

what does God require of us?

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



Introduction

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

—Micah 6:8

What Does God Require of Us?

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

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



Living Faithfully in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

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

On Being Reformed Circle

This booklet presents highlights from the On Being Reformed Circle, originally held August through November 2021 and aligned with Ordinary Time in the church calendar.



World Communion
of Reformed Churches

Sharing Session: Freedom of Religion

Junaid Ahmad (*National Defence University, Pakistan*):

To understand what is happening in Muslim communities and societies today, it is important to give it a political context with the intensification of Islamophobia. Over the past few decades, in addition to direct Western interventions in Muslim lands, there has emerged this feeling—going back to centuries—that there is a war against Islam. It has not helped that we have seen grotesque caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, which of course is a part of a long history of mocking the Prophet. And it doesn't help that there is constant talk of a Judeo-Christian civilization, at the expense of their Abrahamic Muslim sisters and brothers, a civilization that the religion of Islam has always been an important part of. Hence this context remains, since colonial times to what is seen by many as neocolonial times today.

Many Muslims have seen their faith as being their primary identity, hence many Muslims have felt that their faith needs to be rigidly protected in these times of Islamophobia. And this has led some Muslims to adopt very exclusivist notions of what their faith is all about. They have become incredibly sensitive to new forms of Islamophobia. What this points to is that religious traditions and people's ability to cope with differences is heavily bound up with their own sense of confidence of whether their dignity is being affirmed by the world they inhabit, a world in which many Muslims feel that their states are utterly corrupt, authoritarian, and in service to other powerful nations. Muslims' only recourse at times is toward their faith tradition and its symbols of hope and solace. This, of course, often leads to very reactionary and regressive notions of what their faith is all about; freedom of religion and religious pluralism are inextricably bound up with the political and historical context, the rise of fundamentalism in Muslim societies and communities in the 1970s and 80s. The world and especially the most vulnerable amongst Muslims and non-Muslims have paid the price for political decisions by the powerful, not all of whom were Muslims. Our struggle to affirm freedom of religion must come from an alliance of our communities at the civil society level.

Nation states, especially the powerful ones, have political agendas behind selectively raising or not raising the issue of religious freedom. We must not let our principles be hijacked by those nation states. Those nation states often do more harm than good to the struggle to form the freedom of religion. We must rekindle the prophetic struggle for interreligious solidarity for justice and peace and against oppression. In a context where all of our communities and their most vulnerable are given dignity and justice, where other ideation can be minimized and eliminated, then religious and other differences can be fully respected and, indeed, celebrated.



Eve Parker (*Durham University, United Kingdom*):

At the center of the debates over freedom of religion is the subject of bodies' power and knowledge, as knowledge begins in the body. Just as certain bodies have been subjugated, so, too, have certain knowledges and religions. As some bodies are deemed as problems—inconveniences, irrelevant, and indecent—the bodies of the privileged elites are deemed as knowledge holders and the truth bearers who shape and determine what should be deemed “real theology” or “real religion.” The subject of freedom of religion is nestled in the midst of such power dynamics where somebody is freer than others.

In the context of the UK, as with many other parts of the world, the white body is freer in their religion and sense of belonging. This has come about as a result of what James Baldwin has referred to as the white problem, as whiteness is a metaphor for power. Whiteness is privileged; white, male, middle-class, heteronormative theological truths have greater claims over and against what emerge from black, women, queer, Dalit, and other liberationist theological epistemologies.

In this brief presentation I want to briefly cover three points: the role of whiteness in the debates over freedom of religion, the ways in which boundaries of belonging are created to prevent freedoms, and the role that theological education can and should play in challenging such boundaries. Discussions on the topic of whiteness often lead to defensive, aggressive responses that expose the fragility of white identity politics and embedded racial prejudices. Theological education must not shy away from these topics or the rise of racism, the growth of interreligious intolerance, and the normalization of fascist politics that is on the rise in Europe. In the UK, we have a prime minister who uses racial slurs and has argued that Islam has caused the Muslim world to be literally centuries behind the West. No matter what the context, this is not okay. Since the Brexit referendum in Britain, racism and race-related hate crimes have risen dramatically. Political discourse that is anti-immigrant, racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic has not only become mainstream, it's been legitimized by the current leadership. And there exists this dangerous Anglosphere philosophy that's embedded with racism, misogyny, religious intolerance, and an empire ideology, and the subject of freedom of religion has become intertwined with such politics.

Secularism continues to be on the rise in Britain. This has not prevented far right populists manipulating notions of Christian identity and values as a means of propagating this exclusive vision for Britain in their political messaging. In the UK, the socio-religious and political narrative that shaped the Brexit campaign, for example, involved political and religious campaigns that have helped play on this conflation of notions of white entitlement and the demonization of black and visible minorities. Conservative Christianity in the UK, coinciding with a far-right, political ideology, has misrepresented arguments for the freedom of religion as a means of antagonizing white British nationals to fear the religious other. In doing so, they've created a politics of British belonging that excludes ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other religious groups—most commonly Muslims—and such beliefs have been reinforced by conservative politicians who have called for mosques to be banned, claimed Muslims want to turn the world Muslim, and referred to Muslims as barbarians and the enemy within. This goes back to James Baldwin's metaphor for whiteness being about power. Whiteness as this ideology

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controls and shapes people's understandings of what it means to be British or how their identity is able to be accepted; whiteness therefore operates in a way that seeks to exclude any threat to white epistemology. It holds this idealized fixation on Britain's imperial past, in which pride and empire become one and those who exist outside of the fixed boundaries of nationalist British belonging are denied their religious, political, and social freedoms.

Meanwhile, the freedom of religion argument is hijacked and controlled by conservative Christians in the political far right to manipulate the politics of belonging into these fixed boundaries of Britishness, within which only white Anglican Protestants can feel a true sense of belonging. When we look at the subject of freedom of religion we need, therefore, to consider the power dynamics that are at play, and situate ourselves in the midst of them. We need to ask ourselves why we hold the views and beliefs that we hold, especially as we consider the ways in which our centric epistemologies and belief systems have denied the epistemologies of non-Christian communities and maintained colonialist epistemologies.

Each religion has a tendency to consider that it is the sole guardian of truth, duty bound to behave accordingly, an attitude not always conducive to interreligious tolerance. This is particularly the case when considering the relationship between the British Empire, colonialism, and Christianity, where empire and colonialism found much of its intellectual underscoring based on white Eurocentric supremacy and infused with the theological import of Christianity, which marked clear binaries of what is civilized and uncivilized. The church in England has remained silent on certain subjects such as Islamophobia; it's been guilty of releasing statements with an imperial tone regarding Brexit. And in an increasingly secular and multicultural society, like many other denominations, the Church of England appears to be experiencing an identity crisis: It's attempting to find a purpose in the midst of empty pews, collapsing buildings, and a barrage of media coverage surrounding a history of abuse scandals. In response, the church has made statements against same-sex marriage, used pro-Empire rhetoric, and positioned itself very much alongside the political status quo.

This is the form of Christianity that scares me. It's the form of Christianity being deliberately used in the current political climate, but the Jesus of history—this radical ethnic other living as he did as a Galilean Jew—is whitewashed in the UK, where Christ continues to be contextualized as a white man. Jesus has become this symbolic Englishman who reaffirms Empire colonialism and British superiority. This comes at the expense of other faith communities in Britain, whose freedom of religious belief and expression is challenged by the fixed boundaries of nationalist notions of Britishness.

Never be indifferent to the freedom of religion and belief of all people. Because we are embodied and therefore political, I must take a political side and acknowledge the fact that many of our global political regimes are refusing to grant humans humanity, let alone their freedoms.

