

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.

Discerning Circle

This booklet presents highlights from the Discerning Circle, originally held January through March 2021. Presentations are from the regions of Africa and Europe with topical foci on women and the WCRC's racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism (RAN) process.



World Communion
of Reformed Churches

Theme Plenary: Beginning the Discerning Circle

Discernment Questions

1. How does violence “travel” in terms of the body, community, and creation?
2. What forms of injustice impact you most?
3. How do you address these forms of injustice in relationship with other forms of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression?
4. How do you think that this injustice can be disrupted?

Presentation: Reintroducing the Discernment Process

The Inaugural Session began to address the whole Communion and provide a space for analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sought to name the injustices that the pandemic exposes from the perspective of one of the theological seasons of the Church year (Advent and Epiphany, Lent and Easter, Pentecost, and ordinary time).

Allan Boesak began the plenary discussing the working paper (see the Inaugural Session Highlights Booklet for the full text):

The working paper of the “What does God Require of Us?: COVID-19 and Beyond Process” is precisely what the name suggests, a working document, a starting point on the way forward to a collective discernment of the World Communion in response to the question posed in the theme. The working paper itself identifies three global “events” that were unveiled in 2020 and made so much more present to us because of the pandemic that ravaged the world. These were the global climate emergency, the foregrounding of the ugly face of racism and the rising nationalisms and authoritarianisms across the globe, and the decaying of Empire epitomized in what can be named as “Trumpism.” It further seeks to flesh out the interconnections between these particularly in a time of COVID-19.

The working paper acknowledged that our “response, therefore, is not simply to a crisis, but to the whole complex of crises upon us today. A complex system of dominant and dominating power coalescing to what we dare to name as global apartheid. An exclusionary, exploitative system of

death, a scandalous order of a world fallen among thieves.” In the words of Moltmann, it is stated that we have what can best be described as a “God-Crisis.”

The working paper is itself fundamentally rooted in the Belhar and Accra Confessions. With the Belhar confession, it upholds the indivisibility of God’s love, solidarity, justice, and inclusion. And like Accra, it calls us to see the world “through the eyes of the powerless and suffering.” Moreover, it calls us into the radical reformed tradition and the radical Calvin suggesting that we do not shy away from this deep and fundamental engagement and fall captive to compromise and pacification.

The working paper raises the questions of the tensions between the particular and the universal, the indivisibility of God and the diversity of human experience. It allows for the expression of personal experience but at the same time seeks a unifying discernment and to engage with both the liturgical calendar and the Biblical narrative. The paper emphasizes economic, gender, and racial injustice. Still, it should have a more in-depth analysis of those structures that perpetuate injustice against people with disability and the intersectionality between them. It should perhaps engage more robustly with questions of violence, militarization, hospitality.

Sharing Session: Women

Jocobed Solano, from the Gunadule people, one of the seven Indigenous peoples that live in Panama and Colombia, opened the sharing session: The impact COVID-19 has had on our Gunadule territories is that of a health crisis, though, deeper than that, it is a profound spiritual crisis.

When Mother Earth suffers violence, so do we. Due to all this, which has increased with COVID-19, the vulnerability that these death systems have created has undermined our territory and our bodies. When we think of the reality of women in the Abya Yala, we see inequalities and the lack of equal opportunities Indigenous women are given. We must be able to relate to this system. We believe it is crucial that we rethink ourselves as church, as communities of Christian faith; how are we participating in the death that is being created by the pandemic and by COVID-19? As Gunadule people, as Indigenous people, we recognize we have a “cosmo-experience,” a “cosmo-existence” which involves a deep relationship with Mother Earth, whom we call “*nabwagana*” because we emerge from her, we are fed by her, and when we die, we are cultivated by her. COVID-19 has attacked the body of our elders, who are the living memory that is transmitted from generation to generation because God has breathed God’s spirit into the Indigenous people.

The Gunadule people hold a celebration we call “*Waar Ued*,” the pipe of peace. This ceremony shows us the importance of life in harmony. When the house is in danger, it invites the whole community, together with the cosmic community – that means all other living creatures – to recognize the importance of living in harmony,

in silence and lament, and it is through lament that we can resist.

A song is prayed to God so that we do not die, a song raised to Nana and Baba, the Grand Mother and the Grand Father. What do the Indigenous people learn in times like this? The recognition of life in fullness, where we are all affected. Interconnectivity shows us that when one part suffers, we all suffer; but it also teaches us to recognize the importance of resistance through a collective lament.

The people lament, in a public act where one will sing the life of the dead person for three days. This spiritual celebration is an act of remembrance that tells us we are all part of everything. In this sense, lament is also a form of hope. We extend an invitation to all, that we may embrace justice so that those death systems – which attack the Indigenous territories – can also be denounced due to their injustice, and that the Christian faith communities can struggle together with the Indigenous communities, to resist, to learn from their spiritualities; and also to walk with them and commit so that these things never again happen; to work together with indigenous communities and recognize the importance of their spiritualities, the importance of our connection with earth, the importance of not remaining silent and the need to recognize that we all depend on all. That during this time of pain for so many, we can lament together, but that in that lament we may also find hope.

