

Vortrag beim Rheinischen Ökumenetag 2020

Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity

Dr. Elizabeth Joy

The world today is more in need of reconciliation and unity than any other time in the past as we are struggling to scratch the surface of the divisions and destruction ravaging the world due to the COVID-19 deepening inequalities. We are in need of reconciling with our brothers and sisters both within our churches and beyond. The theme of the assembly was formulated in a time and context when COVID-19 was nowhere in the horizon of any world - thought or in reality. However, the theme is so spirit-led and apt for the present because it spells out the theological as well as the ethical climate of the world we live in, the church we and the community we belong to. The theme spells out the identity and calling of the church, the Body of Christ to function as a living body. It calls us for the sake of one another to reflect Christ's love and move the world to reconciliation and unity in a world that is fragmented. The fragmented world with its inequalities, precipitates injustice. It breeds violence and begets inequalities. The world cries out for justice and peace, reconciliation and unity. How will our assembly theme help us to move to reconciliation and unity as Churches and communities belonging to the World Council of Churches in this context of COVID-19?

COVID-19, the pandemic is truly an equalizer. The virus shows no partiality. In fact, the virus has shown how diseased and partial the world body is. It has exposed how divided the communities are in terms of racism, systemic injustice – economic, gender and caste. It has unmasked the injustice in terms of poverty and the violence done against the vulnerable of

the world. COVID-19 has pointed out how the world has economically marginalised those bodies devalued and depreciated in dignity because of the colour of their skin even as they remain a part of the body of Christ.

COVID-19 context has unmasked many stark realities of inequalities that push communities to the margins denying and depriving people of their personhood both the oppressed and the oppressors. If WCC proclaims, **‘Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity’** at a time like this, as one never ever dreamt that our 11th assembly will be postponed, but it has been prophetic making the theme ever more relevant now. It urges us much more to work towards making our theme take flesh and enhance life, life in all its fullness when death is taking its toll in every part of our world.

1. Understanding the assembly theme from a global perspective

At the outset, we need to clarify what we understand by the term, ‘World’ and the term ‘Western World’. The world at the micro-level and the macro-level can vary. As the hosts from the western part of the world, we should see how we are perceived by others. Paulos Mar Gregorios while discussing ‘The role of European (or Western) Civilization in making the World what it is today’ pertinently says:

European civilization is no doubt the most potent force today, both uniting and recreating the world and at the same time creating so much of injustice, war and disruption of the biosphere...¹

He also suggests that we need to have ‘fundamental reflection on the pluralistic unity of the universe of which we are a significant part’.² So, what do we wish to mean by ‘the World’?

¹ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Philosophy: East and West* (Kottayam, India: Mar Gregorios Foundation & Paulos Mar Gregorios Chair, MG University, 2013). P.126

² Ibid. p. 127

He also warns that we should not go into the parochial way of understanding the concept 'World'. The entire universe is related to our world and our world is part of the universe. However, our focus here as we unpack the forthcoming assemble theme is the wounded world where communities are in need of reconciliation and unity. So, how can the Church as the body of Christ embody itself reflecting Christ's love to move the world to reconciliation and unity?

As we envision Christ's love moving the world to reconciliation and unity, we will need to define, redefine and reaffirm Christ to ourselves first and then to the world. This is a very costly affair and demands a lot of introspection, confession – both as individuals as well as communities that will enable an intra as well as inter denominational/faith actions. Are we ready to do this? This will be our ecumenical calling both within and beyond. In order to understand the meaning and the calling of our forthcoming Assembly theme, we need to unpack what we mean by Christ's love, reconciliation and unity. The COVID-19 context not only provides a backdrop for our assembly theme as of now, it will be there confronting us in the near future, prodding us to address the issues related to the inequalities around the world along with racism. Of course, we will be doing it from within our worldview/s from our own context/s from around the world to see what our world is now and what do we want it to be when it reconciles and marches toward unity. I believe doing that from our own local ecumenical contexts and from a global ecumenical context would be very helpful to pitch the assembly theme. Discussing about ecumenism and unity, Clive Barrett reiterates the following:

There is a philosophy for doing ecumenism. Essential to this process of unity are relationship and trust, from which come reconciliation and unity... It is a process that occurs at all levels of relationship and interaction – including the local... Here, is where unity happens. The local

matters precisely because, in microcosm yet in reality, the Body of Christ is in that place, in all its fractured wholeness.³

