba, to where Hagar is banished. She is banished, but she is not abandoned, because she is seen. There the paradigm of God's preferential option for the poor and the oppressed is not a people, but a slave woman.

The One whom we confess and before whom we bear witness in the world is the God of justice. Like the Belhar Confession, the Accra Confession stands firmly on Jesus' sermon in the synagogue as recoded by Luke. Accra reads the Bible as a history of faithful struggle against empire and understands that there is a struggle *within* the texts themselves, exposing the struggle between power and powerlessness, privilege and exclusion, centering and marginalization, domination, oppression, and resistance. Through it all we seek to understand the meaning of prophetic faithfulness, prophetic truthfulness, prophetic endurance, which is the prophetic tradition of justice and peace, which is the tradition in which Jesus of Nazareth plants himself.

There is a reason why Jesus, on that Sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth, chose to read from the Book of Isaiah. We mostly concentrate on the citation in Luke, from Isaiah 61:1 and the first part of verse 2. But first, Jesus' "reading" is a combination of 61 and 58, some of the most radical verses on justice and injustice. Second, Jesus leaves out verses 2-7; the vengeance of Israel against her enemies. Jesus is not interested in violence, vengeance, and the subjection of other peoples to Israel. But third: we forget how Isaiah leads up to chapter 61. It is his "Ode to Justice and Peace."

Chapter 51:1 sets the tone for 11 chapters in a row: "Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness," i.e., justice.



Chapter 52:7 exalts the prophetic tradition and rejoices in its presence in Israel: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace; who brings good news, who announces salvation," i.e., liberation.

Chapters 52 and 53 sing the song of the Suffering Servant "taken away by a perversion of justice," exactly what the Romans did in collusion with the Jerusalem elites.

Chapter 54 celebrates the faithfulness of God toward those singled out for suffering, abuse, and exclusion: "Sing, o barren one! For your Maker is your husband." And to the persecuted and hunted down comes the word, "No weapon fashioned against you shall prosper." Verse 14: "In righteousness shall you be established."

Chapter 55 gives us the invitation to abundant life. "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!" The invitation is all-inclusive, all-embracing; no one is left out. Jesus will pick this up: "I have come so you may have life, and that in abundance."

In Chapter 56, the love, justice, solidarity, and inclusivity of God is radical and indivisible. "Thus says the Lord!" it begins in verse 1: "Uphold justice, and do what is right." To whom? The foreigner and the eunuch, those shunned and excluded because they are foreign, those despised, mocked, and abused because of their sexuality (56:3-7). Verse 8 repeats God's intentions and speaks again of "the outcasts."

Chapter 57 tells of God's lament and God's anger: The righteous perish, and who takes it to heart? The heartlessness of the unrighteous. They seem to get away with their wickedness, but "Whom are you mocking?" is God's question in verse 4. In mocking, abusing, oppressing them, Yahweh says, you are mocking Me. But Yahweh is just and compassionate: "Whoever takes refuge in me shall possess the land" (57:13).

Chapter 58:7-8 include the well-known promise: *If you do justice*, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, begin to do justice stop the evil, *then* your light shall rise in the darkness.

Chapter 59 is God's anger against injustice: The Lord hears the cry of God's oppressed people: "Justice is far from us! We grope like the blind along the wall.... We wait for light, and lo! There is darkness...." The prophet reassures the

destitute: “The Lord saw it all, and it displeased [angered] him that there was no justice, no one to intervene.”

In 60:21 the assurances continue. As God’s righteousness overcomes injustice and oppression and captures the hearts of God’s people, the prophet promises: “Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land.” And verse 32: “I am the Lord. In its time I will accomplish it quickly.”

Then comes chapter 61. The time is now; the Lord will accomplish it. The One who intervenes has come. That is what Jesus calls to mind when he says, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me.” He is the one whom Yahweh has “covered with a robe of righteousness.” In verse 8: “For I the Lord, love justice....” and in verse 11: “For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the LORD will cause justice and praise to spring up before all nations.”

III

Knowing this, the Accra Confession calls us to bear witness. However, it is not a witness that, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has cautioned us, seeks to hide behind cheap grace. It is a witness that is *marturia*, as the New Testament calls it. It is a costly witness. Bonhoeffer consciously takes us back to the New Testament: our witness before the world is *marturia*: standing with Christ and suffering with Christ for the sake of justice and righteousness, dignity, wholeness, and peace. Confession and witness must lead us to the place “where Christ stands.” Bonhoeffer found that place to be with “the children, and the morally and socially ‘least of these’, those viewed as less worthy.”¹ The desire to find the place where Christ stands—with the “least of these”—would lead Bonhoeffer beyond his concerns for his “own people”—the *Volk*—to all those found “unworthy” by the Nazis, rejected, despised, persecuted: the Jews, LGBTQ+ persons, persons with disabilities, gypsies, communists, and finally the true patriots of the resistance. It is witness to God’s indivisible radical justice, indivisible radical love, indivisible radical equality, indivisible radical solidarity, and God’s radical indivisible inclusivity. This is what will shape our decisions and actions, if we remain true to Accra.

¹ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T&T Clark, 2010). 49.



The decisions we take, so Bonhoeffer reads and interprets Colossians 3:1-3, will determine

...whether we Christians have enough strength to witness before the world that we are not dreamers with our heads in the clouds... that our faith really is not opium that keeps us content within an unjust world. Instead, and precisely because our minds are set on things above, we are that much more stubborn and purposeful in protesting here on earth....

Bonhoeffer speaks of the “strength,” the courage, to witness before the world. But first, the “world” he speaks of is a hostile world, a world in the grip of evil, quite specifically the world of Adolf Hitler, of the Nazis, of challenge and risk of persecution, of the ultimate limits of horror and death. It is our world, “fallen among thieves.”

Let’s stay with Bonhoeffer. The “witness” Bonhoeffer thinks of, and Accra calls us to, can no longer be words, however thoughtful and eloquent. From now on, witness can only be the act of taking a stand where Christ is to be found: in the places where the plagues fall, where death casts its shadow. The strength for this kind of witness comes not of earthly power, of connections with those in high places or of the guarantees of protective privilege. This is a strength that comes from faith in the empowering Spirit of God, and our embrace of her work in our lives.

Accra knows that our confession of God and before God, as a witness to the world, cannot be a triumphalist war cry, as if we were innocent and had no blood on our hands. Hence those powerful words of humility in paragraph three, the Communion deliberately framing and contextualising the confession and how it should be read: “Gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast where millions of Africans were commodified, sold and subjected to the horrors of repression and death. The cries of “never again” are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system.” And immediately following, “The cries of ‘never again’—that is, our claims of innocence without remorse and repentance and the doing of justice—are put to the lie by the ongoing realities [of this world fallen among thieves].” But it is a world human beings have created, and are shamelessly and continuously profiting from.

Face to face with the horrific realities of what has been done in the name of Jesus, standing next to those who still bear the wounds and the scars and the trauma, looking them in the eye, we confess. But not only do we confess before God, we confess before those who have suffered, who we have caused harm through our rapaciousness, greed, and imperialist imperviousness. So we confess, with our heads not in the clouds, but here on earth, looking into the eyes of the victims of our violence, with the hope that there will be forgiveness:

We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgment of God's justice.

- We acknowledge the complicity and guilt of those who consciously or unconsciously benefit from the current neoliberal economic global system;
- we recognize that this includes both churches and members of our own Reformed family and therefore we call for confession of sin.
- We acknowledge that we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system. This has all too often permeated our very spirituality.
- We confess our sin in misusing creation and failing to play our role as stewards and companions of nature.
- We confess our sin that our disunity within the Reformed family has impaired our ability to serve God's mission in fullness.

This is language that reminds us (again!) of Bonhoeffer. But like, Bonhoeffer, we must have the courage to name the evils that hold us captive:

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 without raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways of rushing to help them. It has become guilty of the lives of the Weakest and most Defenceless Brothers and Sisters of Jesus Christ.