Peniel Jesudason Rajkumar (*Ripon College, United Kingdom*):

The importance of religious freedom cannot be stressed enough at a time such as this. Every day we witness the bloody scars of violence. Majority and religious nationalisms and religious identities are invoked with a vengeance, day in and day

out, by those in power to promote xenophobia and discrimination. The struggle for religious liberty, the freedom to embrace and profess one's faith or no faith without the threat of persecution, is not a new phenomenon. It is precisely for this reason that the freedom of religion or belief has been enshrined in international instruments of human rights. Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his or her choice. Despite all this, religious freedom continues to be the most violated of freedoms as people treat religions as fortresses to be defended, rather than as wellsprings for the flourishing of life.

The present COVID-19 context has, in fact, provided the ideal context for majoritarian governments to experiment in new ways of spreading hate and restricting the rights of religious minorities. It has been pointed out that the climate of the pandemic has been consequential for hate. On a global scale, we have witnessed the alarming resurgence of prejudice against particular communities. These have resulted in xenophobic terms like Kung Flu and Corona Jihad being added to the wider vocabulary of hate by our politicians who have made violence a new battlefield for the populist agenda. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Mr. Ahmed Shaheed said, "The pandemic has caused a flare-up in existing religious intolerance in many countries." This has led to an upsurge in incitement to hatred and scapegoating of religious communities for the spread of the virus. He went on to mention that those targeted have not only faced verbal abuse, death threats, and physical attacks, but also have faced discrimination in accessing public services, and the denial of health services. This is very important to help us remember that freedom of religion is never only about what one worships, how one worships, where one worships, and when one worships or does not worship, but rather it is also about access to essential resources. It is about political representation, about economic rights, and it is usually in relation to these issues; people with the "wrong" religion or belief are grossly discriminated against, and this is particularly the case during the present pandemic.

There is something particularly dangerous about the violation of the freedom of religion in contemporary times. Violators of freedom of religion today have, in various contexts, managed to co-opt the discourse of human rights in an insidious manner and weaponized it against minority communities; this has especially been the case in relation to access to vaccines.

After emphasizing the sovereignty of the state as the most important right for countries in emergency contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, state and political actors usually employ the language of human rights to construct a self-serving narrative that entrenches power or legitimize their behavior. This is how they can formulate the "right to help": as one that is progressively realizable over time, taking available resources into consideration. There is a lot of ambiguity in this. As a result, the "right to help" produces a level of deference to the state to decide who should receive access to health care and at which point; this, of course, empowers the state to become the primary violator of human rights, in some cases citing both the human rights language as sovereign and the issue of limited resources.

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Discernment Questions

1. Why do you think that religion, more than any other identity formulation, has become the axis along which violence is perpetrated?
2. In what ways has the right to freedom of religion been hijacked by the right wing?
3. Freedom of religion has historically been important for a Reformed understanding of faith. How can Reformed theology strengthen the understanding of freedom of religion?

As Christian theologian Joerg Riger reminds us, we will continue to support Empire by default, unless we look for those particular other and often repressed narratives in places where we encounter alternatives. Therefore, when we think of solidarity, it is especially important to think, as a statement of the Frankfurt conference* says, of solidarity with these communities in the margins, the communities of imagination, and those enacting the art of resistance to the empire—the vulnerable. They have, in their own way, laid siege to the empire. These are the ones who, according to the Indian writer Arundhati Roy, may not have stopped the empire in its tracks, but they have stripped it down, made it drop its mask, forced it into the open, so that it is before us on the world stage in all its brutish iniquitous nakedness. It is why churches have become such communities of resistance, in solidarity with other communities of resistance and resilience today.

The other kind of solidarity that is needed is interlinear solidarity. The Frankfurt statement again recognizes that only an international community of imagination can challenge nationalist notions of intolerant religiosity that deny the dignity and religious freedom of the vulnerable. Interreligious solidarity today requires cultivating a stronger understanding of interdependence as human beings, realizing that a sense of integrity is crucial to our wellbeing, that we are who we are, not against but alongside our neighbors. What we cannot afford at this time is a diluted version of the Golden Rule based on a calculated logic of reciprocity, where the things I do for you are because you will be good to me. What is needed is a strong solidarity premised on a theology of courageous risk and radical and mutual hospitality, where one does good to the other, even if it is possible that it might not be reciprocated.

To conclude, I'm reminded of the words of Lamend Shana, a theologian from Namibia, who once said, for many of us pluralism can be a stumbling block, but for God it is the cornerstone of universal design. The challenge for people of faith today is to use this cornerstone of pluralism of God's universal design to build an inclusive community. This task is rendered all the more challenging in a context in which religion has been recruited as an ally of populist nationalism and xenophobia.

In such a global context, there seems to be a poignant truth to Jonathan Swift's observation long ago: There is enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough religion to make us love one another. The immediate challenge is to build a theology into concrete and creative action, which, through the art and politics of collaboration and cooperation can become what we can call a life-affirming dyad practice that holds the promise of life and liberation, not just for a few, but for all.

*The statement can be found here:
wrc.ch/news/freedom-of-religion-rooted-in-justice

Sharing Session: South Asia

Saman Perera, Stanley Nelson (*Presbyterian Church of Pakistan*):

During this pandemic, I lost my younger sister to COVID-19 complications. We were hurt. Five or six church members died due to COVID-19. My daughter, a medical doctor, serving in Lahore, Pakistan, got COVID; her husband, my son-in-law, was in charge of COVID. He got sick and was on oxygen for more than 10 days. My son and my daughter are walking out of it, but this is one part: We are facing widespread challenges and losses.

And second, many of our Christians have lost jobs. Of course, many Muslims have lost jobs, too; but Christians find it harder to get jobs. From time to time, our government is having smart lockdowns, which I have no problem with; they should happen. But these smart lockdowns cause job problems, and then problems for youth and employment.

Of course, beyond the economy, COVID-19 created many social problems in our society. With reference to church, well, most people don't want to come to churches now; they are afraid of the coronavirus. We had a good strategy: We started using social media, and in my church, we started online services through Facebook and YouTube channels. My channel is like Christian TV, and it's very good that the Lord open another door for us to preach the gospel to non-Muslims. Many Muslims are enjoying my sermons regarding Christian doctrine regarding love for others, and the common matters between Muslims and Christians, so we are touching different topics with a very good response from Muslim friends.

And for one thing I'm very grateful to the Lord: that in every bad circumstance and every terrible situation and every evil, our Lord finds some very good points and brings goodness. And even though we have so many side effects politically, economically, and socially in our country, at the same time, through social media, we can preach the gospel to many, many Muslims in our work. This is one of the best aspects of this COVID-19.

I'm so grateful. And today I'm very thankful to the World Communion of Reformed Churches that provided this good platform where I'm participating for the first time. And of course, my churches in Pakistan will be pleased to join and they're listening. Thank you very much. God bless you, and pray for Pakistan. Our political situation—most of the people in the world know that fundamentalism is a very big issue in our country, religious discrimination is a very big issue in our country; minorities are not happy when literally we are second-class citizens in this country. But we don't want to leave; the Lord has kept us in this country to serve Him and to be the witness of Lord Jesus Christ.

Prinstone Ben (*Church of South India*):

Recently, the Church of South India has asked our pastors and theologians to reflect upon the theme of God in times of COVID-19. It's an opportunity for the church to think about the presence of God in terms of difficult times, while we are suffering conflicts. We're having similar discussions because COVID-19 hit India very much the same as people from other countries.

Hundreds of us, several pastors, missionaries, and Bible women lost their lives to COVID-19. In the midst of the unprecedented suffering, the believers started

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to ask, where is God in this time of this heavy suffering? Is the pandemic itself an indicator of punishment from God? We don't want to say that God is a blessing or a curse, but we are suffering in our pilgrim journey. An array of difficulties—war, epidemics, and natural calamities—is not avoided in this learning. Our God wants to travel with the Israelites as a co-pilgrim in the experience of wilderness, reminding us of the new way out of no way. God gives us assurance in the context of uncertainties; God reveals courage in the context of fear and anxieties, which we are solving through experience.