This instantly brings to my mind, the recent riots in the UK and many parts of the world unleashing anger, frustration, hopelessness and helplessness in the continued racist actions unjust and against all what Christ came for and stands for. As the Assembly is going to take place in the western world where racism is at its peak, it becomes inevitable for us to unpack history from the Black people's perspective. While the many protest rallies around the world standing up with 'Black lives matter' movement, the harsh realities happening make us think and act 'now'. So, how do we look at unity from this angle? Anthony Reddie uncovers the false proclamation of the Church as a body that is united under the Lordship of Christ saying:

While the body of Christ has been fractured by arguments over doctrine, ecclesiology, issues of class, gender and sexuality, perhaps the most ongoing challenge and indeed the most persistent scourge has been that of racism. Black Christianity in Britain has constantly sought to challenge oppressive realities within the Body of Christ...⁴

Anthony Reddie gives his subjective background and the reasoning for doing that as follows:

I have shared these bare details of my life with you because it is my firm belief that all knowledge, and the writing that emerges from it, is embodied... Namely, that all knowledge and truth is contextual: it emerges from, and is shaped by, specific and particular times and spaces...

The construction of the binary of Blackness (as bestial and less than) and Whiteness (as the personification of goodness and the opposite of Blackness) is a product of modernity.⁵

Anthony voices out with pain the legacy of Transatlantic Slavery rightly:

The chief legacy of transatlantic slavery was the unleashing of the rampageous and ravenous animal that is racism... The outworking of an immutable hierarchical manipulation of humanity did not disappear when the Act to abolish the British slave trade was passed in

³ Clive Barrett, "The Priority of Local Ecumenism," in *Unity in Process: Reflections on Ecumenism*, ed. Clive Barrett (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2012). P.123-124.

⁴ Anthony G Reddie, "Unity in the Face of Racism," in *Unity in Process: Reflections on Ecumenism* ed. Clive Barrett (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2012). P.169.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 170-171

Britain in 1807. The act brought the making of slaves to an end, but racism and the notion of white supremacist norms certainly did not end.⁶

So, when we host the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in Germany, a nation that has seen many important milestones in the history of Christianity and also the worst moments that have robbed the humanity of its identity through the holocaust and the world wars, and the modern slavery, how can we as hosts bring healing and wholeness when the representatives of churches from around the world gather to reflect on the Assembly theme? How can the Word become flesh and dwell among us to give meaning and purpose for God's Incarnation in the birth of Christ? Will unpacking racism teasing out what it does to Human Beings point us to a way forward?

Speaking about the Human Being, under the theme Body, Race and Being, Shawn Copeland defines racism succinctly saying:

Racism is structural; it goes beyond personal prejudice or even bigotry to join those feelings or attitudes to the exercise of legitimate power... racism does not rely on the choices or actions of a few isolated individuals; it is institutionalised. Racism is both an ideology, (and) or a biased way of thinking, and a set of practices. Racism justifies and maintains social oppression not only through the formulation of specious arguments but through poisoning human potential for authentic religious, moral, psychological, and spiritual growth. Racism is idolatry: it spoils the Spirit. As such, it is an insult to Eucharist.⁷

Shawn Copeland situates these two opposing terms racism and Eucharist in one sentence to emphasise the structural character of racism. She says that it deforms 'our ideas, attitudes, dispositions and practices – even religious ones'. She divides his essay into the following four sections:⁸

1. The relation of slavery to Christianity
2. The Objectification of black bodies and black personhood and lynching
3. The difficulty of incorporating the black bodies into the ecclesial body

⁶ Ibid p. 171

⁷ Hopkins Dwight N. Copeland M. Shawn, "Human Being," in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, ed. Jones Serene and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). P. 98

⁸ Ibid. pp. 98-99

4. The need for solidarity and what it might mean to be the body of Christ in our present-day context.

How can we address racism being critical of our faith, scriptures, history both secular and ecclesial to show our solidarity in and through Christ's love that Christ reveals through his words and deeds? If we can once again picture George Floyd's and many others before him and after him crying out, 'I can't breathe', where have we failed? This statement becomes powerful as it can be placed not just in the context of racial justice but in the contexts of caste discrimination and economic depravity when many have committed suicide as in the case of young students at universities⁹ or poor farmers who have committed suicide in thousands. A reporter in the Times of India, one of the major Indian daily newspapers, captures the pitfalls of the caste system in today's world describing Rohith's death as follows:

"Most of us think of caste oppression through the lens of the "outdated" practice of untouchability, violent caste clashes in the distant countryside and in lavish biopics on the silver screen.