This is a moment of complete and utter honesty before God and the poor, oppressed, exploited masses of the world. Listen not only to *what* Bonhoeffer says, but to *how* he says it. With the rhythm of prophetic condemnation he stacks one atrocity upon another and names them separately: *the arbitrary use*



of brutal force, suffering in body and soul, oppression, hatred, and murder, and this was done to countless innocent people. But in witnessing all this, the church has “not [even] raised its voice,” it has failed to witness, that is, to speak for those who cannot speak, to suffer with those who suffer, to stand with them in their suffering, and to act against the wrongdoer. The church is a witness to evil, but is not able to offer *marturia*, cannot find the courage to resist this evil. The sins of the church are grave. In that it has become guilty: it has failed the “most defenceless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ” and as a consequence it has failed Christ.

And it is only when we can confess our guilt, not as some ritualistic obligation while hiding in our armour-plated cloaks of victimhood, but as brothers and sisters together, all of us sinners standing before a merciful and loving Judge, that we can “turn from our wicked ways,” away from injustice to the doing of deeds of justice.

IV

In doing this, we surrender not to fear or threat or intimidation nor to our own desires, but to Christ, following Christ in his outrage at injustice and in his love of justice, doing not only what God desires but, as God desires it: justice, dignity, wholeness for all of God’s creation. In doing this, we are, as Bonhoeffer says, “giving the power back to Christ.” Giving it back to Christ disempowers the evil forces that threaten life, but it empowers us to the doing of hope-giving and life-affirming deeds of power, as Christ has promised. Yielding to Christ sets us free to make this choice and to challenge the powers of domination and evil at an entirely different level.

Chris’s insistence on the words of Jesus in John 10:10 helps us also because it reminds us of costly grace and the dangers of cheap grace. Jesus is the good shepherd, ready to lay down his life for his flock (10:11). So standing with Jesus, the Lord of abundant life, and walking with Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the end, we pray for the wisdom to shun cheap grace and embrace costly grace. For it remains true: costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field.... It is the pearl of great price.... It is the kingly rule of Christ.... It is the call to follow Jesus Christ, wherever that may lead.... Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which one must knock.

Such grace is costly because it costs a person their life, and it is grace because it gives us the only true life. It is *costly* because it condemns sin, and *grace* because

it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Costly grace is the sanctuary of God; it has to be protected from the world, and not thrown to the dogs. It is therefore the living word, the Word of God, which God speaks as it pleases God. Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him: It is grace because Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Allan Aubrey Boesak, an ordained minister in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, is an anti-apartheid activist, author, and former president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.



Choosing Life: Full Freedom and Equality for All

Ofelia Ortega

Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts heaven gave to [humankind]; the treasures under the earth and beneath the sea cannot compare to it; for freedom, as well as for honor, one can and should risk one's life.

—Miguel de Cervantes: *Don Quixote de la Mancha*

There cannot be Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is no male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:28 (MKJB)

It is a privilege to write in honor of friend and comrade-in-arms Chris Ferguson, who has invested his life in theological reflection, ecumenical dialog, and pastoral service. In Latin America and the Caribbean, we remember him for his intense search for justice and peace. It was in Colombia that he worked with the churches and the people for the termination a war that has not yet ended, and Chris continues dedicating efforts to seek a peaceful solution.

I remember the day he showed up at the Evangelical Seminary of Theology of Matanzas, Cuba, where I taught, with a special petition from the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI by its acronym in Spanish). I was captivated by his enthusiastic words: "Let's get together for ten days and talk about what ecumenical *diakonia* means for the churches."

And so we did, and from that reflection the *Ecumenical Diakonia: Reconciling, Compassionate, Transformative, Prophetic, Justice Seeker* (Quito: CLAI, 2007) was born. Even though the book was written in both Spanish and English, it was never published in the latter. However, the Spanish version is a resource much used by the churches and students from ecumenical theological institutions in learning an effective Diakonia.

With great pride, today now we see Chris's face on social media announcing the Thursdays in Black each week, showing his support of the important initiative that works to end violence against women and girls.

Pastor, theologian, and defender of social justice, Chris can feel satisfied that he has fulfilled all the goals he set. Out of nostalgia and gratitude, I write about freedom, knowing that it is the symbol of his own life.

Freedom as the Maximum Expression of Shared Love

The concept of freedom in the history of human thinking has had many aspects. A concept that seems very simple is actually diverse and complex, from philosophical to psychological and sociological definitions. This complexity comes from the dynamic character of the idea of freedom throughout history. Just as Karl Rahner has specified,

In the beginning freedom was considered liberation from social, economic and political oppression, meaning the contrary to slavery, servitude, etc. ... [T]he concept is later on individualized and gains self-understanding; the one who possesses “auto praxis” is free; the one who can do whatever he wants. It is inner freedom, “not being subject” to the powers that alienate the person from itself.¹

However, even to Rahner, historic development has shown us that freedom is the liberty to love.

The Gospel of Saint John always confronts us with the fundamentals of freedom: “The truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). From this perspective, freedom is closely related to truth, because freedom includes freedom of thought and freedom to reflect about one’s own convictions and to express them in the social framework. This leads us to think that the truth has its own strength, since it is a true form of freedom.

The free human being is critical about themselves and always finds the courage to let themselves be taught, listen to the arguments of others, and look for criteria beyond the personal emphasis.

From the Christian point of view, we understand freedom as the right that accepts the other person’s freedom, is tolerant, and seeks out dialog with all, men and women. That is why we must continuously create spaces of freedom as much in society as in religious institutions, to feel the freedom of others as something personal, and to be sensitive to threats to other people’s freedom as if they were dangers to our own freedom.

In a way, as Jürgen Moltmann has maintained,

The clamor for freedom covers not only the subdued, alienated, divided and beset humanity; it also emotionally moves the creation that is controlled by

¹ Karl Rahner, *La gracia como libertad*, 36 (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1972).



[humans]. Nature and our bodies have become strange to us. We have made our natural environment the matter of our exploiting domain.²

That is why nature wants to be free of slavery as well. In Paul's terms, "For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:22). Hence this clamor for freedom should unite us as humankind to nature, an approach that at the same time pledges for a new future.

Theological and Biblical Fundamentals of Freedom and Equality

Fortunately, the paths of God intersect with the paths of freedom. If there were ever a doubt, the Bible's itinerary would prove it—despite all its agreements and disagreements. God defines God's self by God's liberating historic action in the experience of the Exodus. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the God of the pharaoh, Caesar, or the slave trader, but the God that leads God's people from Egypt's slavery toward the freedom of the promised land.

The historic notion of Christianity as an imperial product is documented in the interesting work of Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. According to the author, this is one of the biggest paradoxes in history because this religion, established in the center of the Roman Empire, became an anti-imperial movement.³

The Empire is, indeed, present in the Bible from Genesis to Revelations. The prophetic faith—with its emphasis on truth and hope based on God's commitment to those who suffer, his preference for the poor and excluded, and his continuous suspicions of the wealthy and powerful—is the central message that unmask the Empire and its perverse destructive actions.

In the book *Convocados a la Esperanza*, Walter Brueggemann refers to the emphasis on the "empire vocation" that has its origins in the Monroe Doctrine; it is powerfully associated with the globalization of the economy that has gained power with new technical competencies already implicit in the Bretton Woods agreements that led to the creation of the World Bank and the International

2 Jürgen Moltmann, *Temas para una teología de la esperanza*, 88. (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Aurora, 1978).

3 Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

Monetary Fund.⁴ Having the “empire vocation” means that we are not facing an inclusive economic reality, but a vocation that reaches all levels of society. That is why some authors have described it as a civil crisis and call it “the inequality civilization.”⁵

Today, the conflict with imperial powers is the theological emphasis that makes us know who our God is. We find this opposition action very clearly stated in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The city was created with a tower as a fortress and only one artificial language, to form a state of dominion and oppression: the city as the economic center; the tower as a sign of military power; and a single name and single language as a symbol of cultural and ideological imposition. This ancient episode narrated in the Bible is very similar to the current “global village” where technological cities proliferate: impressive towers, pretentious names, gathering and dispersion, confusion of languages, and exploited and impoverished peoples who clamor for God.