The context of COVID-19 is a time of reformulating our worship, renewing our mission and practice of ministry. We believe that the Lord provided his people with ten commandments, the Tabernacle, The Ark of Covenant and the Pentateuch at the time of their wilderness experiences to better their worship and serving community. This gives us new missions, new resources to worship Him.... The bitter and unpleasant experience of COVID-19 in our life is inviting us to see God acting as people, God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, goes into the cloud as a suffering sentiment. Jesus, the one who identified with suffering and was despised by his people, is a role model for us.

The Church of South India encourages all believers to get involved in the needs of people who are suffering, marginalized, and justice-denied, as Jesus involved the needs of the people in hardship at the time of his ministry.

Maxin John (*Church of South India*):

The COVID-19 pandemic, spread out everywhere, has jeopardized what it means to be normalizing all people. This virus spread has taken the lives and livelihoods of people and affected societies that so much has been lost. It has created the suffering experienced by many, whether the loss of lives or livelihoods for years to come. We have lost many lives, but the true victims of this crisis are the last ones in society. Mentally, physically, and financially, people were exhausted. The church tried to reach and accompany the people with available resources. There are many remarkable initiatives made by the church to address the scarcity of resources for people to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

We convey the message to the people that COVID-19 is not the end of a horror story. God is in control, and we can make a breakthrough; by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in any circumstances, ultimately, in spite of all prices and dilemmas, God is in control. The church has addressed the pandemic issues in remarkable ways, and still, the church is on the move to enhance the capacities of the people to combat the pandemic crisis.

Elder Lim Kar Hor (*Presbyterian Church of Malaysia*):

Let me start with the background of the situations of COVID-19 pandemic situation over in Malaysia. There are four stages of movement control, or what is called the lockdown, in March 2020, January 2021, May 2021, and June 2021.

During the three stages of the pandemic, we look at what happened to the churches before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and post pandemic. I would like to use the word “light” for us to reflect through these three stages of the pandemic. “Let your light shine before men” (Matthew 5:13-16). With the team, we sought the silent world of influence and the light of the visible manifestations of God in people’s lives. Light was the first thing God created, one of the first words recorded in the Bible—“let there be light,” in Genesis. Also, in the Old Testament light is often used as a symbol of goodness, of uprightness, of blessing. It is linked closely with Yahweh and wickedness and serves as a symbol of God’s blessing. In the New Testament, light is used to point towards Jesus Christ. Jesus is referred to as a light of the world.

So now, during the three stages, how do we become the light for the world to see Jesus Christ? Before the pandemic, you know, the light is in the building, the church itself, within the four walls. When the pandemic struck—during the pandemic—some of us were lost. We did not know how to shine the light as most of the church activities were the first to stop: Sunday worship ministries like Sunday school, youth Bible study, you name it. Then we learned how to conduct all this ministry online, without knowing how effective it is. At the same time, people are suffering because businesses are closed. People are losing their jobs and income; families break down; and suicide cases rise. Children become orphans because they lose their parents. Many more things happened. It was during this period that God wanted us to relook into how we shine our light for him. How do we become the light for the world to see Jesus Christ?

Jesus said in Mark 12:31, “that the second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In 3 John 1:11 it says, “Beloved, imitate. Imitate what is good; whoever does is from God. Whoever does evil has not seen God.” The Greek word for imitate means to duplicate or to follow. This means that we who claim to follow Jesus Christ must duplicate what Jesus has done and follow his example. Therefore, be imitators of God. The world needs people to reach out to others in search of friendship. Nothing has become more disturbing in today’s society, especially during the period of the pandemic, than self-centeredness and the worship of me, myself.

In Bible times, hospitality was not merely a gracious act, but a necessity. The stranger was to be treated as a guest, and homeowners were expected not only to house them, but to offer hospitality so that even a stranger would recognize it as love. We must get back into the ministries of graciously receiving others into our

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Discernment Questions

1. What are the particular challenges of the South Asian context that need to be addressed by the WCRC?
2. United and Uniting churches have a very special place in the South Asian context. What do you see that these churches bring to the Reformed communion?

homes, feeding them, and making them always feel the warmth of welcome. We are all called to practice hospitality as best we can, for it is a true act of gratefulness for what God has done for us.

And we know during this period of time, a lot of people are suffering. Families are without food. In our country, there are a lot of migrant workers. So, what we do is that people go to them, we bring the needs to them. We look at this group of people and see what they need. We go into the community to truly reflect the words “love your neighbor as yourself,” to imitate Christ doing good to them. Get to know them to show them hospitality. At the same time, in the spirit of these times, because of the pandemic, people need some kind of spiritual comfort, to respond to a spiritual emptiness. We can take this opportunity to share with them, tell them about Jesus. We can be a light to illuminate a world that is fumbling in the period of this pandemic.

Post-pandemic, we know that the church will no longer be the same as it was. We will no longer be in the same four walls of what we know. The church is outside. The church is without boundaries, is what Paul said. We need to get ready; there is no way we are able to go back to normal or that life will just be the same now that members have gotten used to that virtual world. This is what we need to look at the same time. When we went out, we had to bring this light to the world, to our community, to whoever we come across. Now go and follow this light and shine as a beacon of light so that others can follow it too.

Rolin Matu (*Christian Reformed Church in Myanmar*):

First of all, we want you to pray for Myanmar. Specifically, for peace to be restored. Our problem here in Myanmar is about civil freedom, not only in general but to worship. We were always watched, especially people of a minority ethnicity. Internet limitations are a daily problem. Around me, many people have passed away and are suffering; we cannot get the vaccine. We need a COVID-19 center to take care of those who are infected. Every day our children live and study afraid of violence. As a body of Christ, we want you to pray for us so we can bear and go through this.

Sharing Session: The Pacific

Hamish Galloway (*Aotearoa Presbyterian Church in New Zealand*):

We have been, so far at least, fortunate. We had our first case of COVID in February 2020. In late March we went to a six-week lockdown, which effectively stopped COVID here in New Zealand. At that point, we were COVID-free in terms of community transmission of COVID. We've had a significant period of time when we've been able to close our borders and have very strict quarantine for people who do have to return home or come to New Zealand for a reason. And we've had a huge amount of time when we've been COVID-free.

The other thing that's really quite significant is the way that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has worked with the medical profession and scientists. In these daily briefings both the politicians and the medical people speak with one voice. They have clear messaging and strong leadership. And the other thing is that we're a country of 5 million people; when there's been a sustained message all the way through a team of 5 million, it's worked pretty well.

However, the Delta variant is now in the country, and once again we needed a strong lockdown throughout the whole country. Unfortunately, that has not allowed us to eliminate COVID-19 this time; we're in a situation where COVID is spreading in the community. Obviously a very big part of the solution is vaccination, and this has been a huge drive, to have as many as possible to be vaccinated. Anyone over 12 has been strongly encouraged to be vaccinated, and the procedures are not paid. We have in Auckland, I think, now over 90 percent of the population who have had at least the first injection; that's where we are at the moment. The change from being COVID-19-free in terms of the community, as we were for so long, to a place where we are accepting that COVID-19 is part of our life here in Aotearoa New Zealand has been a big thing to get our heads around. Most places in the world had to come to terms with it some time ago; within this it is relatively new for us.

I read an article the other day that I thought was really helpful. It was put out by one of our theological colleges and presented three Cs in our situation: they talked about change; they talked about care; and they talked about community. Using those three terms, one of the situations that COVID-19 brings us is rapid change. We've had to change from a situation where we felt quite comfortable, going about our lives as normal, to now being in lockdown in large parts of the country.

In terms of care, we've found that vaccination rates in our poorer communities, in the Pacific communities, in the Maori communities, have been much lower compared to more wealthy, urban, European parts of the country. It's made us think about why. Is it about accessibility? Is it about our communities as compared to the wealthy, those of European descent?

It's highlighted a disparity within our country; as Christians we're thinking carefully about the government timeline and how we can close those gaps. The other thing about this has to do with the biblical theme of "Love your neighbor": How does that apply in this situation in terms of the way that we behave, particularly around getting the vaccination? How can we be sure we are as safe as possible in our interactions with our children, with the elderly, with the most vulnerable?

