

WCRC PLENARY MISSION SESSION

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We see great value in emphasizing the continuity with previous statements and foundational documents (The Barmen Declaration, The Belhar Confession, and The Accra Confession) as we ponder the mission of the church in an ever-changing, but unwaveringly hostile world for the vulnerable, the poor, the excluded children of God. The “scandalous world” of the Accra Confession is now more scandalous than ever, and *Belhar’s* call to “stand where God stands” namely with the poor, oppressed, the wronged and the destitute, is now more urgent than ever.

The question is, can we, through God’s grace, be as truthful, as prophetic, as faithful in these times? In the aftermath of the Second World War, German theologian, friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and pastor of the Confessing Church, spoke of those times as times of “deadly convulsions.” He was right then, and his words are more true today than ever before.

Never, in our life time, we say in the Mission Statement, has imperialistic power expressed itself so relentlessly, overwhelmingly, and devastatingly violent as now. The church, “as the possession of God”, (*Belhar*) sees, always, and now more than ever, the events in our world “through the eyes of those who suffer.” (*Accra*) With deeper conviction and greater urgency than ever before, we recall Calvin’s truth, not only that the longing for justice in our hearts is “implanted in us by the Lord”, but that the cries of the victims of injustice, exclusion and violence are cries from the very heart of Godself. Hence, the call to mission is the call to justice. If that is true, then we are right in asserting that God self is wounded by every injustice inflicted upon God’s vulnerable children, then it is God’s woundedness that is the heartbeat of Christian mission.

Nicholas Wolsterstorff, Reformed theologian/philosopher, concludes from this: “To perpetuate injustice on a fellow human being is to wound God; the cries of the victims are the expression of divine suffering. Thus the call to justice is rooted ultimately in the pathos of God, in God’s vulnerable love. The call to justice is the call to stop wounding God; the call to eliminate injustice is the call to alleviate divine suffering.” It is our rootedness in this truth that helps us discern the difference between the victims of suffering and those who claim perpetual victimhood even while they continue to inflict pain and suffering upon their victims.

These are the fundamental truths that frame the mission of the church in the world today. What is “mission” in the presence of the empire, an economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, constituted by a reality and spirit of lordless domination, created not by divine sanction but by humankind, to, as the Belhar Confession says, “harm and control others”? It claims to have absolute power over rest of the world as if it owns it. No challenge is tolerated. It promises peace and security by keeping the world in permanent state of warfare that are waged to reconfigure lands and peoples unto its likeness and image in line with its geo-political and geo-economic strategies. We have called this sacrilegious, idolatrous and blasphemous. What is “mission” in the presence of undeniable reality - when land theft, genocide, and deliberate acts of extermination in Gaza right before our very eyes, on a daily basis, become our hermeneutical lens, the lens through which we see the world and read the Scriptures?

Consequently, we will continue to place emphasis on empire’s heightened militarized presence, renewed imperial projects of neo-colonialism and settler-colonialism and the consequences of those for oppressed, vulnerable, and dispossessed persons and peoples everywhere, from Palestine to the Sudan, to the Congo. That is why we speak of mission as the disruption of the works of evil in the world, of mission as the work of those who, as followers of Jesus, are turning the world upside down.

But the question goes deeper: What does “mission” look like as so many seem to have lost trust in the ability of the church to be that truthful, faithful, credible, compassionate and prophetic presence in the world? What is mission as “truth spoken to power and to the disempowered”, and truth spoken *about* power and powerlessness? And what, if the church’s prophetic faithfulness is in doubt, does speaking hope to the hopeless mean?

In speaking of power, we do not mean the power to dominate, lord over, and subject others, which characterised mission as handmaid of imperialism and colonialism. That is an exercise of power always embedded in violence in all its manifestations, always an instrument of the continued disempowerment of the powerless. We speak of power as India’s M.M. Thomas from India taught us, namely, power as “the bearer of dignity” of the people and the channel of their “significant and responsible participation in society and social history.”

At its essence, our mission is driven by our faith in the resurrected Lord, the One, Jürgen Moltmann has reminded us long ago, whose resurrection is God's *apanastasia*, God's rebellion against sin and doubt, against all that is evil, against the suffering of God's children and God's creation; against the myth that death has the last word. In this light, mission means joining God's rebellion in resistance to all that is harmful to the abundant life Jesus has promised.