As theologian and revolutionary martyr Ignacio Ellacuría stated, “The Old and New Testament are filled with the arid thinking of intolerance and injustice as action and reality; that is the great sin, both secular and religious, that has to be erased from the world. Injustice denies the very center of Christianity.”⁶ Then it is not an exaggeration to fight against injustice and to passionately promote justice that, always focused on the context of relationships, would acquire a very clear meaning: justice pronounced in favor of the oppressed, the hungry, the subjected, and the marginalized. In the Hebrew Bible, God is called the “God of Justice” (Isaiah 30:18). That justice reaches all human beings on Earth (Jeremiah 9:24-29) but is always related to the search for freedom and equality. That is why it is a humanizing force.

It is clear that the biblical concept of freedom is not individual. It is a message of freedom for the people. We know that a person is free only when in the heart of a free people, so our personal freedom is closely related to the society we live in and within which we work to develop ourselves as free beings.

That freedom is very much linked to peace. There is no freedom in war. Freedom cannot be based on domination and weapons but on peace and reconciliation. Hans Küng soundly states, “the theology of peace demands a truly ecumenical

4 Walter Brueggemann, ed., *Convocados a la esperanza* (Matanzas/Quito: Seminario Evangélico de Teología/Ediciones CLAI, 2001).

5 Ibid.

6 Ignacio Ellacuría, *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios*, 247-248 (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1984).



theology, rigorously objective about the political relevance oriented to the future.”⁷

In general, freedom and equality are related in the Bible to the search for justice, truth, and peace. In the New Testament, we find the “Apostle of truth.” We have to recognize the fact that Paul was the author of the doctrine of freedom. In his letter to the Galatians, we read, “For you, brothers, were called for freedom” (Galatians 5:13).

Thus, Paul proclaims freedom ahead of his time. His statement in Galatians 3:28, “There cannot be Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is no male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” is not only the central topic of the letter, but also one of the most important declarations of the Bible about justice among nations, social classes, and genders. Thanks to this statement, ethnic differences are annulled. There is no more difference between Jew and Greek. It is the opening to a non-Judaizing Christianity: an inclusive Christianity for the gentile, the Jews, the Pagans, and the Samaritans. In Christ, there is no tribe or nation, nor chosen, exclusive, privileged, or rejected race. The ethnic and racial prejudices are done with. It is an anti-imperialist movement.

Likewise, women’s roles were broadened by the public declaration of Christianity: “There is neither female nor male.” Here the relation between sexes is emphasized, opening the historic opportunity to condemn sexist male chauvinism. It is important to highlight the fact that women lived not only under the Empire and the oppression of slavery, but also under a patriarchal, male, authoritarian society based on violence and the war of sexes.

This declaration of equality and freedom constituted the means of radical transformation implied by the Christian baptism. By the baptismal formula in Galatians 3:28, the baptized were committed to the principle of life according to which, if you entered the Christian community as a Jew or Pagan, slave or free, man or woman, you would have the same rights as the others. This equality in the center of the Christian assembly is poured over into the streets and fills the totality of Christian life. It is practiced not only in the community, but also at a social level.

Thus, the Kingdom of God’s alternative society is opened, a society of new men and women. It is an open theology, inclusive because the reality of the Gospel breaks the old molds, the old patterns. It is a new praxis among God’s daughters

⁷ Hans Küng, *Proyecto de una ética mundial*, 159 (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1990).

and sons that eliminated the old distinctions, the old differences that have to be surpassed. That is the Gospel: a new style of life, new values: good news for all of us!

It Is Possible: Pastoral Visions about Freedom and Equality

During the twentieth and early twenty-first century, the reflections of the churches and the ecumenical movements globally seem to emphasize freedom and equality. Texts proclaiming the equality of human beings and the abolition of the differences that race and religion proliferate. Theologian José Comblin has specified that, "... Vocation for freedom includes the option for the poor. Many times this phrase is mentioned as something added to the theological reflections, as an honest companion of concrete actions to achieve the radical change in the life of the impoverished. That is why we have to go back to the roots in the central core of Christianity that is present in the Gospel of Paul and John. We have to recover that vocation for freedom on the fringes of the market."⁸

It is important to remember some of the confessions of the liberating faith that have inspired our pastoral praxis, such as the Declaration of Barmen (1934) and the Belhar Confession of Faith (1982), contemporary manifests that have constituted symbols of liberation for Germany and South Africa. The Declaration of Barmen is a text with six theses explicating "evangelical truths" about the situation of society and churches in the times of the Nazi regime, and the Belhar Confession has five deep-rooted clauses in its confessional struggle against the Apartheid system. Belhar placed his emphasis on discipleship, aiming to experiment, practice, and look for community together in freedom and without coercion.

However, I will never forget how hard it was for the General Council of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches to approve the Accra Confession in Ghana in 2004. We were there, and we thank God that men and women delegates from South Africa were present to express their testimony about persecution and neglect. There were also leaders from the Pacific who gave evidence of the consequences of their seas having been used as reservoirs of nuclear waste from the northern countries. But most of all, because God was present and we achieved the unprecedented unity of the churches of the global South, the Confession of Accra was passed, subscribed, and affirmed today by many of our churches. The assembly expressed:

⁸ José Comblin, *Vocación a la libertad*, 12 (Madrid: Editorial San Pablo, 1988).



... A commitment based on our faith can be expressed in many ways. We have chosen confession, not in the sense of confessing, but to show the need and urgency of an active response to the problems of our time.... We cannot be silent in the face of the current economic globalization system. We believe God has called us to stand side by side with the victims of injustice. That is why we reject all forms of injustice that destroy just relationships... [on account of] race, social class, disability, or caste. We also reject all theology that states that human interests are imposed on nature.

The confession ends thus:

We emphatically proclaim our commitment to ourselves, our time, and our energy to change, renew and restore the economy and the Earth, and to choose life so that both you and your seed may live (Deuteronomy 30:18).

The confession defines this relationship with the reality we live today as a Pact for Justice that should open doors to all people to be united in a struggle for economic and earth justice. It also reminds us that this path will not be easy; we will need human solidarity as fuel to increase our capabilities, our strength, and our courage to face the princedom and legal authorities of our time. Undoubtedly, this is one of the most explicit documents in terms of asserting a rejection of the economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism, of the imperial, military, political, and economic forces that subvert God's sovereignty over life, and of their actions that are opposite to the Justice of God.

Indeed, the changes should go beyond the technical and structural requirements. What the world needs is a change of heart and mentality so that economic and financial systems do not take individual gain as their compass—instead, justice, equality, peace, and the protection of God's Creation.

Not straying away from those topics, I think there is no better definition of freedom than the one offered by José Comblin in the conclusion to his book *Vocación a la libertad*: True freedom is realized in the service to others. Far from running away from others, especially from the ones in need, freedom means accepting the challenge to face differences and respond to a new situation.⁹ This means that others present the challenge for us that leads to freedom, not as a threat, but as a prompt to freedom itself.

Finally, freedom and equality would be a mere illusion if they were not born out

⁹ Ibid, 330.

of the human conscience, as the response to the calling and processes in each generation; this fact should not be forgotten. A poem by Jorge Debravo from Costa Rica illustrates it perfectly:

*I look for a city.
 A city of light, bread and singing.
 In some heavenly body there should be a place
 That is waiting for us.
 I want a profound, mature city
 clean as the reflection of the sword,
 where we could master joy,
 where everyone has room for smiling in the morning,
 work with the kiss of our life,
 know ourselves broader than maps,
 not standing any other God but our embrace.
 Always white and open like windows,
 and no other war but the struggle
 Of keeping hold of Hope.*

Here lies the challenge of building a church in freedom and equal opportunities. That is where the message of the Confession of Accra comes in. That is where its inevitable validity comes in. And that is why men and women like Chris Ferguson continue to be essential: so that a better world is possible.

Ofelia Ortega, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba, is the director of the Christian Institute of Gender Studies and professor emeritus of the Evangelical Seminary of Theology of Matanzas.



