

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 (WTRC) 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 is involving the whole Communion through creative online processes and discernment circles that are ensuring the full and just participation of the Communion.



World Communion
of Reformed Churches

Inaugural Session

The discernment process began with a global online gathering and a call to prophetic action in December 2020 and has continued with a steady series of online sessions since.



Najla Kassab

Opening Remarks from President Najla Kassab

In this year we have seen the world shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation has opened our eyes on many challenges and realities that affirmed the need to meet, discern, confess, witness, and change to what God has called us to.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the injustices that surround the world whether they are social, political, or economic. It exposed inequality, exploitation, and oppression that are rooted in economic systems that exploited the dignity of people where healthcare and other fundamental rights are only available to those who can afford them. Almost everywhere the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized are most affected by the disease—and by the measures of disease control.

Today we meet as one family around the Communion as we are challenged throughout our churches in strengthening our witness in response to the imperatives of the Accra Confession and the call for an economy of life. This is a special time, where a crisis could become an opportunity, where in the midst of our pain and struggle, we see hope, mainly because God is with us, as we strengthen one another. This is a time of building a stronger Communion, a prophetic one, an impactful presence in every place that hurts. Today we meet to initiate a Communion-wide process on the response of the WCRC to the COVID-19 pandemic based on the guiding objectives of our strategic plan, where a justice-centered response is timely.

Today is moment of *kairos* where we are called to act, to be prophetic voices, and to strive towards healing the world from the long-lasting injustice that even a vaccine will not heal. It is a *kairos* moment in our self-understanding as churches and a Communion and our mission as we prepare the agenda of our next General Council. It is our role to seek new ways of strengthening the Communion and transforming the world as we transformed ourselves—to be the church in the public square reflecting the presence of God in spite of difficult times, to dream of new alternatives and see visions of a reality based on justice.

Today is a time where we gain strength as we come together and strengthen one another. It is a time to discover the blessings of discerning as a Communion. It is a time to be shaped in the image of Christ, who taught us love and justice. It is a time where fear will never limit our abilities. It is a time of manifestation for how God could send us out to a broken world. It is a time to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. It is a time of witnessing to a God of Life. In this season of Advent, we learn to wait in great expectation and ask our Lord to speak to us, to teach us anew how to be called to communion and committed to justice. Together we can make a difference. Let us live in hope.

Introduction to the Discernment Process by Chris Ferguson

In Psalm 11:3, faced with a seemingly insurmountable crisis, the psalmist asks, “If foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do?”

As a global *koinonia* called to communion and committed to justice, how specifically are we called to be a communion in these foundation-shattering times?

Discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. Verbs in the present tense. Verbs that incarnate what we are called to do as a global family, as regional groups, and as member churches. This we do together; our *koinonia* is God’s gift to be received and nurtured. A Reformed community always reforming according to the Word of God.

We have heard the depth and breadth of the impact of COVID-19 and its apocalyptic force revealing, unveiling, exposing, lifting up the unjust and death-dealing world order that existed before but has been exacerbated profoundly by the pandemic. We have heard of the call to enter as a *koinonia* leading up to our next General Council in a “*processus confessionis*” addressing theologically the fundamental challenges to the integrity of our faith in Jesus Christ and the confession that “the Earth is the Lords and all that is in it” in the face of a world order far from peace, justice, truth, and life. Before COVID-19 we heard the call to live out the reality of the Accra Confession and the spirit of the Belhar Confession in addressing the scandal of the death-dealing reality of a whole world in the captivity of Babylon and being stirred up in the rising up through the cries of people and the earth to seek life and respond to God’s call. On top of this all the specific and very real COVID-19 pandemic.

At the center of this is discernment. As the Accra Confession said: “The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted.” For our global *koinonia* this means we must do the discerning together. We are called to a process that mobilizes, involves, and strengthens and, with God’s help, empowers the whole global family in our difference and distinctiveness. The process we are undertaking requires a focus on reading the signs of the times that takes seriously injustice and brokenness of our world and our own churches. Our Communion is not yet the *koinonia* God calls us to be.