Paulette Brown brought greetings from the Presbyterian Church in Toronto, Canada, admitting that she could not claim to speak from the broader CANAAC community without erasing the reality of other people. She said:

Interconnectivity shows us that when one part suffers, we all suffer; but it also teaches us to recognize the importance of resistance through a collective lament.

There can be no more salvation unless we begin to pay attention to the status of women and to the intersectionality of the distinct oppression that they have to bear in their bodies.

My reflection is basically based on two statements from the concept paper, and one is that “salvation cannot be found in the center of power but rather in the margins,” and the second one is that we need to retell the Accra Confession for it to be able to help us to face the issues that are on our plate at such a time like this. For me to say that 2020 has been such a defining moment in the life of the church is quite an understatement. The reckless way in which COVID-19 inflicted a holocaust among the older people in the retirement homes sent a shock waves across the province. What we meant to pay attention to was that many of these homes were owned by wealthy business people who invested in health care for profit. The massacre of health care workers as COVID-19 marched to the health care facilities created a thick environment of fear and pain within the community. Then there was the public murder of George Floyd. The spontaneous rage, and this spontaneous call across the globe for change: it galvanized attention in Canada to a long-resisted truth, always resisted in the Canadian context, that police brutality on black bodies was real.

So, what does salvation look like in this context? For example, we imagine the object of police brutality is black male bodies, while completely erasing police brutality on the bodies of black women and girls. What does salvation look like within the context of the healing and reconciliation project, the mission project that our churches or region here were so involved in? When the ongoing settler colonization continues to recur on the life of our Indigenous siblings, resulting in neglect and horrific abuses; considering that missing and murdered Indigenous women and children have almost

become a way of life in our country? And what does salvation mean when we look at the multiplicity of violence against differently sexed people of the LGBTQIA+ community, against communities of people with different disabilities and abilities? And as these people hammer their ways through seeking liberation, what does salvation look like? For me, if salvation is about changes, living in the abundance grace and love of God, if it's about sharing, participating, with equity, in the resources that God has given us, then there can be no more salvation, whether you think about it in the places of power or in the margins; there can be no more salvation unless we begin to pay attention to the status of women and to the intersectionality of the distinct oppression that they have to bear in their bodies. Having said that, I want to go back to 2020, a moment for the church. [In 2020, in the United States] a police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, and George Floyd cried out for Mama. His mama was dead – and this is my take – what if George Floyd was not crying out for his dead mother, instead crying out for God, Mama God?

Christina Landman offered these questions from the Christian women of South Africa: (1) Were they able to establish a multi-dimensional contra-culture in your church, that is, a culture contrary to patriarchy and gender bias, both in your theology and practice? (2) Have they assisted men and women to explore the dialogical spaces between the gendered binaries of male and female? (3) Have they effected healing in a gendered society and were they able to establish partnership between genders? (4) Have they created space to listen to the stories of women who are suffering

because of a lack of commitment to their embodied sufferings?

After answering these questions in their context, Christina offered perspectives of women in South Africa. Some women lost their jobs due to COVID-19, and some were exploited by companies who remained open. They were forced to work double shifts for half their salaries or go.

Christina shared a story about a single parent to a teenage son and an early-twenties daughter with a baby; she described the struggles of working during the pandemic. Sheila had to leave her home at 3:30 in the morning and had to walk through bushes and the central business district of the city to get to work. There was a detour by footpath through the bushes she had to take, or it would have been another hour on the journey. During this time, men would wait for her, and she had to give them sex before they let her pass. She then bought herself a small car, but with the small salary, the payments have become very difficult. Also, she took out a loan for her daughter's studies, but the daughter did not finish when she became pregnant. Yet, the bank of course still deducts the loan payment. "That is why," Sheila says, "it is the first of the month, and there is already no food in the house. My son beats me when he is hungry. And I have nobody to talk to, because I was always a respectable member of this community, but now I have to beg for food."

1. Because of COVID-19, women became very vulnerable vis-à-vis their sexual health.
2. Women also testify to the fact that their sexual health in general has remained unattended to by hospi-

tals and clinics because of the emphasis on COVID-19 patients

3. It's also important to note the isolation suffered by women during lockdown.
4. A survey was done recently on how women of faith express themselves on the use of vaccines.

The Christian women of Southern Africa invited the WCRC community to join them in formulating an African women's theology to assist them during the COVID-19 pandemic. "We want to share with you at least three points on which such a theology should be based: (1) Acknowledge women's leadership in dealing with the pandemic in the dialogical spaces between science, religious belief, and cultural taboos. (2) Acknowledging women's Indigenous knowledge and preferred ways of expressing their beliefs as basis for a wise and life-giving theology. (3) Acknowledging the needs of women as they have expressed them in their stories of loneliness, hunger, and sexual vulnerability, as the basis for an ecclesiastical practice ministering to women in a time of COVID-19.



MALAYSIA

INDONESIA

AUSTRALIA

NEW

Sharing Session: Africa

COVID-19 has had the effect of a health war or a natural disaster, worsening the socio-economic situation especially of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons.

isaac Kalonji (*Presbyterian Community of Kinshasa*): Ambassador Minata Samate said it is right to say that “The COVID-19 pandemic is ruining the economy, putting pressure on health systems, but above all worsening the already gloomy humanitarian situation on the African continent.” Indeed, Central Africa was already suffering from a serious and even chronic economic anemia, and the populations live in indescribable poverty as a result of mismanagement and endless conflict. COVID-19 has had the effect of a health war or a natural disaster, worsening the socio-economic situation especially of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons.