Lower-caste students are forced to wear colour-coded bands, made to sit on the floor, served mid-day meals separately, and often bear the brunt of teacher insults. In state after state, studies have shown the dropout rate of Dalit children is way higher than their proportion of the population."¹⁰

We cannot forget those who were lynched in America. They too were choked to death. All these people are also very much the body of Christ. They too have been a part of the Church that proclaims the fullness of life in and through Christ. Cone says the following explaining lynching:

The lynching of black America marked an important turning point in the history and meaning of lynching, as a racial component of lynching, changed its meaning for both whites and blacks. Lynching as primarily mob violence and torture directed against blacks began to increase after the civil war and the end of slavery, when the 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act granting black men the franchise and citizenship rights of participation in the affairs of the government.¹¹

Today, 7th November 2020, having seen the election results in the US with Joe Biden winning and the people of colour having their say, taking the right to vote seriously have expressed their right, vision and dream to build a better world.

⁹ Elizabeth Thavamani Joy, "Can Body Become a Liberating Tool for Reclaiming Identity and Freedom in Christ? An Examination with Special Reference to Dalit Theology" (Unpublished as of date, King's College London, 2018). Pp.23-28

¹⁰ Dhruvo Jyoti, "Death as a Dalit: What Rohith Vemula's Suicide Tells About India," *Hindustan Times*, 18th January 2016. (Quoted in the above thesis. P.23.

¹¹ James. H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2019 (Eleventh Printing)). P.4

The fact that a white police officer could kneel on the neck of a black person and murder him in broad daylight, even as fellow police men watched, even as the public filmed this act of murder, the world woke up to this brutal reality of injustice, violence and the body of Christ tattered under our very eyes. We as humanity have failed, failed miserably. If we embark on this journey, we will have to be ready to confess who we are and choose the right path, not go away from Christ as the rich young man did (Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30). Christ continues to reverse the question just as he did when he was asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' asking, 'Who are you a neighbour to?'. Reconciliation will include reparation bringing healing and wholeness to both parties the oppressors and the oppressed. So, retrospection, reparation, reconciliation and unity will be achieved if Christ and his love for the world that cries out for liberation is understood. If we choose to follow Christ and reflect his love, we are called to be in solidarity with people at the margins.

Questions suggested for the first Breakout Group discussions

- A. How can you as the Ecumenical Officers hosting the assembly in 2022 show in action your affirmation of the assembly theme?
- B. How will you respond to the four sections mentioned that Shawn Copeland outlines in his essay?
- C. Explain the opportunities and challenges in the affective and effective outcomes by adhering to reflecting Christ's love to move our world at local and global levels to reconciliation and unity.
- D. What did people do in the past when a pandemic struck? What is it that the humanity, the church lacked to face this pandemic situation? Did human beings need to be equipped with any other instrument or ideology?

2. The meaning and Purpose of the *Incarnation*

Incarnation is the expression of God's solidarity with the humans and the world for the cause of restoration. Our world stands in need of God's continuous intervention in history. We believe that humanity struggles with all the challenges to be a true witness to God's love. We may be on the road to transformation but in need of interrogating how we are doing it as individuals, communities and churches. Canon Vernon White points to the fact that it is never easy to identify the trends of any era saying:

No era stands alone with a self-sufficient sensibility. 'Pre-modernity' and 'modernity' have both proved notoriously porous notions, even considered in retrospect. So, it will be even more difficult to assess the sensibility in which we still currently stand. Nonetheless, some commentators are willing to try. And some at least are clear: while accepting that historical progress has, as a matter of fact, become dominant, they nonetheless think it has now become discredited and questionable; they claim our quest for meaning there has now stalled.¹²

However, Vernon White still gives us the hope by pointing to Macintyre and Taylor who identify the importance of narratives for us. Vernon quotes Taylor who believes that the 'changing shape of the sequence of events' that constitutes our life is fundamental as Taylor says:

The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we are, because we are always also changing and becoming... So the issue for us has to be not only where we are but where we're going... (and if) we want our lives to have meaning or weight... this means our whole lives... if necessary we want the future to 'redeem' the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or (sic-a) purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity.¹³

In such a context, unpacking Christ in our theme demands that we unpack the narrative of Christ's birth beginning with God the father who loved the World and sent his son Jesus Christ, whose birth - *incarnation* becomes the greatest narrative. It expresses God's solidarity with the world to bring about a new creation. The recent events in different parts of

¹² Vernon White, *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature and Theology* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). P.16

¹³ *Ibid.* p.26

the world showing protests against racism express body solidarity which becomes the hermeneutical key for doing theologies to overcome racism.

Christ's birth, life, death on the cross, resurrection, Ascension and the presence of the Holy Spirit that will lead us to the truth as Christ said. For the limitation in time for presenting this paper and discussing, I suggest we briefly look at incarnation and see how it leads to reconciliation and unity.

