

# what does God require of us?

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



## Introduction

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

—Micah 6:8

## What Does God Require of Us?

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

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

## Living Faithfully in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

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



World Communion  
of Reformed Churches

## Witnessing Circle

In our third discernment circle, we bring together the idea of witness along with the liturgical calendar of Pentecost. To witness means two things: one, of course, is the idea of seeing. To witness something is to identify with a discerning moment. And in our first circle we were witness to the cries of people across our communion; in our sharing circles this has also been our attempt.

But to witness also means to speak out. This is the prophetic moment. Having seen and judged, it is now incumbent on our communion to act, to embrace the Holy Spirit and change the world we are living in. We call upon all who are part of this witnessing circle to creatively engage with what is being said and discussed so that we as a Communion can now move into a prophetic moment when we will be able to turn our world upside down.

And as we move forward to the witnessing circle let us remember what the prophet Joel says that in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Those whom society thinks are unimportant, those who lie outside the mainstream of society, the young, women, the old, are the ones who will be enthused with visions and dreams. And it is these visions that provide the new hermeneutic for us to discern, confess, witness, and reform the world in which we live.





## Sharing Session: Alianza de Iglesias Presbiterianas y Reformadas de América Latina (AIPRAL)

**Darío Baorlin** (*AIPRAL*):

**T**he *Alianza de Iglesias Presbiterianas y Reformadas de América Latina* (AIPRAL), in obedience to the mission of God, contributes to the meeting under study and theological education, solidarity, and events. The impact of the Reformed family in Latin America and the Caribbean is to promote life in all fullness for creation and reaffirm a commitment to the values of the kingdom and the justice that flows from this Reformed spirituality.

**Simony Dos Anjos** (*Presbyterian Church of Brazil*):

We live in a terrible time of pandemic. We have lost many loved ones to a virus that has wrecked our lives and our nations, especially the more vulnerable of society. For this I pray for the blessings on the consolation of the Spirit divine on us all. The countries in Latin America share a characteristic in that our democracies are young. Because of the period of dictatorships under which most of our countries have lived over the last 50 years (five decades of governments of four years' average duration), the population has had little opportunity to choose representatives over about 10 cycles. That's very little when it has to do with stable consolidation of governments. This way, the policies become very personalized, centered on personalities, not on government programs. The damage that this has produced is in how easily countries polarize; we have seen fundamentalist or polarized governments.

Until last year in Guatemala, we had an evangelical fundamentalist, Pastor Jimmy Morales. In Costa Rica, we had the leader of the restoration National Party Fabricio, Geraldo Alvarez Munoz; his presidential campaign included defense of the family in the position of equal marriage. After Morales, an interim president, Janine Aeneas, appeared with a presidential band and a small pink Bible in her hand. There are lots of other names.

The largest and biggest danger with these fundamentalists is that they go hand in hand with neoliberals. They talk in Parliament on television about the defense of the ultra-family model, which is normative, and "good customs." We see privatization and the minimization of the state. In this moment I want to call attention to the fact that the fundamentalist offensive results in the growth of capitalism, because it defends merit and is against social policies in the distribution of resources.

The Christianization of moral guidelines is monopolizing and polarizing public debate. The defense of religious agendas in Parliament and the moral agendas is an attack on the lay state and the fundamental human rights. And this happens in a frame that is promoted by religion.

**Paula Camara** (*Presbyterian Church of Brazil*):

This last year, the Caribbean society and Latin America have struggled with the pandemic, which brings up this systemic crisis. It recalls the colonialist period with its different affected populations and groups in society. This makes everything much worse both indirectly and directly. Current sanitary conditions are affected, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. The pandemic constitutes challenges to leadership in pastoral roles for those who oversee those carry-

ing out theological work in the region, and challenges in being able to face the situations in our countries and of those we serve.

In this sense, I brought to the executive committee with its member churches a plan to organize a series of meetings to think ecumenically and Reformed about mission and the *diakonia* post pandemic. This is being organized as our visions are from a little different perspectives.

From Reformed, ecumenical, and prophetic perspectives in our region, in our continent, we have, as churches, identified challenges. Those challenges are impoverishment and concentration of riches, climate crisis, migration, gender justice, and catastrophes. We have had an average of 75 people in each of these meetings, not only from Latin America and the Caribbean, but also North America and Africa. In this space, we ask ourselves how to be a companion in hope and how to walk with our people, now in the context of the pandemic and post pandemic.