These people have lost everything: their property, their land, their property and sometimes even their families, and thus they have no social security. They depend on local and, above all, international protection and solidarity. The restrictive measures taken by politico-administrative and health leaders to prevent the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of borders, the isolation of capitals and large cities, and confinement, have had fatal consequences on the above-mentioned groups of people. These people need to eat, drink clean water, sleep in humanly acceptable conditions, have access to basic primary health care, and get children to school.

If life has become unbearable for those who live at home, imagine what the situation must be like for those who are forced to live outside their usual surroundings. They have become more vulnerable and more isolated than before. Due to repeated cycles of conflicts, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) stands out in terms of

the number of internally displaced persons; it ranks first among African countries. The conditions apply for the refugees who come from Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan. The UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) spokesperson considers that as the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts intensify in the DRC, internally displaced people face the deadly consequences of chronic underfunding; he also warns that challenges of massive funding threaten hundreds of thousands of lives in the DRC, where rising violence and COVID-19 exacerbate the already dire conditions of millions of forcibly displaced people. The economic impact of COVID-19 on the current situation of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons is enormous.

Chief Magistrate Mrs. Enyidiya Uma-Onwunta: In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, several casualties were recorded in different parts of the globe. This is not only in terms of the people that died as a result of the pandemic, but also casualties of other adverse consequences. Among the worst casualties in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, were women and girls. I shall discuss this topic under the following three headings, namely, domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, and economic exploitation.

1. Domestic Violence: When the lockdown was enforced and people were forced to stay at home, many men got themselves busy by battering their wives. Hence, there was an increase of domestic violence. Some of the men who were already used to such habits, coupled with the idleness orchestrated by the pandemic, had ample

opportunity to vent their frustrations on the female folk.

2. Rape and sexual assaults: There has also been an increase in rape cases. It really got to a level of disgust as some men descended to the point of indecently assaulting girls under ten years of age. As a judge in the Magistrate cadre handling both juvenile and general criminal cases, I can say with authority that reported cases of rape and other sexual offences have escalated well above 200 percent since the pandemic.
3. Economic exploitation: Many unemployed women and those whose businesses were cut short by the pandemic, had to resort to prostitution as a means of survival for lack of other viable means of livelihood. Economic exploitation of women and girls has heightened within this period. Women and young girls are paid menially for jobs like carrying blocks and stones at building sites. It is no longer news that many undergraduate students returned to campuses after the lockdown with unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. This, of course, does not include those girls who had delivered their babies during the lockdown and many abortions by the girls who did not have the courage to keep the pregnancies. In the midst of all these, where does the church come in? In the heat of the pandemic, churches set up food banks from where palliatives were given to members and non-members. This, though laudable, was a temporary measure.

Regarding racism, inequalities, and trans-nationalism: There are massive

disruptions to the world order, and African communities are struggling to cope. The shutdown of nonessential global economic activities resulted in massive job losses and unemployment; there is increased poverty, crime, violence against women and children, and marginalization of poor communities. There have also been extreme weather conditions due to climate change – floods driving some people out of their communities. The closed borders have stranded the displaced, migrants, and refugees or cross-border people, including women and children. As a result of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, there is limited social support or access to services. Churches have struggled to respond with limited religious activities, some even failing to take care of ministers.

Discernment Questions

1. What has not been mentioned?
2. What can we add?
3. How can churches promote the dignity of internally displaced people, stateless persons, and refugees?
4. How can churches hold governments accountable to provide essential services to all people?
5. How can churches provide a space where those who are without voice can make themselves heard?

Sharing Session: Europe

Claudio Pasquet (*Waldensian Evangelical Church*): Italy was one of the first to be affected by the pandemic.

From February of last year, the infections have caused more than 90,000 deaths and have damaged the economy and society of the country in ways that are difficult to record and will continue to affect us in the years to come. The closure of schools in February 2020 has had a noticeable effect on children and education, above all in the most needing society. Not every child has been able to follow the online lessons because sometimes there is only one computer and another family member needs it. It is like parents working from home. We add the economic crisis favoring the rise in the poor of nationalistic and anti-European parties. We are extremely worried about the long-term consequences to the democracy of our country.

But in the long term, a church without personal contact risks sustaining damage to the makeup of its congregation, both in human and in community terms. For the first time since the Second World War, we have had no regional and national synod. The economic consequences we are seeing the start of are very serious. However, we do not want this to distract us from our commitment to support the least fortunate. We cannot forget the many homeless people who are growing in numbers in our city, and those who have lost or are at risk of losing work. Besides this, we are continuing our commitment to the migrants arriving from the North African coast.

At the moment, the main debate in our country is about the vaccine. The politician sees merely in national or mostly European terms. The only voices raised in my country in favor of the

vaccine being distributed free throughout the world come from the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches.

Judit Vincze (*Reformed Church in Romania*): In December 2019, we in Eastern Europe were watching the news coming from very distant places about a growing disease. It happened far from us, we thought, at a “safe distance” – it would not affect us. In March 2020, the new disease was devastating in Italy, and it was flooding Europe, from south to north, from east to west. It reached us, too. We experienced a hard global crisis that we have not seen in generations. We need to decide between overcoming a global crisis or surrendering to it. Europe is having many challenges, including identity quests, and has been learning to act in unity amid diversity.