Living Out the Accra Confession

Eve R. Parker

Organising the Struggle: An Interconnected Theological Education of Solidarity

“We must recognize the interconnection between the local and the global. There is no local reality which is not impacted by and shaped by the global world order. There is no global reality that is not constructed through and by local communities and resources.”¹ —Chris Ferguson

Chris Ferguson’s focus on the interconnected Church demands that each individual situates themselves in the global Church and become conscious of the lens through which we perceive the world around us. This requires us all to ask the question, “Where do we speak from?” For those of us in the West, this question brings about a confessional reckoning with narratives of power, privilege, and persecution. We are forced to acknowledge that we speak in a context of complex power relations that demand an understanding of history, place, and society, and in which we are met with the realities of the atrocities of empire, of racism, and of xenophobia. To be interconnected equates to an entangled mess if we are not honest about where in the Communion we “speak from.” This requires asking critical questions about the mission of the church while acknowledging that our missional history has been rooted in the complex legacies of war, slavery, and occupation. It requires acknowledging the context of today, one of global inequality, where we are capable of drowning out the cries of the poor, the plight of the refugees, and those who suffer the most from climate change.

As we witness the truth of the Accra Confession further played out in the midst of a global pandemic, in which the greed of Capitalism has created vaccine warfare and exacerbated existing inequalities, we must be conscious of our own complicity within this system. As neoliberal capitalism is the true virus of inequality, a system that violates and exploits the bodies of the poor, survives through consumption, greed, and destruction, and manipulates the spread of a global pandemic to fill the pockets of the wealthiest, we must find a vaccine

¹ Mike Ferguson, “World Communion of Reformed Churches Hosts ‘Discerning, Confessing and Witnessing in an Age of COVID-19 and Beyond,’” Presbyterian News Service (December 30, 2020) <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/stated-clerk-other-reformed-leaders-join-in-covid-19-discernment-process/>

against it. The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), has confessed to these truths in Accra. In confessing, however, there is also a need to recognise that we are part of an interconnected struggle. This requires putting progress before Church politics, and calls for a pedagogy of solidarity in global missiology and theological education. Education is the weapon of confession. It is what puts a confession into action, and the greatest challenge remains achieving a global consciousness for the struggle of the oppressed. Therefore, Ferguson's call to "take account of each other in common identity, reinforcing our sense of connectedness"² will be achieved only through a theology of global struggle and solidarity that is rooted in an interconnected theological education that begins with struggle. This paper will therefore argue that Chris's commitment to an interconnected mission, rooted in the Accra Confession's call for justice, offers a challenge to theological education as it presents a global theological pedagogy of solidarity. The continued struggle, however, remains one of "getting organised." To be organised in the struggle for the oppressed demands an education of praxis and discipleship if we are to achieve liberation.

In recognising the need for solidarity in the struggle for justice, the WCRC, under Chris's leadership, has created democratic spaces of education where pedagogical and epistemological efforts have been made for women and men to engage together in the struggle to liberate the oppressed. Such spaces of thought have nourished love and hope, but this hope must be politicised through organised resistance if it is to bring about change. To quote Ana Maria Araujo Freire, "hope is a revolutionary transformed, either through knowledge or through radical ethics, but it loses strength, brilliance, and political clarity without fraternal love."³

The notion of fraternal love resonates with Ferguson's call for interconnected mission and speaks to collective efforts that seek transformation. Such love demands a fraternal honesty, with which we are willing and able to challenge those with whom we are in communion about the powers and privileges they hold. It also requires offering one another the support in the struggle for liberation. The fight to bring about God's kin-dom of justice amidst the injustices of the world can be overwhelming; we, as individuals, can feel helpless. This is why solidarity is so vital in the call for transformation. Education can be the tool through which those involved in the struggle can "get organised"; it offers

² "Reformed Churches Leader: Communion Is a Gift and a Task," The United Reformed Church (2016) <https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/2085-reformed-churches-leader.html>

³ Ana Maria Araujo Freire, "Foreword" in Peter McLaren, *More Praise for Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), xvi.



the means through which our interconnected hope for transformation can be realised. Such an education would “employ knowledge and transformation as weapons to change the world.”⁴ This paper will therefore focus on Chris’s call for interconnected solidarity in mission that is central to living out the Accra Confession. In doing so, I will address the need for an interconnected theological education and then look to Luke 5:1-11, where Jesus organises the struggle by calling on his disciples and, in the process, presents a pedagogy of solidarity. Discipleship is not simply about following; it is about “getting organised” in the revolution of God’s kin-dom.

Addressing the Interconnected Theological Education

Under Chris’s leadership, the WCRC has been living out the Accra Confession through critical readings of scripture and the development of creative resources for congregations, focusing on justice issues including “caste, climate change, gender and sexuality, human trafficking, immigration and migration, the New International Financial and Economic Architecture, racism, and the theology of enough.”⁵ This work has had a significant impact on the global church, and yet there remains a lacuna in theological education—within Europe in particular—for the narratives of the global oppressed and theologies of liberation. For the most part, theological education in Europe remains Eurocentric, and the norms of colonial Christianity remain ingrained in the academy. Social structures such as classism, racism, patriarchy, and sexism are reproduced in the classroom and the academy as a whole, and theological curricula remain dominated by Eurocentric theologies, where the voices of the colonized are missing. Consequently, the Accra Confession, that as Hewitt notes, “emerged in response to the challenges faced through the experience of global economic injustice and ecological destruction,”⁶ becomes only a footnote in the formation of the European church and her ministry in its theological and missiological endeavours. This is important, because “theological education has the potential to be the seedbed for the renewal of churches, their ministries, mission, and commitment to Christian unity.”⁷ It is for this reason that Namsoon Kang

4 Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), xi.

5 Jerry Pillay, “The Accra Confession as a Response to Empire,” *HTS Theological Studies* (2018): 6.

6 Roderick Hewitt, “Telling the Truth, Naming the Power and Confessing our Faith in the Market: The Missiological Implications of the Accra Confession,” *International Review of Mission* 97 (June 25, 2009) DOI:10.1111/j.1758-6631.2008.tb00640.x

7 Dietrich Werner, et al., “Introduction,” *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Regional Surveys, Ecumenical Trends*, eds. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), xxv.

called for “a transformative theological education that seriously takes up and challenges the issues of ‘power and knowledge.’”⁸ This is needed more than ever as economic injustices and global inequalities outlined in Accra become even more apparent in the context of a global pandemic. Chris’s argument, therefore, that the local affects the global, is visible in how interconnected we are as humans, as the greed of the wealthiest nations leaves the poorest fighting a pandemic without vaccines or the resources for survival. An interconnected theological education must acknowledge such realities and prevent the homogenization of theological thought, while enabling the diverse contexts of theology apparent in World Christianity to speak truth to power.

This means calling on theological education institutes in the West to address the form of Christianity that has been used throughout the history of the Church to, at times, deny the “Jesus of history,” the Jesus that, as Anthony Reddie argues, “comes to us as the radical ethnic other living as he did as a Galilean Jew.”⁹ In doing so, theological education could challenge historical aspects of the contemporary church and her mission, in which Jesus “becomes a symbolic Englishman who reaffirms empire, colonialism and British superiority.”¹⁰

This is how white supremacy operates in theological education and why an interconnected theological education requires a decolonising of theology and missiology. Students must be free from the homogenous theologies of the ruling elites to encounter and contemplate Christ as the radical rebel who engages in the lived struggles of the oppressed. An interconnected theological education would focus on the institutes in the West in particular, calling on them to situate themselves in the context of World Christianity and ask themselves “where they speak from” to address the unjust dynamics of power. It would call for a decolonising of the curricula. Decolonising involves addressing the history of colonialism whilst acknowledging embedded colonial norms in which whiteness and patriarchy continue to oppress the colonized.

It involves challenging cultures of dehumanisation by giving focus to indigenous theology and theologies of liberation born out of struggles and resistance. Producing a theological education that challenges notions of mission imposed

8 Namsoon Kang, “From Colonial to Postcolonial Theological Education: Envisioning Postcolonial Theological Education, Dilemmas and Possibilities,” *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Regional Surveys, Ecumenical Trends*, eds. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), 31.