The third component is community. I don't know how it is in the countries you come from, but there has been some division within our society. While we've

Addressing the immediate present context for our survival we need pastoral strengthening, networking both organizational and technological, and learning to reflect, act, and reflect.

been a team of 5 million for most of the time that this has been going on, we've been united about lockdowns, increasingly there have been people who've been agitating for freedom, the freedom to gather. Some of those demonstrations have been fronted by church leaders. In these particular churches, not part of the Presbyterian Church, there's also been an undercurrent of messaging around anti-vaccination sentiments. While growing, that segment is only a small minority within the country. It has been led by a segment of the Christian church in New Zealand, and it's been, in my view, a witness in terms of the Christian faith that creates a lot of challenge in terms of how we are as a community generally, particularly how we visit Christian communities.

Brian Bird (*United Church in Solomon Islands [UCSI]*):

The United Church in Solomon Islands was established in November 1996 as a national church. It has about 52,000 members. The church is young in terms of establishment and population structure, with the bulk of membership in the Western Province and Choiseul Province. However, members also live in all the provinces as well, with a distance that spread over 653 nautical miles. There is great diversity in the church, such as different cultures and about 20 different language groups. The most common mode of transportation and intra-island travel is by outboard motors, and increasing chaotic and unpredictable weather and climatic conditions due to global warming make such travels risky and often life threatening.

There are about 205 congregations of differing sizes that are scattered throughout the Western Province and Choiseul Province. Some are in other provinces. Missional engagements encounter challenges such as dangerous movement or transportation between the communities, weak communication with congregations, inaccessibility to health, economic, and education centers, and so on.

Various transnational corporations operate logging companies in many areas with a predominant UCSI population. Deforestation and associated negative ecological impacts such as destruction of forest ecosystems and biodiversity, soil erosion, river and coastline erosion, sedimentation, etc., are visible everywhere. Shorelines of coastal villages continue to erode and sea levels continue to rise, forcing homes to move inland. Weather patterns are changing, affecting seasons for planting and fishing, negatively affecting food security.

The Solomon Islands in 2020 sustained a total of 20 COVID-19 cases. The 20 patients are fully recovered and to date Solomon Islands is still COVID-free. As a preventative measure, the government extended for the fifth time the State of Public Emergency. Currently, Solomon Islands is still under a State of Public Emergency. The COVID-19 vaccination roll-out is still running. The expected vaccination percentage is still too far from reach as citizens have varied reactions about the vaccine. Frontliners, including church leaders, are among the first to take their vaccine. An appeal is made to all government workers and frontline organizations for compulsory injection. Take a job to come to work or stay home if not vaccinated.

UCSI last year, because of the State of Public Emergency, downscaled its program and activities. All programs and activities that involved mass gathering of people were put on hold or canceled. Public worship in some congregations were

streamed, while others continued in smaller gatherings with strict observation of social distancing rules. The UCSI Assembly Office provided Missional Engagement Guidelines to all church members through their various congregations.

The UCSI is taking stock under the running theme of redirecting missions toward fullness of life. Addressing the immediate present context for our survival we need pastoral strengthening, networking both organizational and technological, and learning to reflect, act, and reflect. To “ground and earth” the Kingdom of God, we intend to speak truth to power and regimes as perpetrators of climate change, violence against women, unemployment, etc. We need reliable and safe inter-island transportation to advance missional work. We look ahead to kingdom living with vibrant people, effective mission, and relevant church.

Hannah North (*WCRC Executive Committee member*):

I'm from Aotearoa, New Zealand, currently living in Auckland, which has been in lockdown now for nine weeks, a new experience for a lot of us over here. But I feel incredibly privileged to be living in New Zealand, which is relatively safe compared to the rest of the world. I just want to highlight something Hamish mentioned in his presentation: the inadequate equality in New Zealand around how the vaccinations have been handed out. It has highlighted some systemic racism which has been in New Zealand now for a while. I think it's reflected, hopefully not in the superior church, but in a few churches within New Zealand where our Maori community and our Pacifica community makes up a big part of that lower socio-economic environment and is constantly being targeted with spiritual abuse and misinformation. It pulls out this inequality that is happening in New Zealand and, I assume, in other countries like New Zealand. Something that the WCRC could be involved in is highlighting that systemic racism which affects so many people, bring the church on board with it, and help break some of that spiritual abuse and misinformation that people have been affected by.

Sharon Hollis (*the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people in Melbourne*):

Just like Hannah, we've had similar experiences around online targeting of Pacifica and other First Nations and First Nation communities and that has been a problem. One of the key things we can all be involved in is the End COVID for All campaign. That's an international campaign that says every person around the world has the absolute human right to safe, effective COVID vaccines delivered in a timely manner. I think we all have to be involved in that. I live in a wealthy country where we've managed COVID-19 a lot by lockdown, so when Hannah said nine weeks, I thought wow, how lucky you are. I'm in my seventh lockdown. And in Nam, we have had the longest amount, the largest number of days in lockdown in the world. We also have a healthcare system that is supporting free vaccination, free testing, and so on. One of the most important things we can do is to be involved in the End COVID for All campaign, those of us in wealthy countries lobbying our governments to be about distribution of vaccines beyond our shores.

Sharing Session: Indigenous Network

Carmen Lansdowne (a member of the House of First Nation in Canada):

I'm joining you today from the traditional ancestral and legally unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples and Squamish-speaking peoples, specifically the Musqueam. Squamish and Salish are the two nations who are the first caretakers of what is now called the city of Vancouver. This week, as we gather to share participating in the Reformed and reforming work of the global church, we are tasked with thinking about the new normal for which we strive. Specifically, we were asked for reflection on that new normal in the context of some pretty significant issues: the climate emergency, vaccine equity, the rights of Indigenous people, and Indigenous spirituality. All of these issues are interconnected. We recognize that for most Indigenous cultures in most parts of the world, at least part of their culture and spirituality is focused on the idea of good living or the good life.

The concept of reconciliation is central to how we approach other justice issues in our lives. In September, Canada celebrated our first ever National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.... Our elders didn't like the word reconciliation because to them to reconcile is to repair the relationship between two parties who have wronged each other. Our elders are very clear that we as Indigenous people didn't do anything wrong in our relationship with the state of Canada. Our land and our children were taken from us as our customs were outlawed for decades. *Haileistut* was the word our elders wanted us to use, and it means to turn things around and to make things right again. I love the fact that our elders asked us specifically to use this word. As a theologian, it resonates with our Christian traditions of *metanoia* and repentance.

In 1996, Amartya Sen, a professor of economics and philosophy who had just won the Nobel Prize in Economics, published a book called *Development as Freedom*. In the very moving introduction to his book, he spoke about his experience growing up in Bangladesh after partition and the ways in which political freedom had created religious and economic freedom in his community. He argued that all of our freedoms are connected to each other. And so, when we experience any unfreedom it can change our experiences of freedom to unfreedom. This is something that Indigenous cultures have known and practiced more successfully than Euro Christian traditions. When we have been allowed to thrive in our own cultural contexts, our traditional forms of logic and worldviews saw and recognized more clearly the interconnections of life. It is time, therefore, if we were to think about the new normal that our world is tumbling towards, that we seriously consider centering and learning from Indigenous perspectives. Canada is a raging dumpster fire of bad examples of what it means to make statements about the need for a different teacher that allows for stronger



and better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and between people and the planet, but without wanting to change our corporate behavior.

Our current market system thrives on disruption. Without an intentional focus on rebalancing our existence on this planet, the market will exploit the destruction of COVID-19 to benefit the world's wealthiest. We talk about reconciliation in Canada without *Haiticistut*. We want a different future, but we don't want to go through the process of *metanoia* to change our behavior. To turn around and to make things right.

Canada has also made statements claiming its heritage as a G7 country, that it can help to support countries from around the world to achieve vaccine equity. At the same time, we have stockpiled vaccine that is now sitting in storage, and we have started offering second boosters to use that overstocked vaccine, some of which we took through the international pull-backs program, instead of offering our vaccines to countries who do not yet have enough. As a wealthy country, we should be giving to the COVAX program, not taking from it.