Incarnation from an Orthodox Perspective

Today, 1st November, the MOSC began its annual Calendar beginning with *Koodos Eetho* (*Church New Year*) which can be either 30th or 31st October if they fall on a Sunday or the first Sunday in November. The Church calendar has seven seasons or periods. Number seven is a symbol of perfection. The seven periods and their importance are as follows:

- (1). Koodos Eetho to Christmas - emphasis is on God's eternal Covenant, renewal and sanctification of humanity.
- (2). Christmas to Dananho (Epiphany) - emphasis is on the birth of Christ and the rebirth of the faithful.
- (3). Danaho to Great Lent – emphasis is on Christ's growth and the spiritual growth of the faithful.
- (4). Great Lent to Easter – emphasis is on Christ's acts, sufferings, crucifixion, resurrection and repentance of the faithful.
- (5). Easter to Pentecost – emphasis is on resurrection and hope of the faithful.
- (6). Pentecost to Transfiguration – emphasis is on the growth of the Church and spiritual nourishment of the faithful.
- (7) Transfiguration to Koodos Eetho – emphasis is on the Second Advent and eternal life.¹⁴

As seen from point 2 above, Christmas or incarnation's emphasis is 'the Word becoming flesh' in order that the faithful are also reborn in Christ and put on a new flesh that marks a difference in our attitude, behaviour and choice in relation to both our individual lives as well as that of communities that we are a part of and beyond.

¹⁴ K K John, *Christian Righteousness: An Orthodox Perspective*, vol. 1 (Dover, USA: St Thomas Orthodox Church of India, 2007). P.13

Suggested questions for second breakout groups

- A. Discuss racism as a structure and institutionalism within the Church and the Eucharist Table as an antidote?
- B. How does the doctrine of Incarnation and need for our solidarity to bring about racial justice address the assembly theme?
- C. What does Christly love mean in reality? How does it become real in action in a context of a pandemic?
- D. Will narrating your stories both negative and positive (especially the fall of the Berlin Wall) help world communities to realize our assembly theme?

3. The signs of hope during the COVID-19 and beyond: Next Steps

I would like us to look at a world of possibilities even in the present gloomy context that we are all in. firstly, the third encyclical from Pope Francis reflects on the COVID-19 as a pandemic that has ‘shown the failure of the world to work together, and that the true worth of the different countries of our world is measured by their ability to think as part of the larger human family’.¹⁵ As the WCC interim General Secretary Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca offered reflections on the newest encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*. Subtitled “On fraternity and social friendship”, it is heartening to see the priceless value of love being reiterated once again by Pope Francis as follows:

Thinking, working and acting by cultivating this virtue, which is understood as the cornerstone for our coexistence, people can build relationships, which go beyond networks of associations to an expression of solidarity that finds concrete expression in service.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ioan Sauca, "Wcc Interim General Secretary Reflects on Fratelli Tutti and the Christian Virtue of Love" <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-interim-general-secretary-reflects-on-fratelli-tutti-and-the-christian-virtue-of-love> (accessed 2nd November 2020).

¹⁶ Ibid.

Secondly, Dr Agnes Abuom the Moderator of the WCC addressing the G20 Interfaith Forum on Africa calls us to work with all faiths and communities saying:

“The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many of the inequities and injustices that are prevalent,” ...“The reality of living in multi-religious and diverse contexts ensure that our actions and commitments are carried out in a spirit of solidarity and calls (sic) us to be accountable to the broader society we live in.”¹⁷

Thirdly, the joint statements with respect to WCC and the Pontifical Committee for Interfaith Dialogue (PCID) have made through the following direction affirm what the wounded- world requires:

“Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond.” Its purpose is to encourage churches and Christian organizations to reflect on the importance of interreligious solidarity in a world wounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The document offers a Christian basis for interreligious solidarity that can inspire and confirm the impulse to serve a world wounded not only by COVID-19 but also by many other wounds.¹⁸

As Pope Francis points out, expression of solidarity is the need of the hour. God’s love for the world made the ‘Word to become Flesh’ – Incarnation to express God’s solidarity with the world to bring about reconciliation. Reconciliation and unity can be experienced as healing and restoration in and through the Body of Christ – both incarnation and Eucharist. It means restoration of the people of God to be restored in love and restored in relationship within the community. *Christic* work, Christ like function of the Body of Christ means readiness to work for justice and peace. I would like to place womanist Shawn Copeland’s quote at the centre of our discussion to unpack the meaning of the second half of the theme.