9 Anthony Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 60.

10 Ibid.



from a position of privilege, power, and possession, would enable a systemic means by which the injustices outlined in the Accra Confession could be addressed and the the struggle for change could be greater realised. Chris's commitment to theologies of the marginalised and indigenous theologies of struggle further offer the tools for decolonising. This is why it will be vital to organise the struggle for change as a collective, and our Scriptures exemplify how this is to be done.

Jesus “Gets Organised” in the Struggle

As Jesus was teaching the crowds to hear God's message, he saw the boats of two fishermen, and “got into the boat that belonged to Simon and asked him to row it out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sat down in the boat to teach the crowd” (Luke 5:1-3). The narrative of Jesus choosing his disciples begins in Luke 5, with Jesus teaching the crowds to hear God's message. We know that the message of God is not a neutral message; it is one of hope and transformation for the oppressed; the crowd gathered before Jesus to hear this message of resistance against the status quo. Jesus used education as the tool for transformation, but he realised that, in order for God's message to be heard by all people, he would have to “get organised” and utilise the tools of communication in the context he was in—in this case, boats. Today it is our classrooms, journals, media, social media, textbooks, gatherings, churches, and congregations. The social resistance organiser, Saul Alinsky, argues that, “As an organiser I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system.”¹¹

Jesus as God incarnate worked within the system in order to change it, and he called on the marginalised masses, where the struggle was situated, for his message to be heard and the resistance movement to begin. Jesus could have called on the Pharisees—the religious elites—to share God's message, but instead he called on working class fishermen to be the teachers of the Word of God. The Roman contemporary of the early Church, Celsus, in his anti-Christian rhetoric, described those who followed Jesus as “the dregs of the people.” This included the fishermen, the very people Christ would call on to educate others.¹² Jesus organised with an awareness of the social conditions of the people, and

11 Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xix.

12 Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

the educators were those who knew the struggles of the people. "With magic and parables, healing and shared meals, he and his fellow agitators bring an utterly subversive message."¹³ It is for this reason Karl Kautsky maintains that, "Jesus was not merely a rebel, he was also the representative and champion, perhaps the founder, of an organization that survived him and kept growing stronger and more powerful."¹⁴

Jesus then demanded that Simon row the boat into uncertain waters and cast out the net (Luke 5:4). Living out the Accra Confession means not shying away from political or public spaces. The ease of preaching and teaching resistance in echo chambers with our comrades in faith can be tempting, but as Jesus' disciples we are called on to be uncomfortable in our mission. Therefore, we must cast our net into murky waters, educate those who may not like the message, and galvanise the support of the multitudes who struggle. Each time we cast our net we engage in a process of dialogue, where we become conscious of those who struggle for liberation. The revolutionary implications of such teaching will be realised as those caught in the net "know that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁵

The Accra Confession is an example of what can be achieved when the collective gather and "deliberate on urgent issues facing God's world."¹⁶ Jesus' process of communal organisation speaks directly to what it means to live out the Accra Confession, and central to the process are education, welfare, communication, and resistance, with a message that is ultimately about liberation. In "getting organised," the disciples took a risk and, in doing so, catch "so many fish that their nets began ripping apart. Then they signalled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them...." (Luke 5:5-7). This is what it means to work in collaboration.

In "getting organised," Jesus consciously called on those who would communicate the message to the masses. It matters who we call upon to cast out the nets. Just as Jesus chose men who were not religious elites or those searching for power, there is a need to resist those who live by the principles of the colonial church as opposed to the church of resistance. Alinsky uses the

13 Ibid, 63.

14 Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity: A Study in Christian Origins* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 415.

15 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1986)

16 Jerry Pillay, "The Accra Confession as a response to empire," *HTS Theological Studies* (2018): 1-6.



example of “the priest who wants to be a bishop and bootlicks and politicks his way up, justifying it with the rationale, ‘After I get to be bishop I’ll use my office for Christian reformation....’ Unfortunately, one changes in many ways on the road to the bishopric... and then one says, ‘I’ll wait until I’m a cardinal and then I can be more effective... and so it goes on.’”¹⁷ For Alinsky, this is “where men speak of moral principles but act on power principles”; these are not the people who are willing to leave everything to walk in the path of Christ (Luke 5:11).

Towards a Pedagogy of Solidarity

Paulo Freire argued that everyone holds part of the truth, stating “I believe that those who are weak are those who think they possess the truth, and are thus intolerant; those who are strong are those who say: ‘Perhaps I have part of the truth, but I don’t have the whole truth. You have part of the truth. Let’s seek it together.’”¹⁸ Chris’s leadership of the WCRC has created an environment that enables the truths of many to be gathered and heard to address systemic injustices that marginalise and oppress. The challenge now will be to organise the voices and cast out the nets into institutions that develop the next generations of religious leaders—students in theological education—to be engaged in the lives of the poor, inclusive of contexts of community activism and social movements of liberation. As in agreement with McLaren, “students need to move beyond simply knowing about critical, multicultural practice. They must also move toward an embodied and corporeal understanding of such practice and an effective investment in such practice at the level of everyday life such that they are able to deflect the invasive power of capital... and put ideology-critique at its centre of gravity.”¹⁹ In acknowledging our interconnectedness as human beings today, we are called on to be in solidarity with those to whom we are connected and who struggle. Our theological education must then enable the space for communal protest and activism to be in true solidarity with such struggle and work towards transformation. It must be radical if it is to be prophetic; it must not be afraid to confront, to listen, and to see the world unveiled.

Under Chris’s leadership, the WCRC has taken up the challenge of the Accra Confession, to be rebellious and prophetic to expose the inadequacies of

¹⁷ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, (New York: Random House, 1971) 13.

¹⁸ Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1989), 20.

¹⁹ Joe L. Kincheloe, quoted in Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Lanham, Maryland : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), xii.

systems that subjugate. This presents a model of dialogue in mission that calls on those with power to be true witnesses: conscious of the roots of oppression, the systems that subjugate, and our role in such systems. In doing so, it presents a missional model of solidarity that is a template on which to build a pedagogy of solidarity. As mission in solidarity requires a theology shaped by dialogue, this is not a dialogue of Pharisees in a room talking, but one of solidarity that promotes an understanding of self and other. Such a dialogue requires an acknowledgment of churches' embedded "Whiteness," and its role in Empire. It demands an interrogation of our theological learning processes and pedagogies, too often dominated by Eurocentrism. Theological education, like mission, has the potential to dehumanise if it is not rooted in lived experience and the struggles of the marginalised. It must aid the process of understanding and experiencing the interconnections of different realities and experiences. A pedagogy of solidarity in theological education would enable space for the messy and complex, to be truthful to the lives of the oppressed as born out of the lived experiences of struggle. Such pedagogy is practical because it requires relocating and contemplating God in spaces of oppression, and liberative because it requires knowing the suffering of the oppressed and acting in the here and now for transformation from their brokenness. A pedagogy of solidarity cultivates in students the desire to seek to radically transform the world, unfearful of getting lost in the uncertainty of what that transformation may mean. Students may enter into the reality of those whose side the Church is called to take, better to know the truths of their suffering and equipped to help to transform a system that suppresses.

Conclusion

Christianity is a radical faith; its scriptures speak of resistance and revolution. Its disciples are called on to be countercultural, use the resources available to them, cast their nets into the unknown, work within systems in order to change them, and educate with a transformative message of freedom from earthly empires. Such a faith requires a radical theological education rooted in the lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalised. Just as Paul's letter to the Christians of Corinth notes that "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the world's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so that mankind can do no boasting before God" (1 Corinthians 1:27).



The WCRC must build on the legacy of a leader who took the side of the marginalised and allow the words of the “weak” to “shame” the institutions that oppress. It must help organise through education, so that as interconnected beings we can situate ourselves in the contexts of the most marginalised—not as a means of self-serving charitable acts, but to truly listen to the cries of oppression. Then, in outrage, we must let such narratives shape our theological understanding of mission today and enable us to address our own complicity in systems and structures of oppression.