This process then requires a theologically and biblically rooted engagement that speaks to global, regional, national, and local realities. We must recognize the interconnection between the local and the global. There is no local reality which is not impacted by and shaped by the global world order. There is no global reality that is not constructed through and by local communities and resources.

This crisis and the virtual tools now available also allow and require us to strengthen our *koinonia* through the process of discernment circles. Our process continues the crucial process of identifying and engaging all the voices and perspectives and identities that make up our family. This is a work in progress, but key to our process is the for us to do our discerning in such a way as to contribute to building a just communion. To foreground the voices and leadership of those in the family who have not been heard or have been impeded or excluded.



Chris Ferguson was general secretary of the WCRC from 2014 to 2021

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Our process then focuses on the WHO. As far as we are able this must be the whole communion. Involved and engaged. All our stories, realities, locations, and identities. This WHO includes all the partners that God provides. We have a special relationship with the Council for World Mission (CWM). The Lutherans. The World Council of Churches (WCC). The JDDJ (Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification group of five communions). Interfaith partners and social movements and so on.

Our process focuses on the WHAT. The reading of the signs of the time. The COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Addressing the mandates and calls emerging from Accra, Belhar, and the Leipzig General Council. The lived experiences of our churches. A world fallen among thieves. The cries of people and creation.

Our process focusses on HOW. First the discernment circles being launched today. Listening, discerning from the diverse perspectives and distinct realities that make up our one family. Critical theological and biblical reflection. This process will be aided by the input of a statement which allows us to focus and summarize our learnings.

The process involves a rhythm of discernment circles following the liturgical year and putting specific realities in interaction with specific regions and concrete identities and groups within our family. This is a process continuing on to next September and leads to a hopefully face-to-face convocation or conference where the discernment is articulated and the process further defined to lead us to the next General Council.

In this process of discernment and the team that has been assembled it is clear that all of our ways of being *koinonia* together are interwoven. So while the discernment circles are focused on discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed are also intermixed in reflections and actions during this next year. We do not want to create a false separation between our ways of being *koinonia*.

The process is marked by urgency to respond to God's call. *Koinonia* is our gift. Justice is our responsibility.

Discerning together is also a gift so that we uphold each other to do together that which we cannot do alone and to honour that which each one of us brings to this global family. For indeed when one suffers we all suffer, and even so when one rejoices we all rejoice.

Allan Boesak on the concept of "global apartheid"

The unprecedented onslaught of the novel coronavirus has hugely impacted our work. COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated the scandalous reality of what we have come to call global apartheid. The term has become more and more depressingly applicable to our world situation. South Africa, with its draconian policies of apartheid—declared by the international community a crime against humanity, and by the ecumenical movement led by the Communion of Reformed Churches as a travesty of the gospel, and its theological

justification a heresy—set the world a particularly vicious model of racial oppression and discrimination, injustice, and exploitation.

We may thus speak today of a phenomenon that we call global apartheid which includes social-economic exploitation and inequalities, political and social exclusion, racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as gender injustices and heteronormative oppression. The common denominator here is not only the racial element but also the systemic, violent, pervasive, and totalitarian nature of the oppression.

The general reference today is the division of the world between the so called 1% and the 99% made crystal clear in Oxfam's annual reports: In January 2017, just eight white men own as much wealth as half the world population. One in nine people do not have enough to eat. And more than one billion live on less than \$1.25 a day. In 2019, Oxfam reported that in 2018 billionaires' fortunes grew by 2.5 billion dollars a day while 3.8 billion of the poorest half of humanity showed their wealth decline by as much as 11%.

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

The situation at all levels and in all counties of the world, in every imaginable way, is getting worse even as we speak. The irresponsibility of many governments and their leaders is beyond shocking but hardly surprising.

One could remind the world and the church that the Crucified One amongst the crucified ones today has disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them as Colossians 2:15 tells us. So, the question here is: Can the church sense, discern, and act upon the *kairos* moment the God of history has placed upon us?