¹⁷ "Coronavirus – Africa: World Council of Churches (Wcc) Moderator Contributes to G20 Interfaith Forum on Africa", CNBCAfrica <https://www.cnbc africa.com/africa-press-office/2020/08/25/coronavirus-africa-world-council-of-churches-wcc-moderator-contributes-to-g20-interfaith-forum-on-africa/> (accessed 30th August 2020). Taken from Elizabeth Joy’s recent paper for the WCC webinar in October 2020, titled ‘Hate Speech and Religion: Can Interfaith Dialogue shape Christian Theology’.

¹⁸ "Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During Covid-19 and Beyond ", World Council of Churches <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/@@search?SearchableText=Wounded+World> (accessed 30th August 2020). Taken from Elizabeth Joy’s recent paper for the WCC webinar in October 2020, titled ‘Hate Speech and Religion: Can Interfaith Dialogue shape Christian Theology’.

What does reconciliation and unity mean in actual terms, in a broken world as we move on expounding the assembly theme before, during and after the 11th Assembly of the WCC? How can the broken bodies of the world because of racial injustice, those that are caught under the weight of the knee of casteism, patriarchy, racism It means breathing easy, breathing again, being able to breathe clean air, the right to demand an environment of human right to breathe. I hope America under the new leadership will as he says bind the country together bringing healing.

Reconciliation and Unity can be envisioned as a possibility only in the light of the life and work of Christ, Cross, the Empty tomb and the Ascension with the body. Faith, Hope and Love in Jesus Christ becomes a lived out faith in the body of Christ only when life is shared, when life—breath is affirmed as the primary common right and dignity of every human being. Talking about lynching and killing people making them unable to breathe, I would like to quote from a paper that I presented last year -2019 in Tokyo:

However, having addressed Overcoming Racism through Cone's 'Cross and the Lynching Tree' and from an Orthodox perspective, I feel compelled to request the ecumenical meetings in CTE with a calling to address not just the persecuted Church but equally the persecuting Church as well. The persecuted church needs to remind the persecuting church on various injustices that happen within the church that carries with it the burden of racism as an oppressor.¹⁹

I believed that as the body of Christ, if we can recognize where and how we have sinned corporately, we can bring about transformation with repentance. We need structural changes and make it happen through resistance as I point out below:

As the body of Christ, we need to resist and challenge power and forces of domination that stink with power, including the White House where the power of the US government resides. However, I feel that should come from people who have gone through the trauma of racism as I feel that only the OPPRESSED can bring solution to Oppression. Sin that is structural and has been communitarian requires that we seek not just individual or private confession but a

¹⁹ Elizabeth Joy, "Can the Dollar Speak?: Racial Injustice and Dalit Liberation from an Orthodox Theological Perspective on the Cross," in *Theological Forum on Racism* (Tokyo, Japan: 2019).

public and communal confession that can lead to transformation and overcoming racism in all its forms.²⁰

I believe this has happened today as the world has witnessed the solidarity of the people in America making a difference using their right to vote. We need to express our solidarity through ‘body engagement’ which is the hermeneutical key for our theological, ethical and ecumenical way forward to realize our assembly theme – ‘Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity’.

Conclusion

While the reason for incarnation according to the Catholic and the Protestants is the fall in the Garden of Eden - the original sin, for the Orthodox it is being separated from God creating a chasm or a gap. We need to see if we can understand these two terms to come closer in meaning –whether you fall or move away from God, there is a gap created which needs to be bridged and incarnation precisely does that. Incarnation undergirds God the Father’s love for the world and sending his only begotten Son into the world. Christ’s love reveals the coming of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. Will our Christological doctrines equip us to journey together to reflect Christ’s love across our denominational faiths that will move the world to reconciliation and unity? What further steps need to be taken to ensure this journey? I am sure the Assembly will take care of this aspect, but we can keep reflecting on how Christ’s love will move the world to reconciliation and unity from different angles – Mission at & from the margins, Interfaith relations, casteism, modern slavery and gender inequalities are a few to be added to unpack our assembly theme. This paper is just a small slice of the big pie – the assembly theme. It is a long road to justice but glad we will go together as the

²⁰ Ibid.

African Proverb goes, 'If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together'.

WCC has obviously opted to go far in this journey to uproot all injustice that the road to reconciliation and unity will be laid out as we move the world with Christ's love.

"Coronavirus – Africa: World Council of Churches (Wcc) Moderator Contributes to G20 Interfaith Forum on Africa", CNBCAfrica <https://www.cnbcfrica.com/africa-press-office/2020/08/25/coronavirus-africa-world-council-of-churches-wcc-moderator-contributes-to-g20-interfaith-forum-on-africa/> (accessed 30th August 2020).

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