Romania is one of the poorest countries of the European Union, and medical care is one of its weakest points. Chances to fight the virus were very slight in Romania; however, after some weeks of shock and fear, we returned to the roots of European civilization, to the Word of God. We have discovered contemporary ways to spread God’s Word – that is the highest human reality on earth: it stays with two feet on the ground, it feels, sees, and hears, and helps our community with both hands. We redesigned modern channels of communication and transformed them to serve God and God’s people. Sermons were preached online. Social media became a blessed tool for outreach. Besides free will, creativity is also a gift from God. We have encouraged each other, and digital sermons also came to life, like pulpit preaching. For over a year, we

have been experiencing God's love and mercy in a huge global crisis.

Financially, East Europe, especially Romania, was hit very hard. This is the heritage of communist dictatorships. The most important income source for the Romanian people, seasonal work in Western Europe, was terminated because of lockdowns. Millions of people had to return to Romania without a chance to support their families.

The global crisis has different local faces in Romania. Poverty is one of them, personal and social depression is another. We, as Reformed Christians, adapted to the new situation somehow. The Internet and telephone lines became God's tools. God's Word became bread, water, and comfort. We were able to feed the hungry children and elderly people; lonely people received spiritual comfort from our pastors and volunteers. Some people had money to share with our community, but the majority of us donated energy and time, love and care. Solidarity is stronger than before the crisis.

Martina Wasserloos (*President of WCRC Europe*): The COVID-19 pandemic not only reveals the weak points of individual societies, but it also fundamentally questions the structures of our coexistence on this earth. As if under a magnifying glass, the crisis intensifies existing injustices. If a whole part of our Communion is excluded from the vaccinations, we are called to raise our voice, to think, and to act. This is what the pandemic reveals. But we are facing other issues as well: What answers does the Church have when people ask for communion in worship, but are not allowed to meet? For many churches in Europe, the question arises whether and how they are "systemically rele-

vant"? The COVID-19 crisis is also a crisis of the Church.

We also see with great concern that in some European countries the nationalist, authoritarian, and xenophobic movements have grown strong; we observe increasing anti-Semitism and violence – also by groups that the philosopher Hannah Arendt called "mobs." Against this background, democratic structures are often fundamentally questioned and declared to be weak, and every political measure that is intended to protect against infection and thereby means – and must mean – a restriction of fundamental rights, is seen as further evidence. We share with many people in the world that many people in Europe are facing economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, and that economic security is no longer a given for many. Here, too, those most affected are those who were previously precariously employed, often women in the low-wage sector, for example, in the catering industry or small business owners.

In some countries, leaders are using the COVID-19 pandemic and the conditions of limited contact to violently create political facts. In the last few months, we saw hospitals in some countries not able or not willing to help people, because medical personnel are infected themselves or patients do not have enough money to bribe them. In these times, it is important to stand together as a community.

Dimitris Boukis (*Greek Evangelical Church*): "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.

We, as Reformed Christians, adapted to the new situation somehow. The Internet and telephone lines became God's tools. God's Word became bread, water, and comfort.



Following Christ means taking certain steps for the truth and justice of the incarnate Son of God, even if those steps lead you into the Nazi prison at Tegel in order to be executed by means of hanging on April 9, 1945, as was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, merely two weeks before the end of World War II. The COVID-19 pandemic stormed our planet in unforeseen ways and changed profoundly our well-established expectations of eternal political and economic progress. Dr. Yuval Noah Harari gives a very provoking description of this new, almost self-improved homo sapiens as being at the verge of “becoming a god – a homo deus,” ready not only to achieve eternal youth, but also acquiring the divine abilities of creation and catastrophe. Today, what does it look like to walk humbly with God?

What steps do we take and where do these steps lead those of Christ’s Church who love kindness and do justice according to the Gospel of Jesus

Christ? In the midst of the storm we are living, engulfed in a state of empty, dull, often estranged curfew days, Ms. Amanda Gorman, the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, brings her fresh language and speaks to us regarding “The Hill We Climb”: “...Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true: That even as we grieved, we grew. That even as we hurt, we hoped. That even as we tired, we tried. That we’ll forever be tied together, victorious.”

In the old days Micah, the prophet, called for a partnership with God and is described as walking with God. It is not a “walk of comfort,” of easy money-giving, publishing of political statements, and solidarity prayers.

The post-COVID-19 era brings the challenge for the Church to genuinely walk alongside God. Living out afresh the ethos of Christ Jesus who claims, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Dr. Nicholas Christakis, a Yale professor and social epidemiologist, whose expertise is in how our behaviors influence contagion in society, says, “We’re the first generation of humans alive who has ever faced this threat that allows them to respond in real-time with efficacious medicines.... During epidemics you get increases in religiosity, people become more abstemious, they save money, they get risk averse and we’re seeing all of that now just as we have for hundreds of years during epidemics.”

We are asked to lead by paradigm, by sacrificing our comfort and empathizing with the wounded and misplaced, not only with those we relate to, but humanity as a whole.