In our discussion we will refer to two documents from within our Communion, and they have helped us to understand better the challenges that we are facing. I'm speaking of the Belhar Confession of my own denomination from 1986, and I'm speaking of the Accra Confession from the WCRC from 2004. Belhar has three main pillars: 1) the unity that we have in Christ, 2) the reconciliation brought by Christ, and 3) the justice demanded by God. To simply put, Belhar confesses God's radical indivisible justice, God's radical indivisible equality, God's radical indivisible inclusivity, and God's radical indivisible solidarity. In these things, the church is called to follow God and to stand with the poor, the oppressed, the wronged, the destitute, the marginalized, the excluded in any form of injustice whatsoever.



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Allan Boesak

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In the Accra Confession we look at the world through the eyes of the poor and the oppressed, the powerless and the suffering, and then we see then a scandalous world. We confess to hear the cries of the poor knowing that in the cries of the poor and the oppressed we hear the very voice of God. We confess that we see the wounds of God and God's creation caused by greed and hubris and selfishness, but we know also that every wound inflicted upon God's children is a wound inflicted upon God. And so, the Accra Confession exposes all systems of injustice—economic social, and political—and, like Belhar, we call on the church to call these heresies and to follow God in God's struggle for justice so that we can stand with those who struggle with God for justice.

Presentations: Perspectives of the Pandemic

J . Herbert Nelson II (Presbyterian Church (USA)): We are dealing with a time right now where by the confluence of both this pandemic that we have been facing in the United States of America and around the globe, and the struggle that we had even before that with the issue of low wage earners, individuals who are struggling... And so, in many ways we found ourselves with individuals dying on the vine, struggling not just with the coronavirus but also struggling with the need trying to get and out and try making money, to try to support their families. And certainly, in all things, to try and lift up their children during this time. This coronavirus has not been the only driver; the driver has been economic. It's been how would you in a sense continue to offer hope and wholeness to the one you love when you don't have a job to go to. And at the same time, finding themselves as individuals going to jobs that are dangerous, that put their lives in jeopardy.

I am convinced that we are having the wrong conversation. The conversation should not be about the economic—the conversation should be about how does a nation that called themselves one nation, with liberty and justice for all, begin to look at the human cost that we are paying by trying to keep commerce open while at the same time trying to fight a pandemic of which we have a very little control of. The moral cost of that needs to be lifted up. People over might, people over exorbitant wealth, people over not being patient enough to live through this but instead find themselves in a hurry dying. We are a better nation than this, but much of what we have been waiting for such a long time has been the leadership to call us into accountability for what really needs to happen to build a better world.

Dimitris Boukis (Greek Evangelical Church): As our theme today is the challenges the new pandemic of COVID-19 has brought to the church life and ministry in our home countries, I would like to state that for all of us in the Evangelical Church of Greece this has become a period of reexamining our theological identity and ministry priorities, especially since Greece, along with many other countries worldwide are shut down with severe lockdowns. Because of the pandemic, Greece's economy has been hit hard since many people are working in the tourist and food industry or are small business owners with limited or no access to e-commerce. On top of that, the lockdown restrictions of limited mobility have become a major challenge for charities and their volunteers as they try to

serve the ongoing needs of the most vulnerable persons, the homeless, the immigrants, the people working the streets, the unaccompanied teenage refugees. The enforced low mobility and curfew made things even worse, as well as making it nearly impossible for our volunteers to provide support services for persons needing emotional and psychological encouragement, church members included.

On a more positive note, the whole pandemic issue made us engage in new ways of sharing the Gospel in word and deed. This new challenge created a catalyst for reaching those who are curious about spiritual matters yet were hesitant to commit to a traditional church experience. Our online sessions have been able to reach people we otherwise did not have access to. People are more attentive to the Biblical teaching and it seems there is a great anticipation for the day when all can gather together to enjoy each other's presence.

Until that day, the sisters and brothers in Greece are trying their best to continue financially in supporting their pastors and find creative ways to offer their volunteer services to keep alive the programs for the homeless, the immigrants and the refugees, the people working the streets, the hospitality programs for the unaccompanied teenage refugees, and the programs for people with substance abuse issues. The local congregations have created new avenues of supporting those in need by providing food, housing expenses, and emotional support to the vulnerable and isolated in their communities. We do this because as Christ's church we know that through the Holy Spirit all of us, the people of this earth, we are the work of His hands and are under His Almighty Sovereignty. The truth of His Word warms our hearts and brings peace to our troubled emotions and thoughts, strengthening our weary hands and feet to the service of others: "For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you" (Isaiah 41:13).