Many Indigenous cultures have worldviews that teach us that the world is a place of abundance, that we only need to take what we need right now because there's always enough. This is in direct opposition to the Euro project, the Euro Christian economic theory that has formed the basis of our current forms of capitalism. Those forms of capitalism are based primarily on the idea that we as people are in competition for scarce resources, a view we hold rather than supporting ways of being in the world that teach us we only need to take what we need. Instead of focusing on wellness, we've built systems focused on unlimited growth and with the desire to always be creating and taking and exploiting to get more. That capitalist system has been built at the expense of people and the planet. Most wealth that is created now has been directly through the exploitation of people and the environment. We cannot continue into the future doing the same things we have always done, expecting that we will not reinforce systems that are based on unbalanced living and the perpetuation of unfreedom. It is time for our concept of history to turn things around and make things right.

Wati Longchar (*consultant for theological education, India*):

A public intellectual in India, Arundhati Roy said something like this: In much the same way as the coronavirus has injured human bodies and amplified existing illnesses, it has injured countries and societies, amplifying their structural infirmities and illness. Unjust economics and politics, authoritarianism, and racism have indeed intensified all over the world. Indigenous people are experiencing more exclusion and discrimination. We also need to recognize that more Indigenous people have died from food scarcity than from COVID-19. Indigenous people are struggling to survive all over the world. For the survival of humanity, now, we need to ensure justice for marginalized communities.

Indigenous people have offered solutions in different forms. I will mention only three points. The first message of the Indigenous voice was that we must safeguard the common resources: land, water, forests, seeds, traditional medicine, people's knowledge, and culture; and we must retain them in the hands of the community, not in the hands of corporations. It is dangerous to hand over all

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God's life-sustaining land to manipulators. Handing over the world and its resources to a few corporations is the root cause of the collapse of the food distribution system. COVID-19 has proved that the present market system cannot save the poor. On the contrary, an unjust market system has killed many people.

The second message we should give priority to is saving life, not saving money. Money should not replace the value of life. COVID-19 has exposed that health care is used for making money. It is inaccessible to Indigenous people, working classes, and migrant laborers. The economic engine of the world hasn't treated labor right. The Supreme Court in India said hospitals in the country have become a large industry now thriving on human diseases; the same is experienced all over the world. Oxygen, hospital beds, drugs, and vaccines are now new currencies. Healthcare is no longer affordable for everyone; it is no longer a service to humanity, as exemplified by the marketing of oxygen. During the pandemic, we have seen the nature of the health care system exposed.

We should affirm respect for the integrity of the region for sustainability. This is the voice of the Indigenous people. For a long time, in the name of development, crude, limitless destruction of natural resources has resulted in severe ecological imbalances. COVID-19 has proved that human beings have been trading the land to industry, which is then abused and from which we are excluded; the land is not seen as an integral part of us on which we depend. Greedy people have invaded the homes and habitats of animals, birds, and other living organisms, resulting in the destruction of biodiversity that is critical for maintaining ecological balance. Humans' wrong attitude towards God's creation is the source of all diseases, including hunger and this negation of the people. I want to reiterate what Indigenous elders said hundreds of years ago: Take time for diversity in nature. If not, we'll face worse than COVID-19. We need to maintain our delicate balance of diversity. If we protect the land with its resources, it will nourish us for generations.

Second, we repent from the worship of mammon, human greed, and desires. Mammon has no respect for anyone including our mother [earth]. It has no respect for life. A love of money and power makes us arrogant, authoritarian, exploitative, oppressive; it gives us discriminatory attitudes and ways of life. Humans should not expect a better future without repenting from having more wealth. Third, respect not only people with money and power, but respect all humanity equally. We should know that everything is interrelated and interconnected.

All suffer together and rejoice together. There is no future without affirming the value of interdependence. We need to teach our children that unlimited want is sin and the root of all exploitations. The earth's energy sources cannot fulfill everybody's good. Accumulation of wealth in the hands of few is the sign of sickness in our society. Choosing the value of life, sharing solidarity, love, service, and doing justice to all alone can usher in hope for our common future.

Seforosa Carol (*World Council of Churches*):

Today I want to share with you a joint message that the ecumenical Indigenous people's group and the Climate Change Working Group at WCC worked on together in Taiwan at their first inaugural meeting, in 2019 before COVID-19.

The statement was actually written last year. I want to share excerpts because it gives a response to the theme of today's panel, which is Indigenous peoples rights, justice, and reconciliation in a time of COVID-19 and beyond.

So, the statement goes somewhat like this, that Indigenous wisdom epistemologies and spiritualities play an imperative role in addressing the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity. Indigenous communities occupy 20 to 25 percent of the Earth's land space, and 80 percent of that landmass holds most of the world's remaining diversity. Indigenous peoples of the world have been and are still protectors of ecosystems. Indigenous communities have been caretakers of the earth for centuries, but their knowledge has been devalued. Indigenous perspectives are crucial not only for addressing the burgeoning climate emergency, but also for navigating the way forward to a hopeful future.

But the COVID-19 pandemic, as we all know, has uncovered and exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. The pandemic has also shown more clearly how intricately interconnected human beings are with creation. It has revealed the delicate balance and links between the damaging effects of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and expansion of large-scale industrial developments on wellbeing and health. COVID-19 is an example of how the pollution and destruction of ecosystems and the impact of human activities on nature makes it easy to spread viruses to humans. Protecting ecosystems and natural habitats will reduce the risk of spreading diseases that will be aggravated by deep-seated socio-economic inequalities.

COVID-19 is a measure of justice. COVID-19 has revealed trends towards fake destabilization and autocratic repression, with an alarming increase of human rights violations against Indigenous peoples and human rights defenders, especially those who advocate against exploitation of natural resources and against land-grabbing and environmentally destructive industries. Indigenous peoples of the world have long recognized the impending climate and ecological catastrophe, but the COVID-19 crisis has revealed what Indigenous peoples have been telling the world for many centuries. They have warned that the failure to protect our ecosystems and nature's biodiversity will lead to a major crisis, but their voices have been ignored. From the Arctic to the Pacific, from the Amazons to Asia, Indigenous peoples have been speaking and acting prophetically, but their wisdom has been forgotten and their voices silenced in favor of prioritizing economic profits and consumer lifestyles. In the process, Indigenous communities have been subjected to colonization and loss of ancestral lands, and one-sided poverty developed.

Our spirituality is at the core of the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The world needs urgently to shift from an extractive development model to an economy of life that affirms the interconnectedness of all beings and experiences. Observations from Indigenous people are a call and warning to the world that the path undertaken must be changed radically. There is no compensation for the damage caused if human beings do not change their way of life and systems of production and consumption. Like the COVID-19 crisis, the climate emergency demands swift and determined transformations. The pandemic has impacted all people of the world in a very short time. Nearly a million people have lost loved ones. Livelihoods have been decimated on an unprecedented scale, and as with climate change, those most exposed to both the disease and the loss

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of income are the poor of the world. But it also sends clear signals that changes can be effected very rapidly when the threat is obvious. The same goes with the climate emergency we face today. There is a possibility to change, but it has to happen now to avoid the most dangerous results of climate change. Both groups outlined this as the way forward. They recognize the continuing injustices and even racism. Indigenous communities face, historically and to the current day, climate change, extraction of land for the sake of development, and the COVID-19 pandemic; these have further exacerbated their already existing vulnerability. Part of this is to seek the advocacy, brothers and sisters, within our global Christian fellowship to ensure the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples within their countries.