Jenny Dobers (*Uniting Church in Sweden*): The COVID-19 crisis has been hard not only on the world and on the societies that we as churches

live in. Since churches are part of humanity, societies, and the world, the pandemic has also struck us hard. Some of our very foundations – such as communion/*koinonia* – have been challenged by the distance we have been forced to keep. But will the experiences we have had in 2020 and 2021 only leave ugly scars on the body of Christ – or are there also lessons learned that have made us humbler and experiences that will make us stronger?

We are called to use our voice. When studying different crises, you can see that most of them have one thing in common: different crises disclose both obvious and more hidden truths about a society. What is revealed is often ugly truths of injustices at the very root of how our societies are organized. A crisis is like a mirror that shows us the true self of our societies. Also, COVID-19 has shown us that where inequality is high and resources scarce, the crisis strikes harder. We see this in every local society in Europe and even more if we look at the effects of the pandemic globally. COVID-19 has once again reminded us as churches in wealthy countries of the importance of speaking up for compassion and justice. There is a constant – but now even more obvious – need for churches to raise our voices against global injustices. We need always to put pressure on and challenge our own governments to go further, to take responsibility also for people in other ends of the world.

1. Act to stop climate change: Can the extensive actions that have been taken to fight the virus be used as an example that it is possible to act drastically when needed?

Could this be an example for the leaders of the world to realize that it is possible to act resolutely to slow down climate changes?

2. Adapt, don't disappear: Being a church in diaspora, not being able to meet physically, does not mean that the church disappears. In the hope of soon meeting again, many of us have learned a lot about how to meet digitally.
3. Build on the importance of small groups.
4. Diakonia is crucial: Among the most painful experiences for local churches has been not being able to care for people in the ways we are used to. How could we find and reach out to lonely people when we have to stay at home? How can we help the homeless when we may not open our shelters? How can we support one another in our struggles with mental illness when we cannot see and touch?
5. Support young people: Show young people respect for the sacrifices they have made to stop the spread of the infection. One way to show them respect is to now take the challenges of climate change seriously so that we leave them with a world possible to live in.
6. Be filled with wonder: The communion, *koinonia*, of the church is essential, yes, life changing. The pandemic challenges and reminds us to explore it deeper, invite it more often, live by it, be thankful for it.

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Sharing Session: Racism, Authoritarianism, Nationalism

Peniel Rajkumar (*Moderator*): We live in a world where there is a growing and often violent upsurge of racist ideologies. If I have to put it differently, nationalism today is no longer solely about the geopolitical landscape. It is also about the landscape of the mind, so to speak, which has brought us to being drawn and redrawn with hostility and fear to shoot the Western political agenda. In such a context, politicians see the fear of the others as being almost a magical silver bullet that can enhance the political fortunes of right-wing forces that are fueled by racist and quasi-fascist ideologies that have asserted themselves in political life in many parts of our world. For example, in India, nationalist ideology undergirded by militant religiosity has found center stage, and what has this meant? This particular backlash has taken the form of state-perpetrated as well as mob-initiated violence, including lynching of members of ethnic and religious minorities. Along with this and obviously related, there are authoritarian forms of government emerging around the world.

So, what we will try to do in this sharing circle, is to lift up the wisdom of this community around the world while at the same time fleshing out the connection between racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism (RAN). As the late James Baldwin once said: "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced." Yes, nothing can be changed until it's faced. And this sharing circle is an attempt to face the things that we need to overcome: racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism.

Those preceded and, in all probability, will outlive the coronavirus. And to help us to go through this with

our panelists, we will have rounds of questions, and then we will try and see how we can navigate this together. As you engage with the issues of RAN, what is the most important issue of your own agenda of justice?

Thandi Soko-de Jong: As I was introduced, I am a Malawian and Dutch person, so that means I am living in the context of the Netherlands; therefore, my response will be a response as an African in diaspora. So, for me, an important issue is that in the environment where I live, no one admits to being racist or to doing racist things, and yet people express that they experience racism. So, I think for me, one of the key issues is to continue to educate people what racism is both in the systemic level and individual level; it's history, but also in the formal education system that we have to bring the discussion to the table the discussion: the representation of the contents is not as it should be.

What I mean by that is that often-times you will find that the contents of our education system limit the contribution of minority groups; at the same time you find that as you go higher up the ladder of education you find less and less diversity. So, for me, that is one of the critical issues, education generally, but also to integrate the contents in the education system.

Shanea Leonard: We have a lot of issues of systemic racism in various forms within our country that have lingered for a long time in the United States. So, this is not a new problem; however, what is prevalent right now in the forefront of the issues of RAN is the rise in the overt racism that happened and viewed by our last administration, and as you all have seen, even

resulted an attack on our country's capitol building just last month. And it seems that the racist ideologies of half of our country have become more and more prevalent to the point at which it makes many areas very unsafe. The rise of this need to be outwardly racist has resulted in a lot of division.

What is also troubling is how that rise in overt racism and white nationalism is connected to the church and a very conservative wing of Christianity. We ask what that says about the nature of church and how we connect to the sins and the evils of racism. And finally, an issue that is very prevalent also connected to systemic racism is the issue of police brutality. If you don't know, the history of policing in this country comes from the time of slave catcher, folks who hunted slaves. And so, racism has continued, and some of the practices and policies that have contributed to the death of black folks and people of color in this country are at the hands of law enforcement.