Mitri Raheb (Palestine): While the whole world is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences on multiple levels, we are facing hardship in a two-fold perspective. Currently, the Palestinian people are literally caught up between the hammer and the anvil, which is adding to our marginalization and increasing the level of distress we are all facing collectively as well as individually.

I would like to start by emphasizing that we Palestinians know the difference between apartheid and a lockdown! Although the response efforts to counter the spread of the COVID-19 virus is materializing in restriction on movement and imposing social distancing and closures measures, we have been subjected to such treatment by the Israeli occupation for decades. And while the world is busy trying to find a solution for this global disaster we are all facing, Israel is continuing its occupation business as usual. Israel continues to build and expand settlements, confiscation of the remaining lands in the Jordan Valley is being implemented, and home demolitions continue to take place, leaving families consisting of elderly, youth, and children homeless overnight. The fact that Israel controls our life from the moment we wake up until the moment we sleep has not been questioned or shaken during the pandemic. The checkpoints are still intact, we still need per-



Mitri Raheb

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mission to move from one area to another and while this has been tried in other areas in the world in order to trap the spread of the virus, here it is being done to us to widen the scope of our humiliation and strip us from our humanity. And while such measures will cease to exist after we overcome the pandemic, it will continue to be part of our daily life thereafter. The over-a-decade-long blockade on Gaza is meant to destroy that part of Palestine together with its people, and now during the COVID-19 pandemic it is increasing the pace of the deterioration. Medical supplies are scarce, and the transfer of urgent medical cases to Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank is delayed. All the while, the Israeli army continues to conduct raids on Palestinian areas.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the Palestinians on an economic level. The lockdowns and closures are affecting the day-to-day operations of the people and many were forced to close shop. Palestine is aid-dependent and its economy is very shaky. Big enterprises control much of the market and they embody the capitalist approach in their decision and day to day practices. This is why many people working in the tourism sector, especially in Bethlehem and its surroundings, were laid off with the pretext that the sector is currently impoverished and therefore it cannot sustain its employees. There is no national social insurance in Palestine which means that these people are now without any source of income.

Needless to say, people still feel with each other, and there is a very high level of social solidarity, but this is neither enough nor sustainable on the long run. The people are in distress, they do not trust the Palestinian Authority's decisions and measures taken to combat the virus. True that we are all in despair at the moment, but we know that the global joint efforts will help us all overcome the pandemic. Sadly, Israel's occupation of our land will survive the pandemic too.

Gloria Ulloa (Presbyterian Church in Colombia): I speak to you from a country that four years ago signed a peace process between the government and the guerrillas that for close to 60 years were embarked in armed struggle to try and achieve changes in the structures of economic injustice. The truth is that after the signing of the Havana Peace Agreement, in Colombia there has not been an agrarian reform; the land continues to be owned by few landowners. Very few of the victims have received any form of reparation; only nine of the signatories of the Peace Agreement have taken their seat in Congress. Of the victims that had been promised seats in Congress, 16 of them were denied; 245 signatories and over 1,000 social leaders have been murdered. Due to the lack of guarantees for security and dignity of life, the majority of those who signed the agreement have abandoned the places assigned for them as a means of re-insertion into society. There are no guarantees for the exercise of electoral policies, as those who are on the opposite side of the parties that support the government become enemies.

We are deeply concerned that instead of directing efforts to overcome hatred and violence, our country is being led towards polarizing extremes, to intolerance, and partisanships that divide families and society in general, all this fomented by social networks and the media.

The pandemic we are all experiencing has highlighted the structural injustice within the social security systems and in the health and public assistance. It has shown us the depth of the socio-economic exclusion made visible in the loss of



Gloria Ulloa

jobs and the instability of labour, the increase of poverty, the reduced access to basic public services, and the lack of support for access to economic resources as people struggle to survive. In the same way there has been an increase of domestic violence and of people struggling with mental health, as well as the deterioration in education due to the lack of connectivity, particularly in rural areas and marginal urban areas. 198.000 children have abandoned the educational structure due to this lack of connectivity.