**Letty Heredia** (*Vice President of AIPRAL*):

The pandemic has affected us in different ways. In health, a great loss of lives. There is mourning in many countries of the world; God has woken us to a new reality. What is going on in humanity? We see deficiencies in governments, the



mismanagement of resources as made visible in migration and violence, weak democracies. Some are privileged, and many are vulnerable, which is giving us to understand that while we are in the same storm, we aren't in the same boat. This is a historical moment that causes us to reflect and rethink our mission as churches in the world. We have seen how this affects us in Latin America. But we also see with hope in God's hands moving through our churches and our people to transform the world to be light in the midst of darkness.

Most of our churches are small; they have an active commitment to facing the needs of the people, neighborhoods, and communities where they live, needs multiplied in this time of pandemic. Our regions are accustomed to crisis; we live in the midst of crisis. Yet, we

have always lived together, supporting each other. This time, physical distancing has not allowed us to live our community strength together. Slowly, we have been able to find other ways to struggle together. Our region of small churches expresses our gratitude to God in the midst of crisis and pandemics. We still hope, we still dream, we still work for a better world, that is to come.

## Sharing Session: Economic Justice

**Peter Cruchley** (*Council for World Mission*):

COVID has been a huge part of all our lives and work as our reflections have reminded us. It's also been part of the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) initiative, looking at the impact COVID has had on our economic relationships and what it's revealing about those relationships. This has been another area where we have tried to speak the same messages around debt cancellation, around investment in public health and social care, employment rights; the need for a progressive tax system that can rebalance our economy. We have called for alternative global structures that can address the interconnected ecological and economic crises that COVID has named and shown to us as part of our movement and moment as churches that have been vital in decolonizing movements of the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. In the national political structures we have seen some signs of that colonization, and again, economic relationships show us much that needs to be challenged and changed with the colonization of our international financial architecture systems like the World Bank.

We're trying to move from system critique into system change. For example, we've been running the global economic management (GEM) school as a space for gathering activists within our churches to explore economic analysis and a critique of the economy of life and work. They're focused not just on the critique, but on practical application in their communities and how to do this work; that feeds into our life, and we are trying to build this further. COVID has impacted that, as we all know. We're committed to bringing the vision of an economy of life into theological education and through the Zacchaeus Tax campaign to voice that call for change from churches and other communities. Our interactions this year on interfaith perspectives and the perspectives of Indigenous people and how that is challenging us, particularly in the area of reparation, land, justice, labor justice—all of these are areas we are addressing.

We've heard again how most African countries spend more on debt repayment than they do on health. So why don't we begin to talk about reparation? We begin to ask who really owes whom, who forgives whose debts. The work that the WCRC is doing through World Council of Churches, Council for World Mission, and NIFEA is asking how we bring reparations into a formal system that builds up what has been broken and what has been exploited. As we address this, we're asked to understand that it's an encounter for mission; it's seeking to understand and articulate re-creation as a magnificent action. We have the chance to reorder our systems, minds, and hearts with joy, bringing down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up high those who have been despised. We are invited to reconsider an economic system that can change to support transformation, healing, and restoration. These are all faith phases and factors in shaping and formations individual organizations and our life and work together.

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## Discernment Questions

1. In what ways do you think the question of economic justice is important for faith?
2. The COVID and Beyond process has raised the question of inequality and injustice. What can our Communion do better to address this?
3. How can we get our churches to concretely support and lobby for the ZacTax Campaign?

### **Athena Peralta** (*World Council of Churches*):

The pandemic has clearly highlighted the importance of access to health care and to basic income security. And we know that tackling this pandemic entails tremendous, tremendous resources; the pandemic has already cost the world economy an additional \$12 trillion just last year alone, according to Oxfam. Out of this amount of \$12 trillion that governments have spent, 83% or around \$9.8 trillion was spent by 36 rich nations, versus around \$42 billion, around 4%, was spent by 59 developing low-income countries. So clearly, countries in the Global South are in dire need of and have to mobilize more resources to respond to the second and the third waves of the pandemic, in particular to initiate and expand life-saving vaccination programs. Taxation coupled with debt cancellation is really the only sustainable way of mobilizing these resources.

Lesson number one, health is wealth. In an era of financialization definitions of wealth, progress, and wellbeing have been reduced to money—into efficient ways of accumulating it—and this has had implications in many areas, in particular, the almost universal application over the last four decades of neoliberal economic policies promoting austerity. Privatization commodification have severely undermined public health systems in indebted countries such as the Philippines where I'm from. These measures were imposed as debt conditionality, resulting in less doctors in the public health sector, a shortage of hospital beds, under equipped health centers, etc. The Philippines has only six doctors per 10,000 populations, lower than the minimum recommended ratio of 10, and six out of 10 people in the country perish without even seeing a doctor. The under resourcing is neglect of public health.