Eve R. Parker is a postdoctoral research associate in theological education in the Department of Theology and Religion of Durham University (England).

From Accra to the World: Catholicity, Justice, and Inter-Confessionality

Henry Kuo

In 2014, the Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson was elected to succeed Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi as the General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Rev. Dr. Nyomi's fourteen-year term witnessed tremendous changes and destabilizations in both the church and global politics.¹ These instabilities not only persisted as Chris began his term, but they sharpened, thanks in part to figures like Donald Trump, who spun Christian nationalism, American exceptionalism, and White supremacy into an electoral victory in 2016. The anxieties and instabilities transmogrified into rogue waves of injustice deepening, facts being questioned, and a general cynicism of all institutions pervading societies around the world. In the midst of those choppy waters, Chris skillfully steered the WCRC. Nonetheless, the storm did not relent, with the COVID-19 pandemic adding to the tumult in early 2020. Many Americans, quite a few unfortunately identifying as Christians, rode the waves, becoming party to misinformation and insurrection, and unwittingly facilitating the spread of COVID-19. Even now, these issues have not been resolved.

I start with a flyby of global anxieties and injustices not to suggest a negative assessment of Chris's tenure—far from it!—but to illustrate the vast pastoral challenges that churches of all traditions had to wrestle with over the past decade or two. These challenges cannot be resolved neatly within one secretarial tenure, but neither can they be swept under the proverbial rug. Such global dynamics will only increase, maybe even intensify, in the coming years, presenting progressively acute challenges for successive leaders of the WCRC and of every Christian tradition. Even so, among the theological emphases in the Reformed tradition is the doctrine of God's sovereignty, which not only asserts God's creative hand on all creation, but that God also continues to sustain and care for all creation.² The risen Christ is not aloof, but is with us on the boat in the storm. (Matthew 8:24) However reassuring it may be, the hope embedded in God's divine sovereignty is not an excuse for human lethargy. Instead, it allows

1 For clarification, aside from the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the Great Recession of 2007-2009, in the US, where I am largely based, the killings of Trayvon Martin, followed by those of Mike Brown and Eric Gardner, reminded all Americans viscerally of the continuing legacy of White supremacy.

2 *Institutes* I.16.1. The translation used in this contribution will be: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).



for deeper engagement in the work of justice, mercy, and healing in this world because God invites humankind to participate in the sustenance and care for all creation.

What this means for ministry is that, however critical it is to address the aforementioned anxieties and instabilities, it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. To save a tree without recognizing the ecological, commercial, and political factors that endanger the forest means that the tree's well-being is not ensured for the long term. Likewise, to tackle each injustice as if each were an isolated incident and unconnected to others risks turning the church's missional evangelization into a pastoral Whack-a-Mole in which individual issues are engaged piecemeal, leaving the systemic problems that give rise to them unaddressed. In this light, the Accra Confession presents a welcome theological contribution and a relevant and urgent call to action for all churches, both within and outside of the Reformed orbit. Chris, who contributed to its drafting, has made it one of his responsibilities to encourage Reformed church bodies worldwide to study and (hopefully) adopt the Confession. In the interest of providing resources for furthering engagement with the Accra Confession within churches across the world, my contribution to this tributary volume in honor of Chris's tenure will raise certain problems that may be a hindrance to Accra's wider acceptance. Following the problematizing, I propose the idea of inter-confessionality as a conceptual way forward in facilitating constructive dialogue that would, I hope, allow a wider range of audiences to appreciate the importance and urgency of the issues the Confession raises.

Situating the Problem of Multiplicity in Accra

In 2004, the Accra Confession was adopted by the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, concluding a long process of discernment that began in 1997 with the 23rd General Council. In many respects, Accra is unique. By and large, Reformed confessions of faith are locally directed, reflecting the nature of a tradition that requires church leaders to exercise sensitivity to local challenges, in contrast to careerist priests and bishops in the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church, who were often more interested in accumulating Roman Curial or Holy Roman Imperial power than the pastoral concerns of the people under their care. The theological challenges that Accra presents, however, are not local. It is the first Reformed statement to take a confessional stand on matters pertaining to economic injustice, environmental destruction, and ideologies that contributed to those ills, including neoliberalism and empire. Even though it was motivated by the suffering that local people

endured thanks to climate change or unjust land acquisitions by multinational corporations, global interconnectivity and globalizing forces meant that the causes and processes leading to the sufferings were not local. Hence, Accra became an unusually universal—that is, catholic—document.

Unfortunately, what makes Accra unique also makes its adoption challenging. Consider, for instance, the Theological Declaration of Barmen. The document resulted from a synod that was convened to address the *Deutsche Christen* movement, which made a theological alliance between Christianity and Nazism. Featuring Karl Barth's renowned but oft-misused Yes-No dialectical theology, it declared confessionally that such an alliance is incompatible with Christian faith. Even today, however, several decades after Barmen was drafted, some Reformed communions have found the statement's Barthian rhetoric effective in speaking to how many of their own members articulate their faith. Hence, bodies like the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC[USA]) or the United Churches of Christ (UCC) included Barmen as one of its confessions or testimonies of faith. To use a different example, the General Assembly of the PC(USA) officially included the Confession of Belhar into its *Book of Confessions* in 2016 after its inclusion was initially rejected. One of the reasons the second effort for inclusion was successful could be the killing of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Gardner in New York which, along with other similar events, made explicit the suffering Black people continued to experience in the US, where racism remains its original sin. The language of Belhar, in other words, spoke to the circumstances of the time. Different individuals or groups find the language and vocabulary of some confessions more amenable than others in articulating faith and witness that speaks to their particular challenges.

Accra's catholicity derives from not pertaining to one circumstance or problem. Additionally, the powers of injustice Accra names are quite diffuse and demand clarification, a task that requires navigating exceedingly complex discussions around economics, politics, international relations, environmental science, critical theories, and many other disciplinary discourses. Inconveniently, complexity begets multiplicity, which means different constituencies will interpret and approach the problems Accra raise differently. The New Testament scholar René Krüger describes how two general hermeneutical divergences exist regarding Accra. In the North—likely referring predominately to the United States and Canada—the advantages and drawbacks of neoliberalism were usually contrasted with discussions focusing on possible solutions to minimize the negative effects while avoiding any criticism of the existing economic,



political, and military structures in place.³ This discursive approach leaves neoliberal systems intact. In contrast, the rest of the hemisphere tends to criticize neoliberalism based on the extensive negative effects of the structures in place. As Krüger summarizes, “the South’s hermeneutic approach is not an abstract quest for the truth but the concrete urgency of survival and the search for justice, for which the starting point lies in the analysis of the living conditions of human beings who have been harmed by neoliberal globalization.”⁴ What this means for Accra is that, despite the problems of framing complicated issues in binary form, hermeneutical differences mean that churches existing in contexts that are responsible for creating conditions for the injustice named in Accra may be resistant to the Confession. This is unsurprising; any individual, much less a church body, dislikes being confronted by their own moral shortcomings or complicities with injustice.

The challenge for Accra’s global acceptance—that is, the challenge to make Accra an expression of Reformed catholicity—lies precisely in how the WCRC can encourage local church bodies to “walk together” on mutually understanding the injustices that contribute to suffering in parts of the world. Certainly, the WCRC’s leaders, including Chris, have been assiduously holding patient discussions with local churches to gently persuade their leaders on Accra’s merits. This thankless task is undeniably necessary. But the localized orientation of Reformed churches can often stand in the way of acknowledging how the actions of one church may generate suffering for people of other churches. This disposition cheapens catholicity by turning it into an abstract concept, with no concrete obligations attached to it. What I suggest may be helpful for concretizing catholicity, particularly in an age of polarization and mutual suspicion, is to think of it, not as *one* church enacting one normalized interpretation of one particular confession, but as an “inter-confessionality” of different churches. Assuming my wager is not off the mark, inter-confessionality assumes multiplicity, but also provides a way for convergence so that the church, in the end, can reasonably “walk together,” especially on matters of great importance such as the ones raised by Accra.