All this setting of rampant injustice seems to break down the hope for life of humanity; but no. The Presbyterian Church of Colombia, during its whole experience in the context that surrounds it, has understood its place in the mission as proclaimed in the biblical texts of Psalm 34:14: "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." And in Amos 5:15: "Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts." Rooted in faith we call on the churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches to discern and confront all these manifestations of injustice as contrary to the will of God, preaching and working for a reconciliation, which will lead us to a society that is more just and in solidarity. God calls us to be a prophetic voice of hope and peace, a church which rejects all use of violence, be it from the state and its agencies, organized groups that exist on the margins of law, or all those who try to take political advantage of the social unrest, by denying its legitimacy and increasing violence.

Worship Resources

Prayer

We praise you Holy Chosen One
Son of Mary, Son of David
God's high down-dwelling one
Fruit of Prophecy, law's fulfillment
Sign of Grace
Love's firstborn child
You the one whom Jacob wrestled
The one for whom Miriam sang
You the one of Isaiah's vision
You the source of Saul's blinded sight
The one in whom all things began
In whom we fall and rise

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Holy unreligious One
Frame and Faith nor chain can bind you
Nor demand that you must come
So, looking far beyond us
We prepare to find you near us
You:
Rage in sin
Joy in change
Fire in belly
Desire in loins
Voice in wilderness
Disappointment in leadership
Wisdom from above
Truth from below
Power of Blackness
Humbling of Whiteness
Come to us:
Baby in straw
Thorn in foot
Justice in cry and in creation.

Liturgical Response

And so we plead our witness to the hills and to the mountains

But they are hesitant to respond

Haven't we destroyed these sacred spaces that belong to Indigenous communities by our mining

And so we rush to the rivers and the streams

But they too do not hear

For their waters are polluted by our industries

We take our case to the seas

But the plastic chokes them, and they cannot speak

Creation groans, not in anticipation, but in pain, she cries out in brokenness

And neither can we take our case to the impoverished, the enslaved, the dispossessed

Because they are tired by our words, our false promises, our mission

And so we return to our tired God who is sick to the stomach of our rituals, our theologies, our pretense

And God tells us what is required...

To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly

To do justice, we must witness.
To love kindness, we must repent.
To walk humbly, we must be in solidarity with the oppressed.

Commissioning Confession (excerpt)

As we journey as a church, we lament in our complicity in systems that destroy creation, as we have sinned against the earth, in greed we have over-consumed and exploited earthly resources. Droughts, rising temperatures, air pollution, and changing weather patterns continue to threaten the most vulnerable populations, exacerbating existing inequalities that continue to rise like the sea levels.

In our lament we recognize our interconnectedness and interdependence with all creation. We are God's creatures existing in relationship with God's creation. Let us therefore listen to the cries of anxiety, grief, and trauma from the Indigenous communities, as the land of the ancestors continues to be threatened. In our lament let us find the tools for change, resistance and solidarity.

We are called to do justice, in kindness and humility, and so as the sea levels rise, and the earth weeps we plead our case before the mountains, and let the hills hear our voice, as we chant together:

We're not drowning, we're fighting

We're not drowning, we're fighting

We're not drowning, we're fighting

After God freed the people from the house of slavery, he called on us to remember the acts of the wicked, and the saving acts of the Lord (Micah 6:4-5). Today we witness the acts of the wicked when God's people cannot breathe because of a knee to the neck. When God's people cannot breathe because their trafficked bodies are trapped as cargo in the back of a lorry waiting to be sold. When God's people cannot breathe because they have been silenced in their suffering by the dominant powers of the state and the system. When God's people cannot breathe because they have fallen victim to the pandemic that disproportionately affects people of colour. When God's people cannot breathe.

We confess that at times we have remained too silent in the face of racism, segregation, and inequality, that as Churches our histories are corrupted by slavery and exploitation, and our complicity must not be hidden if we are to be true witnesses in our journeying for justice.