One of the most important paragraphs is the acknowledgement and affirmation that the health and well-being of the planet is in the hands of all humanity. As we acknowledge this truth, we must also recognize that there is no livable future for our planet in which the full rights of Indigenous peoples are not respected. Indigenous peoples and their stewardship of their lands have a critical role in shaping the way forward toward our hope for the future. Their voices, perspectives, and wisdom are crucial for influencing change. They embody the wisdom of many centuries, and their role in developing spiritualities and theologies grounded in a deep connection to the earth and wholeness must be affirmed. Indigenous peoples give our faith communities a gift, the wisdom of Indigenous spiritualities that value the interconnectedness of life between creator and creation in interdependent relationships.

Jacobed Solano (*Memoria Indígena*):

My people have lived on this continent that people recognize as “America” for thousands and thousands of years; we recognize ourselves as people of the land. We are daughters and sons of Mother Earth. From them, we receive the benefits of being able to be nurtured and fed. When we die, we go back to the earth. Our relationship with Mother Earth is very close. We are proud of Mother Earth, as we are related to her. As I’ve heard from the people before, we agree that the aboriginal people are those who have most cared for and looked after the biodiversity of the planet. Yet they are the ones who have most suffered the vulnerability of the reality of climate change.

We cry due to deforestation, drought; the land cannot produce because it has been raped and exploited. Mother Earth has been raped.... We find hope in the Spirit of God that works in the restoration of the whole creation and causes us to take part in this liberation. This liberation includes the context of our own governments and here in the COP26 [26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties]. We are going to listen to the demands of these people. The governments must listen to the people who are in the forefront, that our voices will be listened to and heard and considered so that they respect the protection of the earth and particularly the rights of the Aboriginal people, women, and local communities. We must recognize that climate change is produced by human beings and their ambition, and that this produces a crisis. The solution to climate change has to be based on preserving the local systems to protect biodiversity.

Our aboriginal sisters and brothers in Glasgow came up with a declaration on the 31st of October. Read by our sister from Brazil, the joint declaration was written by the Indigenous caucus, and I would like to share it with you. What it says is that the aboriginal people are directly affected, and we are deeply worried that the solution may not include our consent, our agreement, that it may not be based on an understanding of our ways and our right to the land or our expectation as aboriginal people in the world that the defense of human rights and in particular the aboriginal people will consider the reduction of emissions.

Today we are working together to consider Article Six, which emphasizes the importance of human rights. Health sovereignty has to be central in all discussion on agriculture. Hope is everything with a political statement, and with our religion with Mother Earth, the autonomy of the people connects with the politics of food. If we aren't autonomous in growing our own food, it becomes a statement of capitalism. Food sovereignty has to be part of the discussion.

The response to climate change has to involve the aboriginal people in certain regions of the world. It's been said there will be a lot of money provided to the aboriginal people. Is it going to be really given to the aboriginal people? How will the communities receive that, even in the remotest of areas? The agenda will always include a theme of loss and damage to assure the rights of the aboriginal people and their community. We implement a working plan considering the recommendations of the report on the platforms considering aboriginal wisdom; We defend the rights to the land of the aboriginal people. Finally, people with disabilities and other abilities should always be part of this discussion. The COP26 and the future for our sisters and brothers must guarantee the participation of aboriginal people. I'm particularly considering that there is an overlap among multiple identities.

I finished with this prayer of the people from the corner where we can work together as part of our faith. The call of the gospel to live in a relationship of justice, in active prayer, seeking life in abundance. It is God's Spirit that works actively in the restoration of all creation. As my people also say when we are called to the holy singing, may our spirit wake up with the song of the Creator.

We find hope in the Spirit of God that works in the restoration of the whole creation and causes us to take part in this liberation.

Sharing Session: Global Institute of Theology

HyeRan Kim Cragg (*Dean of the Global Institute of Theology*):

The Global Institute of Theology (GIT) is a physical gathering of young theologians and students from WCRC member churches. Last year, due to the pandemic, we could not gather in person. Instead, students were invited to submit essays on the GIT theme—"Unsettling the Word"—even as we realize that the world is already unsettled by this pandemic and multi-layered injustices and challenges. Several students will discuss their essays.

Pauline Patricia: Preaching is a word event that proceeds from the silence, meaning, preaching has two interrelated dimensions: the word and silence. Silence is an essential part of preaching because it is an event of God's revelation. Through the event of the cross, the Word became flesh and embraced silence as part of the manifestation of God's presence in the history of humankind. However, because the event of the cross is an event of grace wrapped in suffering, the silence around the cross is also an eerie silence. Preaching must acknowledge the limitations of words and embrace silence. At the same time, preaching must realize that silence is not always good: There is silence that is tense and frightening. Both words and silence are very limited in themselves.

I want to show the complexity of preaching in the face of both suffering and trauma. On the one hand, preaching that functions as an *euangelion* must convey the message of grace from God. On the other hand, the limitations of words also affect preaching that loses the power of consolation in the context of suffering. The word is needed and not needed at the same time. Preaching becomes a space to point to God (*via positiva*) and at the same time to not point to God (*via negativa*). If preaching talks about a God who loves, then preaching must also talk about a God who is silent and beyond action and apprehension. This complexity shows the "unsettling" dimension of preaching, which reflects trauma as an unsettled human experience. We end up with the question, "How are we unsettling the word unsettled by the world circumstances?"

For me, unsettling the word and shouting at a silent God, just as Jesus shouted to his Father in Gethsemane, "*Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani!*" is not wrong. The cry of Jesus was the cry from the wound. We can shout out to a silent God out of fear, anger, and despair when we witness so many people die, lose their jobs, and be traumatized during this pandemic—as if God is absent and has forgotten us. Our screams also come out of incessant hope for protection, salvation, and healing from God. The cross with all its paradoxes proves that Jesus, the Word and the Silence, whose body was broken into pieces, shared compassion and empathy with humans when He entered the wordless space, death.

The story of God's love does not stop at the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Even though the situation is unsettled, the story of God's love remains in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit witnesses in the midst of human suffering. The Spirit remains. The vibration of the divine presence radiates gently through the Holy Spirit, a spirit that gives a new dimension to remaining in love. The Spirit in the space of love does not force a person to recover immediately from their trauma, but the Spirit presents divine love even in tears.

The cross with all its paradoxes proves that Jesus, the Word and the Silence, whose body was broken into pieces, shared compassion and empathy with humans when He entered the wordless space, death.

HyeRan: There is a paradox between the space that needs silence and the space that needs shouting, screaming, and naming the issues of pain and suffering. Sukumar, what is so powerful about your descriptions of Jesus is that they are captured in the songs and expressed in the dances of people. Can you say a bit more about this kind of embodied theological practice? What particular image of Jesus has been helping people in your community cope with the pandemic?

Sukumar Babu: My struggle was and is how to capture Christ in the crisis of COVID-19. As a student of theology and Christian history, I look at chronology in Indian context. I see Roberto de Nobili, a missionary who defined Jesus Christ as a *sannyasi*; from a modern context, from a Brahmanical context, understanding is a continuous struggle within me. I don't have answers, I continue to struggle to capture the wounded Christ in the crisis of COVID-19. Raimon Panikkar defined the Christ as *Isuhar*, of which I am reminded when I see the migrant workers.


I learned a folk song from the migrant workers, some of whom are our parish members working as agricultural laborers. They composed this song spontaneously. They don't have an education; they have a wealth of knowledge. The meaning of the song goes like this: You come forward, take care of yourself, especially remain in the home. Christ is always with you. Do not be afraid. The song energizes the masses, agricultural laborers, and common people. We see Christ in their labor, Christ as a migrant, Christ as a man who gives me a place to stay.

HyeRan: Silence is not simply the absence of noise. Silence has implications historically, sociologically, politically, culturally, even musically. Silence has a beauty: the sound of silence. Silence has different shades. I'm curious to hear how you define silence in the context of Indonesia.

Pauline: I will start with the differences. We have to explore the political, the socio, and many other layers and elements when we talk about silence and silencing. In the Indonesian context these days, we face struggles with financial issues because of the COVID pandemic. Powerful people tend to be determined to silence the poor one, the weak one, and the oppressed. They oppress the weak and marginalized and the poor. We need to make a distinction between silence and being silenced. They are quite different. We ask a preacher, a pastor, to find the full use of silence. The weak, the marginalized, the poor need a voice.