3 René Krüger, “The Biblical and Theological Significance of the Accra Confession: A Perspective from the South,” *Reformed World* 55, no. 3 (Sept. 2005), 226.

4 *Ibid.*, 227. I hasten to add that the binary rhetoric deployed (e.g. North vs. South, East vs. West, etc.) is an oft-repeated trope in liberation analyses. Essentializing the “North” and “South” oversimplifies the complexities behind the opposing concepts being contrasted. For example, essentializing North and South fails to acknowledge suffering in the North or privilege in the South. Perhaps a better way forward instead of generalizing “North” and “South” would be to focus on capital and power flowing in the intersection between class, capital race, and other categories.

The Dimensions of Inter-Confessing

The idea of confessing or being confessional has been so taken for granted in Reformed circles that what it entails exactly could be rather obscure for non-Calvinists or even those who have grown up in Reformed churches. An apt starting point would be the PC(USA)'s 1986 report that serviceably explains,

To confess means openly to affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. The truth that is confessed may include the admission of sin and guilt but is more than that. When Christians make a confession, they say, "This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand."⁵

Yet, there is more to confession than meets the definition presented. The confession of guilt and the confession of faith seem unrelated but, as St. Augustine of Hippo excavates, the two are actually connected. Augustine has often played with theological double binds throughout his disquisitions, including the bind between God's grace and the importance of good works. Humanity needs God's grace because people, afflicted with original sin, find it difficult to do good. And yet, doing good is what God requires of humanity. Joseph Ratzinger in an early essay argues that Augustine unravels this grace-works double bind through confession.⁶ As Augustine would preach later, "the beginning of good works is the confession of bad works. You then are doing the truth [*veritatem facere*] and coming to the light."⁷

Veritatem facere, doing the truth, best summarizes the nature of confessing. It is this commitment not merely to speak but to do the truth that gave the martyrs and confessors the extraordinary courage throughout church history to suffer in the name of Jesus Christ. Doing the truth has likewise motivated the saints of our times to proclaim truth against powers of evil and non-being. And the same *Geist* stirred the hearts and minds of the delegates to the 24th General Council in Accra to write the Confession because the demonic powers that cause suffering in many parts of the world need naming. Unfortunately, the same zeal has also

5 *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, Part 1 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016), v.

6 Joseph Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der confessio," *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 3, no. 4 (1957), 385-386.

7 Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40, Works of Saint Augustine III/12*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009), 240.



empowered Christians to do violence against the truth in the name of Jesus. How many times throughout Christian history has “it’s God’s will” been the alibi for corruption, injustice, and evils that test the totality of depravity? Or, as is the case with Accra, how has a “confessional” allegiance to neoliberal structures shielded more socioeconomically privileged Christians from being challenged by the dangerous memories of those who suffer?

Thus, I suggest inter-confessing as a way beyond this impasse. However desirable it is for all Reformed Christians to be on the same page on matters of faith and worship, such idealism needs to be tempered by another Reformed theological emphasis, namely, humanity’s substantial imperfections. As the theologian Amy Plantinga Pauw has put so eloquently, “the Reformed narrative of the church knows no Eden.”⁸ Consequently, it should not be surprising that multiplicity characterizes even the acknowledgements of unrighteousness. Reflecting on the Synod of Barmen, Karl Barth lamented how “even in Barmen were there people who approved National Socialism as such.”⁹ Such diversity undermined the possibility of a stronger and more direct statement than the Theological Declaration that emerged.

Inter-confessing as Reformed catholicity reconsiders the church’s identity as a conversation between local churches of different stories, cultures, and contexts. As such, no one confessional statement or practice embodies the wholeness of Reformed ecclesial identity. That is, multiplicity characterizes catholicity. The Roman Catholic theologian Yves Congar suggests that even in Roman Catholicism, a tradition not known for flexibility with creative contextualizations of the gospel, catholicity still remains “the feature of the church, due to which the reality of multiplicity of the church is able to be harmonized with the reality of unity.”¹⁰ Congar’s confidence in Roman Catholicism’s capability to embrace diversity without the Church unraveling over its differences is rooted in how the papal institution serves as a nexus for harmonization, however fragile it may be at times. A concrete instrument of unity does not exist for Reformed churches, however, save for confessional statements. Hence, Eddy Van der Borgh rightfully concludes that Reformed catholicity is best demonstrated in the diversity of

8 Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Practical Ecclesiology in John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards,” in *John Calvin’s Ecclesiology: Ecumenical Perspectives*, eds. Gerard Mannion and Eduardus Van der Borgh (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 109.

9 Karl Barth, “Karl Barth on the Barmen Synod.” YouTube video, 1:40. Posted by “kbarthorg,” (The Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary) Dec. 11, 2012. <https://youtu.be/G4XYllcL2bQ>

10 Yves Congar, OP, *Sainte Église: Études et Approches Ecclésiologiques* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963), 155-160. Translation mine.

contextual confessions, as opposed to one universal confession.¹¹

Such diversity is a strength if connections and relations are made between the differences. Thus, the inter-confessing vision understands itself as a bridge that connects traditions, enabling a fruitful exchange of perspectives and articulations. Increasing such a connectional and relational confessionality does not detract from the affirmation of local ministries; in fact, it can enhance it! To use an example, without confessions from outside the country—Belhar comes to mind—the PC(USA)’s ministry and witness is deprived and cannot perform the fullness of its identity as a Presbyterian church and as a Church in the United States, much less a church of Jesus Christ. The same is true of Accra; Accra has the potential to deepen the PC(USA)’s ministry and influence in the United States by equipping it with the theological language and resources to enable American Christians to listen to the voices of those who experience the bitter wages of ecological and economic degradation as a result of unsustainable standards of living in more developed nations. Surely, this is more faithful to the costly discipleship that was modelled by saints such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr., than turning a blind eye to recognizing America’s complicity in global problems.

Connecting the practice of confessing with the dynamism of conversation—the “inter” in inter-confessing—suggests that mere confessing is insufficient; one can only fully confess across traditional boundaries. To confess across boundaries enhances human community because diversity without relationality atomizes communities into mutually exclusive fiefdoms, each claiming totalitarian legitimacy over catholicity even as each is siloed into an ever-narrowing and increasingly myopic view of church and witness. Pope Francis diagnoses this predicament accurately in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, lamenting how, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries and societies failed to work collaboratively to resolve the unfolding epidemiological disaster. “For all our hyper-connectivity,” he writes, “we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all.”¹²

One substantial barrier to inter-confessing, one that contributes to the Balkanization of different confessional identities, is a monocultural or unimodal approach to catholicity. The theologian Laurel Schneider has argued that much of Christian theological history (and pre-Christian religious thought) was

11 Eddy Van der Borght, “Reformed Ecclesiology,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, eds. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (London: Routledge, 2008), 188.

12 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020), sec. 7.



dominated by what she calls “the Logic of the One” that reduces truth claims into “either/or” propositions. This reduction was enabled because such a theological framework enshrines one particular manifestation of divinity or ideal, such as one particular expression of the gospel, as being totally normative. Hence, as Schneider explains, “the logic of the One is not *wrong*, except, ironically, when it is taken to be the whole story. Rather than false, it is incomplete.”¹³ To apply it to our inquiry, inter-confessing refuses a totalization of that One which subsumes all differences into one Western-normative universality. Inter-confessing resists such a theological and ecclesiological imperialism by actively practicing what the critical theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen calls “deimperialization,” which involves “multiply[ing] frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview.”¹⁴ In challenging postcolonial tendencies to rely on a West vs. East binary, Chen avers that deimperialization does not demand excising Western influences from Asian consciousness, but must recognize that the way forward in forging an (East) Asian consciousness and subjectivity cannot exist by conveniently forgetting the West.