We are called to do justice, in kindness and humility, and so we recognize the sins of inequality, the atrocities of racism, the vilification of the marginalized, and the devastation inflicted by the houses of slavery, and so we chant together:

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter

We are commissioned on this journey to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, to become agents of transformation in the world (Micah 6:8).

To do justice, we must witness.

To love kindness, we must repent.

To walk humbly, we must be in solidarity with the oppressed.

Draft Statement

We live in a moment of history that presents us with the conflation of at least three calamitous manifestations:

- (a) a climate emergency which has brought us face to face with the total destruction of the Earth and the extinction of life as we know it. The devastation of the rainforests, the burning Amazon, the desertification of Sub-Saharan Africa, the floods, hurricanes, and heat waves are the evidence of humankind's hubris to undo what God has created.
- (b) Today, in far too many cases, national politics is dominated by narrow, ethnic (sometimes Christian) nationalisms, racism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, legitimized bigotry, and religious zealotry. Globally, we are not faring any better. Foreign policies are characterized by bullying instead of respectful negotiation; forceful capitulation instead of common understanding; enforced submission instead of equal partnership; reckless lawlessness instead of respect for international law; rabid ethnic and religious nationalism instead of inclusive global security; xenophobic rage instead of an understanding of our common humanity. Imperialist expansionism instead of peaceful co-existence; destructive, unbridled neo-liberal capitalist exploitation instead of planetary security; internationalized thuggery instead of the promotion and protection of human rights, and nationalistic vanity instead of global servanthood. It is a form of international political vandalism.
- (c) President Trump, who seems to have regarded himself as the chosen

leader of all this, was presiding over a decaying empire. And under President Biden, the reality of decaying empire is not likely to change. And as with all empires facing its own ignominious end, it presents an even greater danger to the world and to its own people, whom it can no longer distinguish from those it regarded as enemies.

On top of all these comes the coronavirus, ushering in crises of fear, uncertainty, and a devastation not seen before. Over against all of it seems to be one force: the global revolution against injustice, imperialist violence, and greed, and for life, global solidarity and human dignity. 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.

The coronavirus has itself destroyed the myth that the pandemic is "the great equalizer." It has not only exposed the criminal inequalities in health care. It has exposed all the entrenched structural, institutional, and systemic economic, social and political inequalities, and the incessant, comprehensive war against the poor and vulnerable, globally and nationally. Whether we are talking about people of colour in the US, UK, and Europe, or Native Americans in the US, Canada, Bolivia, Brazil, or Chile, the racial element in all this, nationally and globally, is now undeniable. Experts say that poverty, hunger, diseases, and violence exacerbated by the pandemic, including gender-based violence, may dwarf the number of

those dying of the virus itself. All this flies in the face of the calls for solidarity the World Health Organization pleads for every day. Oxfam calls it "a care crisis." The WHO calls it a "moral and political crisis." Thirty years ago, Jürgen Moltmann spoke of "a God crisis." It seems more relevant now than ever.

The poor are facing intensifying calamities at every level – from crimi-



Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash

nal neglect by governments to joblessness to evictions; from overwhelming and unpayable debt to illness and death in vastly disproportionate numbers. To say nothing of spiritual despair. They are drowning in a river of escalating impoverishment, while the rich are not only getting richer, but are profiting shamelessly from the virus itself. Jeff Bezos's 13 billion dollar profit in one day just a little while ago is staggering, but really only a drop in the bucket of wealth collection and expansion during these times. Meanwhile, by the end of this year,

12,000 people will die of hunger every day – most of them in the Global South, and in the Third World of the empire.

In the search for a vaccine we hope will stem the tide, and even turn the forward rush of the virus, the rich have already secured their own safety. The United States has cornered the market for the vaccine by securing contracts worth almost \$7 billion with four pharmaceutical companies for 400 million doses of these vaccines. Other rich countries, like the UK, are doing the same. Poor countries are not only way down the line, they are completely out of sight. Never before has global apartheid been so glaring. All the subtlety and obfuscation are gone.