HyeRan: I'm with you, Pauline, about being silenced. Sometimes you are forced to confront your oppression; there's a reason for the phrase "breaking the silence." I'm also reminded of folks who used silence as a means of resistance when, for example, colonialists wanted to extract knowledge from the colonized. In this regard, silence can be a stand for resistance, which I find powerful as well. How to use silence itself is really pastoral, important, and also politically engaging. Another wonderful essay is from Ujin, who also shares a very multi-layered meaning of silence.

We see Christ in their labor, Christ as a migrant, Christ as a man who gives me a place to stay.



Ujin Junaedi: Pauline's statement about silence is powerful, and challenging for us caregivers, as pastors. We often push; sometimes we talk too much. We will learn to keep silent when facing the suffering, especially in this pandemic. There are two sides of silence. One can be so powerful, if we are mindful, but the other side is an awkward moment when we don't know what to say. We have to be mindful and give extra attention to others.

HyeRan: It serves as a dance between the sound and the silence.

Revelation Velunta (*GIT faculty*):

What Pauline and Sukumar have shared is very powerful; as I was listening to them, I was reminded of Mark 16, the most popular silence. In Mark 16 the disciples are silent and afraid, which is probably worse. Many of us may think we're like the disciples: We are so sure that God will be where we expect. Because they believed that the tomb would have a stone and an occupant, the disciples come and bring the spices for a dead Jesus. The stone was not there; it was moved already. They expected a dead body; there was no dead body.

Many of us want God inside the box, inside the tomb. God is not where we expect Him to be. God is in Galilee, where we don't want to be, or with people, especially the most vulnerable, we don't want to work with. People most in pain are those who most need God, but we're hesitant to go to them. That's why we are silent—and worse, we are afraid.

Worship Resource

Opening Prayer

Come, let us worship God together,

Let us arise out of our lethargy and worship God who is present among us.

Outcast God,

Born into poverty in an occupied land,

Living alongside the marginalized and the oppressed,

Dying between criminals to the jeers of the crowd,

Open our eyes, that we who seek to follow you may recognize your face in the faces of those who are reviled.

Open our ears that we seek to hear your word, may recognize your love in the stories which are often drowned out.

Open our hearts that we who seek your way of life may be bold in witnessing to your longing for justice and peace. Amen

O God who gathers, you are the one who brings us together, to challenge us to live your compassion and your justice.

We pray that as we discern together, we will be touched by your passionate love for this fragile planet, for the peoples of the world,

Whatever their culture, religion, or political system, and for all those who suffer poverty and exclusion.

We pray, as we gather, for the courage and the wisdom to work for the coming of your reign in our world.

We ask you this in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Lord's Prayer Litany

Leader:

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

All: Hallowed be your name—

Leader:

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

All: Your kingdom come—

Leader:

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

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

Leader

Your will, revealed in the Torah, in the words and deeds of Jesus and the Apostles,
in the Qur'an, the book of our Abrahamic brothers and sisters,
your world of love and justice and mercy and care,
inspiring Jews, Christians, Muslims, and people of all faiths to resist injustice,
racism, and inequality and to work for peace, healing, and a new beginning,
and for the common future of Jews and Palestinians in the Holy Land.

Help the Jewish people heed the prophets of justice in antiquity and today,
guide the West to stop supporting Israel's violation of international law and
human rights;

All: Give us this day our daily bread—

Leader:

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

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

Leader:

Break the dominance of the owners of capital and weapons, pushing whole societies into the slavery of debt.
Empower us to discover the power of forgiveness, a new beginning in all dimensions, forgiving the oppressors and establishing new lines of communication, loving even enemies, enabling their liberation from the evil of dominance and oppression;

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

Leader:

All of us are tempted by the lust for power:
men over women, parents over children, white over black, educated over non-educated, politicians over civilians, and all other forms of domination;
At this moment we are tempted to lose hope,
as the Israeli government, together with the power of empire,
violates international law by annexing, once again, land that is not theirs,
deepening the apartheid system in the Holy Land, heaping violence upon violence;
May civil society and the governments of the West awake to this lawlessness and cease their financing of the occupation through military aid and trade agreements;
Let cooperation proceed only when international law is followed and human rights restored,
strengthening the hope and resilience of the Palestinian people;
Especially we pray for Christians and the churches around the world to hear this Cry for Hope and Call for Decisive Action.
May they realize that we cannot serve God and the oppression of the Palestinians.
Grant that their silence end, that they act faithfully for the rights of the Palestinians, that they stand up against the misuse of the Bible for justifying the theft of Palestinian land.

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

Creed

We do not believe that God has created division

But we believe in God who created the universe and made all humans equal

We do not believe in a God who acts in favor of the oppressor

But we believe in Jesus, who gave up his godliness to come and live among us

We do not believe in a God who supports the wealthy

But we believe in a God who came to preach the good news to the poor, which is bad news to the rich, and who worked with the outcast and downtrodden

We do not believe in an ultimate absolute, a God who is impassable

But we believe in Jesus Christ, who suffered and was murdered by the elite forces that he opposed

We do not believe that death is the end

But we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, the first fruit among all of us to do so,

We do not believe that we are alone in our struggle for a just and inclusive world

But we believe in the Holy Spirit, our companion and comforter

We do not believe that God has chosen any particular race, caste, or gender

But we believe that God has called all to work for the transformation of the world

We believe in the life of the world to come

But we struggle for fullness of life for all in the world we live in—today

Closing Prayer

O God who gathers, you are the one who brings us together, to challenge us to live your compassion and your justice.

We pray that as we discern together, we will be touched by your passionate love for this fragile planet, for the peoples of the world,

Whatever their culture, religion, or political system, and for all those who suffer poverty and exclusion.

We pray, as we gather, for the courage and the wisdom to work for the coming of your reign in our world.

We ask you this in the name of Jesus.

Amen



Working Paper: Ordinary Time?

The “What Does God Require of Us: Discerning, Confessing and Witnessing in a Time of COVID-19 and Beyond” process has been intentionally aligned with the liturgical calendar year. Therefore, discernment aligned with Advent and Christmas, confessing aligned with Lent and Easter, and witnessing with Pentecost. In our discernment we recognized the divisiveness of the system of global apartheid that we live within. In our confession we called upon the church to be a confessing church, and in witnessing we raised a call of being a prophetic witness to a God of life in a world fallen among thieves. Within this scheme of things, the intention was to align Being Reformed

or Reforming with ordinary time and of course with Reformation Day, which falls within Ordinary Time.

The question that we have to ask, however, is: what is ordinary? Indeed, as our discernment process has shown, the times that we are living in are anything but ordinary. We have used terms like apocalyptic to describe the moment that we are in. And our discernment process has demonstrated how the apocalyptic moment has unveiled the catastrophic crisis that the people and the planet face. On the one hand we are threatened with a mammoth, irreversible climate crisis that threatens to wipe out life on this home we call earth. The recent IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] document has made this abundantly clear. On the other hand we live in a moment in which inequality has reached astronomical proportions, where some can spend billions on a few minutes in space while others have no clue where their next meal comes from. Racism and patriarchy brutalize bodies and deprive many of dignity and fundamental rights.

And yet while we use bombastic words such as catastrophe, mammoth, and astronomic to discern the signs of the times, the fact is that many of these systems of injustice do not have momentous occasions in and through which they have become hard realities for the oppressed of this planet. The systems of injustice instead worked through normalized, banal, quotidian practices that have later turned into dramatic events that have raised our consciousness to the ugliness of the reality which we face. The point is that terrible forms of oppression take place in the ordinary and in the normal. It happens through everyday practices, ordinary speech, and normalized behaviors. It is in the easy claim that it is a lack of hard work that causes poverty, that women’s biological difference assigns them to subordinate roles, that racialized communities do not feel pain in the same way that white communities do. It is in the lack of an accessible entrance, in the use of exclusive language, in the normalizing of the experience of the global north as universal that oppression is normalized. It is indeed the ordinary that we have to



pay attention to, and it is this that make justice, and indeed discernment, confession, and witnessing a everyday practice. Indeed, a rigorous practice.