Likewise, to deimperialize our confessings and progress towards inter-confessing involves remembering, not just what our churches confess as foundational to faith, but also the enculturated natures of such confessings, along with their accompanying blind spots. This is another place where Accra can be valuable to churches in the so-called “first world.” Accra is, to use a concept developed by the late theologian Johann Baptist Metz, dangerous memory. At the concept’s core is the recognition of the history of suffering and pathos behind the gospel’s telling. Thus, remembering dangerous memory is not merely a matter of recalling an obscured or silenced past but also one of re-remembering the silenced present for the future. Hence, dangerous memories should impel the church to discern certain experiences and understandings that are, indeed, universal and speak to the depth of catholic truth.¹⁵ And for Metz, such discernment and discipleship requires resisting “bourgeois Christianity” which, as he describes,

...is sickening from a sweet poison, the poison of a mere belief in faith and in the praxis of discipleship, a mere belief in love and repentance. All grace remains thereby in the realm of invisibility and intangibility. And

13 Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

14 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia As Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 223.

15 Johann Baptist Metz, “Facing the World: A Theological and Biographical Inquiry,” trans. John K. Downey, *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014), 30.

we ourselves remain always unchanged, we go on defining ourselves by the trusted standards of our bourgeois identity. Grace in this case is not the grace given to us or promised us by God, but the “graciousness” we bestow upon ourselves, the grace without consolation typical of bourgeois religion—“cheap grace,” as Bonhoeffer called it.¹⁶

Dangerous memories are critical for inter-confessing and multiplicity because denying the diversity of the world as a constitutive element of human wholeness is, in many respects, motivated by a desire to ensure that catholicity is irretrievably static and unyielding in the face of diversity and, therefore, in no need of change.

But if we do acknowledge the multiplicity of the triune God, and that our confessional islands impoverish our own confessings, then inter-confessing provides space for mutual accountability through the building of bridges that connect those islands. Accountability matters because, through the mutual sharpening of our theological consciousnesses (Proverbs 27:17), our traditions can hold each other to the church’s mission in the world. It requires, as Peter McEnhill has described, a “vulnerable catholicity” in which only matters that are absolutely and undeniably essential to Christian faith form the critical center of confessing.¹⁷ Vulnerability exists because inter-confessing requires the hard work of patient discussion, discernment, and persuasion. It also requires the immeasurable courage of *being* persuaded: How many Christians today have been so fearful of being persuaded that they only assent fundamentalistically to “truths” that they agree with, rejecting even facts that they disagree with? It is therefore even more important, then, in our time of great polarizations, divisions, social fragmentations, and overly-flexible truthinesses, that Reformed churches reclaim such Christ-like vulnerability in order, paradoxically, to demonstrate concretely and publicly to the world that a different, more humane, and less fearful way of living is possible. The way to Accra, in short, requires humility, courage, and generosity that inter-confessing encourages.

Accra and the Future

This article has covered substantial theological terrain, introducing the idea of inter-confessing as a necessary disposition that could pave the way to a broader

¹⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, trans. Peter Mann (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1981), 55.

¹⁷ Peter McEnhill, “The Reformed Tradition and the Ecumenical Task,” in *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek: Ecumenical Prospects for the Third Millennium*, eds. Jeremy Morris and Nicholas Sagovsky (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 88.



acceptance of the Accra Confession. Reformed catholicity as inter-confessing resists a “logic of the One” in which one dominant contextualization of the gospel—usually Euro/American, White, and male-centered interpretations—becomes universally regulative for orthodoxy. Instead, God and confessional God-speak are drenched with multiplicity. This means that confessional diversity does not detract from the church’s witness. Rather, the multiplicity embedded in theological discourse and content should resist ecclesiological balkanization and ecclesial pride, vices that delude churches into pipe dreams of self-sufficiency or, worse, being self-appointed God-elected theological islands. Inter-confessing encourages inter-ecclesial engagement, allowing each other’s voices to call truth to where we have fallen short of God’s mercy and justice. Hence, the Accra Confession’s most important contribution to the Reformed imagination is not the importance of engaging theology to resist Empire, environmental degradation, and economic injustice, but its invitation to the Reformed church catholic to inter-confess. The invitation calls for churches to host important conversations on what it means to love God and neighbor in a globalized world where injustices are borne disproportionately by the poor, marginalized, even the subaltern whose plights have not entered public discourse yet.

No better demonstration of the potential of inter-confessing exists in the WCRC than Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson. In many ways, he presents the best the Reformed tradition has to offer, demonstrating virtues that I feel we have lost over the past several years. The few decades following World War II were a golden age of inter-ecclesial cooperation and ecumenism. But the early twenty-first century has seen this effervescence flatten, like soda that has lost its fizz. What started as a strong commitment to cooperation has waned as financial crises, church closures, the popularity of less institutionally linked religions, and other challenges led churches to retreat into their own comfort zones, pining at times for the “good old days” of their traditions, unaware of the unintentional racism and classism of such a disposition (or, worse, lusting after such evils). Theologians and seminaries are accused, justifiably in many cases, of talking big on faithfulness, righteousness, and justice, but are incubators of their polar opposites.

Chris, fortunately for us, ensured his witness and ministry matched his theology so that the church/world dichotomy does not exist. For him, to be a church catholic meant to be a testament to wholeness in a world made un-whole by sin and evil. A Canadian with a global vision, he ministered in various Latin American countries that were torn apart by war and violence by right-wing regimes which were supported indirectly by the United States. In an interview,

he recalls ministering in El Salvador in 1989 when war came to his municipality; he coordinated human rights work and pastoral care for the missionaries, church workers, and even perhaps the parishioners who were unwittingly engulfed in it.¹⁸ Later, he would work extensively with the World Council of Churches before helming the WCRC. These callings require building bridges between constituencies and church traditions in order for workable solutions to various crises to be addressed. Mere talk of justice does not save lives. Hence, his witness and leadership is inter-confessing in action.

As a professor of theology and ethics, I'm convinced that most students will not fully appreciate the importance of having a theological and moral imagination until at least a few years after they graduate. I venture that the same can be said of Chris's work in ecumenism and the Accra Confession. Few churches around the world today appreciate the importance of ecumenism and of confessing against Empire, environmental destruction, and economic injustice. As Chris admits, The WCRC "is charged with the imperative to contribute to the wider ecumenical movement at a time when the way forward is not clear and the energies are flagging."¹⁹ But the Reformed movement has never operated on a short time horizon when it comes to participating in the work of God. Its work cannot be pithily summarized in 280 characters or less. The work of God extends beyond and even transcends the participation of any individual, which is why humility and an ardent love of God with one's own energies and mind are indispensable for ecumenical and justice work. In his tenure as General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson has demonstrated those virtues without much fanfare, but in doing so, he has planted seeds that will eventually sprout. May it be that future generations will enjoy the shade created by trees of justice, harmony, and peace—trees that grew from the seeds he planted.

Henry S. Kuo is assistant professor of theology and ethics at Greensboro College in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA. He also serves from a distance at the First Chinese Presbyterian Church in New York City.

18 Chris Ferguson, "An interview with Chris Ferguson," *Reformed Communiqué* 5, no. 3 (Sept. 2014), 9.

19 Ibid.



Subscription prices:

1 year: 25 euro/30 USD

1 year solidarity subscription: 40 euro/50 USD

Single Issue: 15 euro/20 USD

*Reformed World is published two times a year.
All prices include the cost of surface mailing.*

***Back issues, books and other
publications are available from:***

World Communion of Reformed Churches
Knochenhauerstrasse 42
30159 Hannover
Germany
Tel: + 49 511 8973 8310
Fax: + 41 511 8973 8311
Email: reformed.world@wrc.eu
Web: wrc.ch/theology/reformed-world

Financial contributions are welcome!

Cover, design and layout: Michael Kolk, Kolk Creative
Printed in Germany.

Published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches
42 Knochenhauerstrasse, 30159 Hannover, Germany

Called to communion, committed to justice

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is comprised of 100 million Christians in Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting and Waldensian churches. The WCRC, working with its more than 230 member churches, is active in supporting church unity, justice, theology, mission and ecumenical engagement in over 105 countries.

Called to communion and committed to justice, the World Communion of Reformed Churches responds to God's call to foster justice and meet spiritual needs for all in the transformation of the world through the love of Jesus Christ.



**World Communion
of Reformed Churches**

MORE INFORMATION
wrcr.ch