Mission is therefore God's persistent call to persevere in our witness, in our *marturia* for the sake of God's suffering children and creation, and for the sake of Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." And we do this with what we, in the rest of the world, have been learning from the Palestinian people over the eight decades since the Nakba began: their *sumud* – their steadfastness, resilience, and indestructible hope. *Sumud* is anchored in the steadfast commitment of the Palestinian people, including Christians, to a cause of justice and of historical rootedness in this land that has seen years of suffering and persecution, but continues to propel the sense of steadfastness and perseverance towards achieving hope for the people on the land. It has long been my personal conviction that the question of Palestine and the genocide is today the fundamental measure of the integrity of our politics, the authenticity of our faith, and the authority of our Christian witness in the world.

Thus, how do churches hear and understand "mission" in the context of the triple nexus of racism, militarization and capitalism? Martin Luther King, Jr. named these as three sins (materialism, militarism and racism) with reference to the USA. How do churches engage in costly solidarity with advocacy movements seeking justice for Black lives (specific to anti-Black racism), and for diverse, racialized communities (Asian, LatinX, Middle Eastern)? For Muslims in an Islamophobic world? What is the nature of Christian mission with racialized movements for life in the 21st Century, whose leaders may be suspicious of or have previously been burned by their experiences with the church and mission? What does "mission" look like in context of both the specific and generalized dehumanization and "othering" of black and brown bodies?

Christian theology has played a role in almost all settler colonial projects from North America to South Africa, Ireland and Australia. What is true for the Americas is true for Palestine; Palestine is not an exception. And yet, Palestine continues to be the exception. While no one would dare today to cite the Bible to justify settler colonialism

in Australia or North America, many Christians and Jews have been doing exactly this in Palestine for almost the last two hundred years and continue to do so until this very day using Christian Zionism. Like the theology of apartheid in South Africa, which the WCRC declared a sin and a heresy, Christian Zionism – from the Amalekite trope to the extermination of Palestinians as precondition for the coming of Jesus - is a pernicious perversion of the Gospel used to justify racist oppression, dispossession, ethnic cleansing and now open genocide. The World Communion, in faithful recall of our prophetic stance in 1982 regarding the theology of apartheid in South Africa, cannot let this stand. At stake is not only the integrity of the continuity of our witness. Now, as then, the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake. As in 1982 we opened our ears and hearts to the cries of God's oppressed children in South Africa, we are now called to hear the cries of God's oppressed children in Palestine, knowing that John Calvin was right: The cries of the oppressed are cries from the very heart of God.

Real partnership in mission calls for accountability from real friendship, that displaces and challenges power in the "other" and in ourselves. We are calling for honest, courageous but therefore vulnerable conversations about how God's mission looks in the world, and serious interrogation of why our visions for God's dream often do not align. The pursuit of mission cannot be a distraction of these conversations, but need to act as further, important impetus towards them. God's mission, as through the incarnated Christ, disrupts the status quo of society and history. Missionaries are called to join Christ's example of turning the world upside down. Not into the chaos of deathly convulsions, but into the transformative, life-giving, disruptive presence of Jesus Christ, the life of the world.

It is within this framework and against this background that we have put the following proposals before the General Council for consideration and action.

Proposals:

1. We proclaim that mission is disruption. As the resurrection re-inspired the disciples in the upper-room to join the women who were waiting at the foot of the

cross and tomb, missionaries are called to join with God's dream of turning this world upside down. WCRC will work for the realization of God's transforming power leading to Justice and peace and will continue to privilege the voices from the margins and outcasts of society and will boldly proclaim God's work and love to all, through all realms of life. Mission is discipleship.

2. To continue to be in solidarity and support of the Palestinian people and other people who are suffering in different contexts and their work towards speaking truth to power through their theology, advocacy and through amplifying their voices.

3. WCRC consider, recognise, and declare the phenomenon of Christian Zionism as fundamentally evil, racist, a travesty of the gospel and a heresy.

4. The WCRC to commit to define ways of costly solidarity that shall transform the way we do mission today. Repentance must be based in action, not just rhetorical. **Publicly recommit** to the Belhar Confession's call to "stand where God stands" (with the poor, oppressed, and wronged) and the Accra Confession's challenge to resist "the scandalous world" of economic and military domination.

5. The WCRC commits to continue the work of advocacy and expand the advocacy platforms for engagement that are built from within the local contexts of member churches reality of struggle.