All this is a truthful, if painful, description of what the Accra Confession calls “a scandalous world,” only 100 times worse. The Accra Confession is our own creation, and it is solid ground to return to the World Communion’s efforts to respond, and to help our churches respond to the multiple crises we are facing. But the urgency is fierce. So we suggest that in our application of Accra today, we must be done with the harmful civility of theological compromise and pacification. We should no longer be hesitant in our embrace of the radical Reformed tradition and of the radical Calvin. On this basis, we must take a clear, firm stand against the harmful fundamentalist theologies mostly imported from outside to which our people in the Global South have been subjected, and which have caused great harm to our societies. These too, the virus has exacerbated. We must learn to open ourselves to the wisdom of Indigenous traditions and religions to which many of our people in Indigenous communities are now turning in



order to create new ways of common understanding, solidarity and action.

Accra is clear: we see the world “through the eyes of the powerless and suffering,” because we know that the real scandalousness of this world is only seen through the eyes of those who see it from the bottom of the well. Paragraphs 5 and 28 speak of “the cries of the people.” But Calvin taught us that when the oppressed cry “How Long?” it is “as if God hears Godself cry.” The cries of the poor are actually the cries of God. Par. 5 speaks of “the woundedness of the people and of creation,” but Calvin also speaks of the woundedness of God. Every injustice inflicted upon God’s children, is a wound inflicted upon God. In doing deeds of justice we are then not only healing God’s wounded children, we are healing the wounds of God. Par. 6 reminds us to look at the “root causes” of the scandalous condition. So our critique of “unjust economic conditions” must become unvarnished, pointed, and well-informed critique of neoliberal capitalism in all its forms. Any response to the coronavirus must not just include a call for a Recon-

struction Fund, it must include a call for the immediate cancellation of all Third World debt. The work for a Jubilee Year with all its political and moral implications must be urgently revived (Lev. 25, the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our debts” revisited).

Yet in the midst of all these death-dealing realities is a sign of hope – and we see that in the global Black Lives Matter revolution against empire in the streets of cities and towns across the world. In all their interracial, inter-gender, international inclusiveness they are a hopeful, courageous, iconoclastic energy against submission to empire and against hopelessness. The revolt against the lynching of black bodies is revolt against the lynching of hopeful, meaningful life. This is the world revolution Martin Luther King Jr. saw beginning to unfold in his day, and called for people of goodwill to be “on the right side of

the revolution.” It is a revolution described by Indian lay theologian M.M. Thomas as “the demand of the people for power as the bearer of dignity and for significant and responsible participation in society and social history.” It is the power of the powerless wresting power from the hands of the powerful. It is, in every sense of the word, a *kairos* moment.

So the question for the World Communion is not whether there is a revolution going on, but on which side of the revolution are we? What does it mean to “follow Jesus of Nazareth” as Accra demands? The question is not whether we can discern the signs of the times. Those signs are all too clear. The question rather, said M. M. Thomas, is whether “Christians can see God at work through the revolutions of the world” and whether we are “in the grip of the essential truth” that it is about justice, dignity, life, and the creation of a new humanity.

Accra quite deliberately aligns itself with the Confession of Belhar. But are we ready to show the difference between a Confessing Church and a church with a confession? For Belhar that means “that the church is called to stand where God stands: namely with the poor and oppressed, and against any and all forms of injustice.” Standing with them means standing with them in their struggles against injustice and for dignity and life. Spiritual empowerment, encouragement, and comfort remain as a given, but offering “thoughts and prayers” are for unimaginative politicians who have run out of platitudes. We should find ways to join the revolution. The power and destruction of imperialism and the revolt against it is not a Scylla and Charybdis through which the church must try to sail safely. It is a choice we

have to make. And we should remember: “Many are called, but few are chosen. And the chosen shall be known by their choices.”

Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation for the God who lies behind the veil to be with us. It is a desire for the divine being to journey with us to reveal Godself to us. The constant sense of wonder that accompanies Advent is that it is not just our desire to journey with God, but God’s desire to journey with us, that God actually wants to pitch God’s tent among us. But as in the Advent story, we too are stalked by life-threatening shadows darkening our hopes and expectations at every level and in every moment. The good news of the angels to the shepherds is shadowed by the death news from Jerusalem as they journey to the Inn and the stables behind it. The journey of the magi is shadowed by the tears of Rachel. The journey of Mary to Elizabeth lights up in the glorious joy of expecting life. Yet this moment is shadowed by the deep knowledge that a sword will go through both their hearts. Above, and despite it all though, is the star “rising in the East” and journeying across the skies past the place of dark deceit and deadly politics, to “stop over the place where the child was,” the stubborn shining light of hope and joy and life not just hovering over, but enlightening the darkness below, drawing us to what is true and steadfast: Immanuel. God is with us.