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam: My mind slips between despair and hope: despair because for the last couple of weeks we've seen a 21-year-old young girl arrested and charged with sedition for editing two sentences in a document called "toolkit" that was initiated by Greta Thunberg, the environmental activist. Also, I am aware of the wave of human rights denied, and how human rights activists are being witch-hunted and put behind bars. We are aware of the 83-year-old father who works for the rights of the indigenous people, behind bars now for his activism. We are aware of the 18-year-old boy who has been in jail for the last two-and-a-half years, and finally got his right to speak. As well Miss

Disha [Ravi, a 22-year-old climate activist] got her bail.

The context for all of this is a stripping of democracy, whether by judiciary or executive. All are somehow humbling themselves before the authoritarian regime, becoming propaganda missionaries for the rise of religious nationalism in the states. So that is one of the major concerns found in this country. In the process, there is



increased tension between our plurality of religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds and a unity narrative, which supposes a unity that does not exist. Anyone who in any way actually articulates a human rights discourse is being labeled as anti-national, as someone who is bringing division in the country. I think that is something that we are facing in our own times.

Simony dos Anjos: In Brazil we have a president whose rule is tone deaf; we have a government that has not envisioned their profession and did not rush in the purchase of the vaccine

after it had been developed. Since 2016 after a coup against President Rousseff, the number of people in misery in Brazil has increased. We have a government that is not invested in social public politics. So, related to COVID-19, the absence of public service to people has caused domestic and informal workers to be the most affected. In this context, racism is clearly present in our time of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the lack of support for the most vulnerable from Jair Bolsonaro's government, is accelerating the growth of poverty in Brazil. Extreme hunger is emerging all over the country, as reported today by the NGO, Oxfam. The current president does not care to carry out any intended process for enslaved people who were released.

This causes a huge difference between Black people and other people in Brazil. Black people since then have always been oppressed in Brazil and the pandemic is only evidence that makes it clear. So, here the first death from COVID-19 was a poor, Black woman. She was 63 and a hard worker. She took three different transportations to get to work; always the same thing, two buses and a tram. She left her home on Sunday and only returned on Thursday. So here in Brazil, the Black people are dying a lot. The majority of victims of COVID-19 are Black people. Black people are also more likely to be infected and are at the greater risk of racism, social inequities, and poor access to health care system and housing; and the inability to isolate makes them the most vulnerable population, most affected by the pandemic. So here in Brazil, we have a government who rules to death, authoritarian and fundamentalist. We have churches, priests, and Christian people who understand what is happening to Black people, but are not working to bring back the community to life.

Peniel: Thank you to the panelists who have brought the conversation to the broader canvas, where we see that racism, authoritarianism, and nationalism intersect with many other injustices, reinforcing the image of a world in which people are not equal.

Thandi, you start with the question of education, and how education is important. I want you to help us theologically to frame these issues: As you say education is a tool, can churches be more aware and empowered to tackle the issues of RAN?

Thandi: Thank you for the question; I hope you don't mind if I go back behind the question. When I look at



it, I think of how we normally just produce knowledge, including theological knowledge, but there are a lot of assumptions that we have. So, for me as an African, I became part of a culture in which we assume that a theological concept means the same thing to everybody. But when you do not interrogate the concept, you don't know that other people understand them differently.

I will give you an example: the concept of *imago Dei*, it's a concept that everyone understands as the image of God. But if you critically look at how knowledge within a context is produced, you understand that for some people, when they think about the image of God, they think of one particular kind of human being and not all others. So, I think the task for church and theologians is to always know and be critical about what is meant. When you find that there are problems in what different groups of people mean in using such a concept like this, then you can interrogate those.

Just to give you a summary about what happened to me, I was having a conversation with a fellow academic, a theologian and very well experienced. We reached a point where we talked about race and racism; my colleague did not agree about what I was saying. Because he did not agree, the realization emerged from this conversation that he did not think that I had what it takes to speak about the issues. When I went further into it, I realized that he could not understand what I was saying because I did not fit into what his image of God is: I was a woman, I was Black, and so on. So one of the important tasks is to interrogate how we produce our knowledge, to talk about certain things that



we think are universal, unpack those, and try to solve the gap.

Peniel: Thank you very much, Thandi. I am now going to turn to you, Shanea, thinking about Thandi's reflections on how responses to injustice can be informed by various sources. I want to draw the focus to the Black Lives Matter movement, and I want you to help us to understand whether there is anything from other Black liberation movements that has helped the process.

Shanea: Absolutely. The Black Lives Matter movement started from the grassroots community. It started around 2014 with the murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, and the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, both at the hands of some racist practices that killed them. And so, this movement started not as a system where one person is in charge, but based on an understanding that your life as a Black person matters, and it has substance, and it has purpose, and it is something to be treasured, to be honored, and to be



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celebrated. That understanding comes directly from the movement that happened in the 1970s around the Black empowerment movement and the Black liberation movement and traces of that still exist in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Furthermore, this understanding of the need to critique our justice system and our government systems comes out of the Civil Rights movement; there is still very much a threat and a strain in Black Lives Matter movement. The recent context makes clear the need for a more aggressive approach, looking at what changes we produce and how changes are made. It's not necessarily a monolithic movement. It is concentrated from a variety of sources, not held firmly in one specific community, and that's intentional. It's housed in the understanding that your life as a Black person either of faith or not, as a Black queer person or not, as a Black person with financial substance or not, whatever your particular position in life, your life still has meaning, substance, and value and must be affirmed in all of our systems in our country.