By now, no one is trying to pretend that our times are what is called “normal,” even though we have always known that what is normal for the rich and privileged is not ever normal for the poor and powerless. What is normal for the haves has never been normal for the have-nots and the never-will-haves. What was normal for the entitled male chauvinist with his sacralised patriarchy has never been normal for the women who suffer gender injustice and gender-based violence. What is normal for the raving homophobe and the self-righteous transphobe has never been normal for the victims of their baptised bigotry.

And today we face what is being described as a new normal, a normal which has indeed mandated by a pandemic, perhaps even a genuine concern and love for our neighbors, but it is a normal that is being used and being taken advantage of by dominant forces and authoritarian regimes. It is indeed affecting our everyday practices and is reinscribing a new normality that is subservient to illegitimate power. It has allowed for increased surveillance by governments and infringement on privacy. It has created a hyper-vigilance of “the other” among all of us, feeding into and increasing suspicion. It has hardened international boundaries and hyped nationalism. And within the caste imagination of India it has only fed deeper into practices of untouchability. Most of all it has increased distance and impeded social interaction that is imperative to the life of the church and the ecumenical movement. The restriction of the body has also restricted the body of Christ, which is the church.

While we have earlier spoken of how the moment calls on us to ask not only how to *do* church but also on how to be church, this new normal of doing church is also influencing how we are *being* church. It raises the question of whether a virtual church can really be the prophetic church we imagine. Can we be the church without flesh and blood and bodies? Can we be the church without sharing in the holy meal together; indeed, can we be a community of humans unless we are able to share meals together?

And these are not separate things. The flesh and the blood, the holy meal, everyday normal meals are all symbols of the Eucharist. A Eucharist meal is to be found in everyday experiences of eating; every meal becomes a Eucharist. Every meal gives us special knowledge about Jesus. The hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus were warmed when they shared the meal together. In the Eucharist we remember Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, but let us also remember that this meal gives us special knowledge about each other; as we share in the bread and in the wine, we also commit to sharing in the lives of each other, that this meal unites us into one body. Eating



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together Eucharistically or otherwise means offering ourselves for transformation. The simple act of eating together, this normal act, brings people together.

But the Eucharist is not only a meal for unity, it is also a meal for justice, as Calvin aptly points out to us: “Now since he has only one body, of which he makes us all partakers, it is necessary that all of us should also be made one body by such participation.... We shall benefit very much from the sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved upon our minds: that none of the [siblings] can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any kind offended by us, without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do; that we cannot disagree with our siblings without at the same time disagreeing with Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving him in our [siblings]; that we ought to take the same care of our [siblings’] bodies as we take care of our own; for they are members of our body; and that, as no part of our body is touched by any feeling of pain which is not spread among all the rest, so we ought not to allow a [sibling] to be affected by any evil, without being touched with compassion for them.” (Institutes, 4, chapter 17, par 38.)

It is significant that the Gospel writers chose to place this sacred meal at the time of the Passover meal. (The earliest account of the meal in Corinthians doesn’t do so and many biblical scholars still debate the actual date of the meal.) By placing the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with the celebration of the Passover, the Gospel writers were invoking for early Christians a connection with God’s intervention into their ancestors’ lives, which changed the socio-political order of their day. They knew the story of how God had heard the cries of an oppressed people, intervened in history by bringing them out of economic, political, social, spiritual, and physical bondage and leading them on the journey of a free and responsible covenant people.

Is it possible that the invitation to share in the body and blood of Jesus is an invitation to participate in shattering economic, political, cultic, legal, and ethnic boundaries and participate in the future reign of God exploding transformatively into the present moment? Is it an invitation to be about the work of fair distribution of resources in a way that honors and cares for all creation? Is it an invitation to be about the work of liberation? (This is my body—the word that became flesh... the incarnate presence of God in our world... are you willing to partake of this body? This is my blood—the cup of salvation—the life giving force—but a cup that if you drink of it will lead you to faithfulness that may cost you your life as you know it.) We don’t know when we forgot the invitation. We don’t know if it was when the church became the church of the empire that we forgot our calling to show forth a different social order and new reign of God. When did we forget that Communion is not simply about my personal salvation (need a place to work out my sin guilt), but it is about participating in the liberating work of God empowered by the Holy Spirit through the body and blood of Jesus? The *forgiveness of sins* does not only denote personal sins. The term “forgiveness” is used fourteen times in Leviticus 25 (also Deuteronomy 15:1-3,9) to denote the year of Jubilee, the year of societal restructuring, freeing slaves, canceling debt, returning property. Jesus’ death anticipates a just society at His return and the establishment of God’s reign. And this is done through the normal everyday practice of eating together.

And this is not a special table we come around; it is an everyday normal table. And the significance of this is tremendous because it also makes every table a *Eucharistic* table. It is a stark reminder that we cannot come to the Lord's Table on Sunday and go to the board table on Monday and make decisions that destroy the very communities with whom we claim to be in communion. To believe in Jesus as the one who is broken for others, to recognize that every meal is Eucharistic and that the Eucharist calls us into a struggle for the cause of justice is what it means to speak of Jesus as the bread of life.

But what we need, now more than ever, is to move beyond the normal, into not just a "new normal" but into another world in which there is justice for the oppressed and abundance of life for all. And the church, the *Ekklesia*, the radical collective of believers is called to be the initiators of this new community. And baptism is the initiation into this new community. Theologically speaking therefore, it is through baptism that we enter into the household of God, a household that reaches out in love, service, welcome, and acceptance to the other. This does not mean that "the other" is either extinguished or absorbed into this household, but that in the household of God that otherness is accepted and difference celebrated. It is within this household that hospitality is shared and experienced. From a liberation perspective, therefore, baptism would demand dying to systems that deny life, systems such as racism, patriarchy, ableism, and neo-liberal capitalism, and rising again to new life in which all belong to the one household of God, a place where justice and peace kiss.

And therefore, in this Ordinary Time we call our communion into a radical embracing of the sacraments that radicalize the normal and normalize the radical; that we go through the waters of baptism into a new community that is welcoming, affirming, and celebrating of all of life; that we find a place where everyone is welcome to the table and there is enough for everyone. For isn't this what the church should be?



MALAYSIA

INDONESIA

AUSTRALIA

NEW

Discernment Questions

- 1. What is Ordinary?** The time of the pandemic has an apocalyptic quality. We see more clearly what is not right in what we regard as normal. Describe experiences from your context where you have had such revelations.
- 2. A communion of bodies:** During the pandemic, huge parts of our daily lives have turned digital. While this development has allowed us to remain in contact with each other, it also has led to new forms of surveillance, separation, and exclusion. Social media are full of hatred and calls to violence. Give examples from your context.
- 3. A meal for unity and justice:** In John Calvin's interpretation of Holy Communion, partaking in the Eucharist has consequences in daily life: "none of the [siblings] can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any kind offended by us, without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do." In many instances, the emphasis on the impact of everyday life has been restricted to narrow church discipline, which often "normalizes" oppressive structures in our societies. Give examples and consider how such restrictions could be overcome.
- 4. Moving beyond the normal:** In the context of our discernment process we understand that to embrace the sacrament means to "radicalize the normal and normalize the radical." Gather ideas for how our Communion can transform to express this radical change more clearly in our doing and in our being, specifically as we move forward into the next phase of COVID and Beyond
- 5. Looking forward:** What do you think have been the major learnings from the COVID and Beyond process? How should we take these learnings ahead to enthuse and transform the Communion particularly looking to the next General Council?

Becoming Involved

While hundreds of people participated in this process virtually, all members of the Communion are invited to join. This booklet provides highlights from the On Being Reformed Circle, including excerpts from presentations, worship material, and discernment questions. Highlight booklets from the inaugural session and each circle are also available.

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

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



World Communion
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