And this Advent we both prepare to journey with God as well as call on God to journey with us, to pitch God’s tent among us as we journey together in a time that calls for new and deeper forms of solidarity and alliance building.

Advent is a time when we remember several journeys. The journey of Mary to Elizabeth, the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the journey of the angel to speak to the shepherds, the journey of the shepherd to see the Christ child, the journey of the magi and the journey to Egypt to flee the evil designs of Herod. And it reminds of travel and journeying in our time, where travel spreads the virus, where migrant workers are struggling to go home because jobs have dried up, where home is not a safe space but a space of violence and assault.

Each of these Biblical journeys represents human solidarity and resistance to empire. Each of these journeys can and must be fleshed out in their own right. But there are two common aspects that speak to us in this time. The first is that in each of them salvation is not to be found in the centres of power but rather on the margins and shows us the necessity for us to journey to the margins to be able to find our common salvation.

We know now more than ever that our salvation will not come from Capitol Hill but will emerge from the streets of Ferguson where a wall of clergy worked to separate the protestors from the batons of the police forces. Just as the Biblical story of the magi showed us our salvation will not emerge from the palace of Herod but instead a manger, we know that we cannot expect hope from the stock exchanges of the world, but it will instead emerge from the shanty towns of Central Africa, from the streets of Chile, the protestors in Hong Kong, Thailand and India and the Indigenous people in Bolivia. That it will not come from patriarchal power in the institutions of higher learning in the

global north but will come from children and babies. That our hope comes from the stable and not from the dog-eat-dog world of capitalism, promise of a new earth where the wolf and the sheep, the lion and yearling shall lie down together and be led by a child.

And so, we journey with the one who calls us and who is to be found among the impoverished, the enslaved, the disempowered, the dispossessed. That the manger opens for a new space where none existed earlier. And this is the call of advent, to newness to the margins to a God of life that is not to be found in the corridors of power.

Become 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 inaugural session, including excerpts from presentations, worship material, and discernment questions. Highlight booklets from 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@werc.eu.

More information on the “COVID and Beyond” process can be found at werc.ch/require.

Discernment Questions

1. In what ways does the term “global apartheid” describe the crises exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic? Is it an adequate lens to read the signs of the times?
2. How should the WCRC respond to the revolutionary affirmation of the Belhar Confession that the church should stand where God stands, at the side of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged? In what specific ways should we join the global struggle against injustice, imperialist violence, and greed to work for life, global solidarity, and human dignity?
3. How can we be church in a situation where we respond not simply to a crisis, but to the whole complex of crises upon us today: An exclusionary, exploitative system of death, a scandalous order of a world fallen among thieves,” which, in the words of Jürgen Moltmann, can best be described as a “God-Crisis?”
4. What would best embody the goals of the *processus confessionis* (process toward confessing) in our Communion? What document and mission practice would this require?
5. In the time of the pandemic, we see a global increase in gender-based violence. How can the church contribute to end gender-based violence through its theology, preaching, teaching, and mission?
6. What does salvation mean in the midst of the multiplicity of violences against those who fall outside of the constraints of normalized patriarchy (women, men who face violence from other men because they are lower in the patriarchal hierarchy, LGBTQ+ community)?
7. How can the WCRC as a global communion take up Indigenous knowledge in addressing the burning challenges of the African region and in other parts of the world?
8. How can the church be relevant in a situation where religion is used to justify nationalisms, authoritarianisms, and racism?
9. How can churches become aware of their complicity and complacency with xenophobic and racist cultures and practices?
10. How 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? How can this be an example to realize that it is actually possible to resolutely address challenges like the climate crisis?



World Communion
of Reformed Churches