Peniel: Thank you very much. From the question of race we will move to the concept of caste. Joseph, can you help us to understand the concept of caste in relation to nationalism? And

how caste and inequality become reinforced and strengthened under a nationalist regime?

Joseph: As we know, caste is one of the oldest surviving and thriving social structures in India; itlegates one in four of its population to be excluded from the mainstream life of the country. One of the unfortunate features of this caste system is a greater hierarchy: some are considered untouchable whilst some are considered to be twice-born.

In this context, we need to understand India and the rise of Indian nationalism. I see three roots for Indian nationalism. One is the religious roots, one part of which is the idea that India only existed after the coming of the British. This is a counter identity to the presence of the empire, and also to the presence of the Muslim community. So, one root lies in religious identity.

Second are the influences of Orientalism on the dominant caste community in India. There are those who define themselves as liberals, yet give leadership to the nationalist movement in this country. The Orientalist white and the Brahminic forces in this country found something in common in their identity as belonging to the Indo-Aryan community that came from Europe. I think RAN needs to

look at Indian nationalism as having these two traits.

And the third root is perhaps a consequence of the presence of the empire, in the sense that empire has its own taxation system. India found itself in a new context with which to realign itself, while the caste identity was local and played down within village politics. Given the presence of the empire, the caste configuration became national in their oligarchy and political imagination.

So, India's nationalism certainly would not have worked and found their logic as we see it today without the caste as one of its foundational characteristics. In its origin and development, caste plays its own role; today as nationalism finds its own expressions, it often uses caste identity to play itself out. On the one hand, the dominant movement excludes the Sudra and Dalit communities as part of the mainstream body politic; at the same time, they use the Sudra and Dalit communities as their soldiers to fulfill the agenda of religious nationalism. That is the context for where we are, where religious nationalism uses caste to propagate itself and to reach its own ends.

Peniel: I am going to the question of economics. Simony, you have given us a snapshot of how the pandemic has particularly affected poor people and Black people. Can you help us to see how churches can respond to the economic implications of RAN in your own context?

Simony: Here in Brazil, I think the churches have to investigate the education of people. Here the state is riding among the religious community; the church first needs to think about its own position in the society: the church

should not do law or apply politics to our own. The church needs to help us to reach an equal society, to help us respect other religions. Here in Brazil, those things do not happen. The progressive Christian people here are try-



ing to stabilize this. Before calling out the state, we have to call out the church, because there are many churches that do not want to see the poor, but want to take money from the people; they want to use politics in the wrong way. We have the president who is using the Bible, using the name of God, to justify a genocide of Black people here, to justify the lack of

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human rights here. We have to construct a church where the majority of actions are based on human rights. Here in Brazil, you have to discuss human rights among the Christian people.

Peniel: Panelists, what resonances are there between your own experiences and your co-panelists? What is it that makes you feel connected to experiences from other panelists?

Shanea: Listening to both Simony and Thandi, it is very striking how similar are our experiences as Black people in the diaspora around the world. Systemic racism against Black bodies seems to be so prevalent no matter where we are; it's engraved into government and education and all systems of law enforcement. It is consistently and perpetually up to us as marginalized people to stand in resistance to the opposition, to the way in which we are oppressed by a dominance culture.

Joseph: Though we have diverse experiences, diverse memories of oppression, I think what brings us together is our experience of suffering, which can form a ground for us to come together in solidarity. And I think all the issues, although they have their own local presences in some ways, are connected to the whole idea of empire, and therefore the struggling, and the path will involve the coming together of all this context. And also, as we are working in our own context, we are sharing our solidarity and work together.

Simony: I want to answer the question I saw in the chat box about racism, about what white people can do about racism. It is very important to us to discuss it, because white people

are involved in structural racism.

When I have a problem in my life, but white people have benefited from it, the privilege is about your race. The white people need to think about the differences in race: Black, European, Asian, and African are different. Different is good, just like Jesus embracing differences and choosing to be with the poor. White people should choose also to be with Black people, Europeans choose African, American, and Brazilian, etc. The problem is not only the different skin color, but the gap between people from the high and the low society. We have Black people discussing racism; we need white people to discuss racism, too. We need to have people from high society discuss what they can do to stop racism. They need to recognize their privilege and choose the poor.

Thandi: I also found similarities with Shanea and Simony; of course they have their own uniqueness, but there are a lot of overlaps. And also, as Joseph shared, one of the solutions is solidarity. I think each one of us comes from a tradition where there has been resistance in the face of the oppressor, and so solidarity helps, I think, to empower.

Peniel: Let's turn to a question from the chat box: How does the panel think white church spaces especially can change and become antiracist places?

Shanea: I think the first step is like our Alcoholics Anonymous program: to admit that there is a problem, and I think that is necessary. I think it is also calling the question of the church and the white church having a hand in history in the oppression of black and

brown bodies; that it is systemic and connected to the history of the growth of Christianity around the world and especially in the white churches. Admitting that it is true is key to the liberation of oppressed people. I would like to see white churches having an internal dialogue on how they are complicit and complacent in white supremacy culture, and how you can educate yourself from various sources and not put the work on black people to educate you about racism. It is important to have those difficult conversations, and having those difficult conversations around your dinner table, in private meetings, and country clubs. Have conversations about how you can be effective tools in liberation, because understand: that is the work of true Christianity. Liberate folks so that we all might have life and live abundantly, not just a select few who look like a certain demographic.