In the last few weeks I, along with I hope many, many others, have received the utterly moving and compelling letter from Palestinian clergy to their people and their pastors. It is a letter that simultaneously broke my heart and uplifted my spirit. A part of the letter talks about the painful choice Palestinians are now forced to make in the midst of unspeakable suffering, hopelessness and despair; in the midst of the severest and most relentless onslaught on life my generation has seen: that is the choice to leave or to stay. As the bombs continue to fall, and places of worship are being destroyed; as the people die in the most horrific ways the depraved human mind can conjure, amidst the senseless death of hundreds of thousands, most of whom are women and children, while the world that can make it stop right now simply looks on; this is why they, these priests and pastors, are choosing not to leave, to flee to safer places, to find and build what is left of life elsewhere, but to stay:

“To stay is to bear witness”, they say.

To stay in this land is not merely a political, social or practical decision. It is a spiritual act. We stay neither because it is easy nor because it is a fatality. We stay because we have been called. Our Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem, walked the hills of Galilee, wept over Jerusalem, and suffered unjust death because He was faithful to his mission until the end. He did not flee suffering. He entered into it, bringing life out of death. So too, we remain, not to romanticise suffering, but to witness to the Lord’s presence and power in our wounded Holy Land.

“To stay is to say with our lives: this land, bruised and bleeding, is still holy. To stay is to proclaim that Palestinian life—Muslim, Christian, Druze, Samaritan, Bahai—and Jewish-Israeli life is sacred and must be protected. It is to remember that resurrection begins in the tomb, and that even now, in our collective suffering, God is with us. God sees and shares our sufferings and struggle, as God did in Jesus, and God loves us, each one, as a child. We are the children of the resurrection. Our presence in itself is a witness to our Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ.

“To stay is to love” they say.

“Our presence is a form of resistance—not of hate, but of deep and abiding love. We love this land not as property, but as gift. We love our Muslim and Jewish neighbours not abstractly, but in solidarity and in action. To stay means to continue planting trees, raising children, dressing wounds, and welcoming the stranger. It means insisting that God’s Kingdom—where the meek are lifted up and the proud brought low—cannot be obscured by bombs, starvation or walls.

“To stay is to follow Christ who said, *“Blessed are the peacemakers.”* But peace, as we know, is not passivity. It is the fierce labour of liberation, equality, justice, truth, and mercy. Our mission, then, is not to withdraw, but to build: homes, churches, schools, hospitals and gardens. We are called to be communities of faith that model another way—God’s way—in a land thirsting for life. We do know that in this life perfect peace is utopian, nevertheless, it is through our witnessing to it here that we will enjoy it even more fully in the Kingdom of God.

“To stay is to be Church”, they say.

“Together we constitute a living and incarnate Church in the land of the Incarnation. Since the time of Pentecost, our liturgies have been sung in times of joy and suffering, giving expression to many languages and cultures: Aramaic, Greek, Armenian, Arabic,

Latin, and many more. Our sacraments flow with ancient and undefeated hope. We pray today, rooted in our rich and ancient traditions, but wholly present in and faithful to our surrounding world.

“Our mission” they say, “is to be salt and light in the very place where Christ first said these words. Salt that heals the wounds of discrimination, occupation, genocide and ongoing trauma. Light that refuses to go out, even when the darkness is ever deeper. And even if we are reduced to a handful of people, we will intensify and strengthen our role to be salt and light.

“We are called to minister to the suffering, advocate for the oppressed, speak truth to power, and live lives deeply rooted in the Gospel. We must equip our youth, strengthen our communities, and deepen our faith—not only to survive, but to live fully, even now in the midst of death and destruction. We are not alone.” These are their words.

So now we know. Mission is to persevere. It is to know, to believe, with fear and trembling, but with certainty, “We are not alone.”

So Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood it, and it is as if he is whispering into their, and our ears as we are gathered here.

“[If we take this stand for God and for justice for God’s people, Bonhoeffer testifies] It is certain that we may live always close to God and the light of God’s presence... [It is certain] that nothing is then impossible for us, because all things are possible with God; [it is certain] that no earthly power can touch us without God’s will, and that danger and distress can only drive us closer to God. It is certain that we can claim nothing for ourselves, and may yet pray for everything; it is certain that our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life is in death; it is certain that in this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand.”