Peniel: Another question from the chat box: Where should we put our attention in addressing RAN? We can also combine this with the question: How can church be a church in time like this?

Joseph: I can answer this from the Indian context. We know that it is with the backdrop of nationalism that Indian theology arose and evolved over time. What we have now as theologians is to work with this nationalist sensibility. The challenge before the church is to evolve with a theology that problematizes the way we as church experience nationalism in our own country today. I think we need to denationalize ourselves when nationalism becomes demonic.

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Discernment Questions

1. Can we as churches claim that we are “systemically relevant” for our societies – that we are as important as hospitals and pharmacies?
2. Dimtris Boukis refers to Micah’s words: “to walk humbly with your God” and says: “It is not a ‘walk of comfort’; of easy money-giving, publishing of political statements, and solidarity prayers.... The post COVID-19 era brings the challenge for the Church to genuinely walk alongside with God.” How and to where do you think we as Christians will need to walk in the post-COVID era?
3. Do you see any possible learnings we as a church can do in the times of the pandemic?

Thandi: Could each panelist talk about how the Christian faith has contributed to the oppression and liberation of people? For me, one of the important things to look at on a global scale is how the Christian faith has responded to people in general. I think it is always important to remind ourselves that racism as a concept was created about four or five hundred years ago, but Christianity existed in Africa and other parts of the world long before the slavery existed. We know that St. Thomas was in India. I think it is important to look at the now but also the heritage outside of the European empire before five hundred years ago to address this race question.

If we look at it in the now, and we look at the global scale, and we look at the place like South Africa, there were people like Boesak from the Christian faith who were able to resist apartheid. Yet maybe one of the most damaging things especially in the context I come from, Malawi, mission is intertwined with slavery, mission is intertwined with colonization and so on. It’s become very difficult to differentiate the Christian faith from this oppression. Looking beyond, I think it will

be helpful. It doesn’t answer everything but it brings us to a conversation to understand that Christianity is not European; there is a way of African Christians and Asian Christians from a long time ago.

Worship Resources

Leader:

Outcast God,
born into poverty in an occupied land,
Living alongside the marginalized and the oppressed,
Dying between criminals and 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 who 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.

All:

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 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 wisdom
to work for the coming of your reign in our world.
We ask you this in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

Litany

We often hear it said that

“The poor will always be with us.”

Give us the courage then to say, “Your kingdom come.”

We often hear it said that

“It’s what they’re used to... they’re not like us.”

Give us the courage then to say, “Your kingdom come.”

We often hear it said that

“I don’t want to think about it – it makes me so depressed.”

Give us the courage then to say, “Your kingdom come.”

We often hear it said that

“What did she expect – dressed like that.”

Give us the courage then to say, “Your kingdom come.”

Amen.



A poem by a 12-year-old girl

My mother's name is worry

My mother's name is worry

In summer, my mother worries about water,
In winter, she worries about coal briquettes
And all year long, she worries about rice.

In day time, my mother worries about living,
At night, she worries for children,
And all day long she worries and worries.

Then, my mother's name is worry,
My father's name is drunken frenzy
And mine is tear and sigh.

Let us pray to the Lord.
We have heard the cries of injustice:
The cry of the single mother
Working at night so she can feed her children.
The cry of the world woman
Who just lost her job.
The cry of the young woman
Who was promised a land of milk and honey
And found only violence.
The cry of the Dalit woman being brutalized
Her day's wages being denied
Finding only sexual abuse.

Yet we have been led to believe that this is normal
Not out of the ordinary.
We have been taught to not get involved
And we have obeyed.

Unquestioning, believing
Having faith,
Not in God, but in the lords of this earth.
Help us to question, Lord,
To not follow blindly
But to ask the difficult question
To expose reality
To doubt and through doubt
To come to true faith in you.
Amen.

(Source: Between the *Flood and the Rainbow: Reflections on the JPIC Process*
[World Council of Churches])



Responsive Prayer

In the midst of violence, of pain, and in the face of death,

We affirm... Jesus is alive!

In the midst of torture, gang rape, and burning,

We affirm... Jesus is alive!

It is our protest, our hope, our affirmation...

That Jesus is alive!

And so, death cannot conquer us, systems of death do not daunt us...

For Jesus is alive!

I know that we will not be beaten down, that though we are pressed we are not crushed, that though we face repression we will not be broken.

We believe in the resurrection... because Jesus is alive.

I believe that God's reign on earth will come, that there will be justice for all the oppressed...

Because Jesus is alive.

May it come soon to the hungry, to the weeping, to those who have thirsted for your justice, to those who have waited centuries for a truly human life.

Grant us the patience to smooth the way, on which your Kingdom comes to us.

Grant us hope, that we may not be weary in proclaiming and working for it, despite so many conflicts, threats, and shortcomings.

Grant us a clear vision that in this hour of our history we may see the horizon and know the way on which your Kingdom comes to us.

Amen.

Becoming Involved

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

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

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



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