Our response to the global health crisis must be in sync with our response to the longer standing, economic and ecological emergencies, and must hold together economic, social, and ecological objectives. And this is why the NIFEA initiative of the churches is so critical, rooted in God's promise of a new creation that affirms wholeness of life performed. The calls in a time of pandemic have never been more urgent. These include the cancellation of external debts of low- and middle-income countries to make available resources for rebuilding the resilience and livelihoods of people. The allocation of necessary funds to public health and social protection.

We must harness compassion, solidarity, and creativity to respond to the crisis. No doubt this underlines the potential of a different kind of economy, with a cause for fresh systems of global governance and policies, rooted in justice, care, and sustainability, and helping to create an environment where such community-based initiatives can take root and flourish.

## Sharing Session: Northeast Asia Area Council (NEAAC)

**Yueh-Wen Lu** (*Presbyterian Church in Taiwan*):

**T**he outbreak of COVID-19 changed the world, the society, and the life that we used to be familiar with. The region of Northeast Asia is one of the regions that has been commented as having “better performance” in terms of fighting against the pandemic. Nevertheless, such good performance was achieved with prices that we did not expect.

Japan’s government, for example, is quite “famous” in terms of its slowness in the policy and decision-making process. Its slowness put the whole nation in danger. Only a few Japanese citizens got vaccinated while the majority of people are still waiting in the queue.

For people in Hong Kong, the pandemic made evident that the democratic living style and politics they used to have no longer exist. Totalitarianism and censorship have become normal phenomena in daily life.

While others lived in so-called hard lock down, we Taiwanese kept our routine lifestyle for almost fifteen months since 2020: no school lockdown, no large-scale economic collapses, and no serious mental breakdowns. We had life that was almost the same as in 2019, except everyone had to wear masks. It could even be described as “living in paradise.”

Things began to change in May this year. Countries like South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong began the process of vaccination, while Taiwan continued its original strategies to control the pandemic outbreak. Then, one day, Taiwanese found more and more confirmed local COVID-19 cases without knowing the source. The figure of confirmed cases rose rapidly until the central government announced the implementation of the policy of soft lockdown in the middle of May. Suddenly, everything turned to the mode of online: online grocery shopping, online worship, online graduation ceremony, online meeting, online work from home, or even online medical check. Taiwan is repeating what has happened in other parts of the world in 2020.

Furthermore, the inaccessibility of valid vaccines is also an injustice, and such injustice connects not only to economic capacity but also to geographical politics of a nation. Take Taiwan, for example. Since Taiwan is not a member of the World Health Organization, the accessibility of valid vaccines is much more difficult than for other countries. Apart from COVAX, a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, Taiwan does have financial capacity to purchase through market mechanisms. However, such mechanisms can be interfered with by political power. With the worldwide shortage of vaccines plus political reasons, Taiwan is not able to get vaccines on its estimated schedule due to boycott and interference from China. Vaccines become a tool that not only creates political turmoil but also triggers a strong sense of social insecurity.

Beyond COVID-19, the priority for us as Christians in the region is to think about how we as Christians and churches can reshape current narratives about injustice and justice, even though we have been talking about injustice versus justice for a long time.



## Discernment Questions

1. Taiwan's presentation calls for vaccine justice. What can churches do to promote that all people on earth will have access to COVID-19 vaccines?
2. The presentation from Korea urges churches to address the damage that the pandemic is doing to young women. What can churches do to protect and empower women in this situation?

### **Sohyun Nam** (*Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea*):

Disaster does not come equally. The coronavirus attacked all of us. It attacked all classes and races without discrimination. However, the damage caused by this virus was not equal. The effects of the coronavirus are experienced differently by men and women, especially, face consequences that are worse than for anyone else.

In the patriarchal society of Korea, even before the coronavirus attacked us, young women were regarded as low-value workers in Korea. They are perceived to be workers who will leave the company because of marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth rather than as breadwinners. As a result, many young women are hired as non-regular workers who can be laid off easily, rather than as stable, full-time workers. These young women have to earn their living on the small income they receive from irregular work.

Up until now, Korea has been considered a model country for handling the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic. The government has fought the coronavirus epidemic with the aim of recovering daily life. But women are not included in what they call the restoration of daily life. The recovery of daily life in Korean society is equated with the recovery of the economy, which still focuses on job recovery for men who earn a living. Unlike other countries, government-funded emergency disaster assistance has been delivered to "household owners," who are mainly men, and not to individuals. Young women were the ones who suffered the most from the corona attack, but no assistance was delivered to them.

The church in Korea should make an effort to listen to women's voices. Until now, Korean churches have grown rapidly through the dedication of women. Although women were given the responsibility of service, all of the leadership positions, such as elder and pastor, were occupied by men. In the midst of this pandemic, women experienced alienation and discrimination even in church. Leaders of the male-centered churches in Korea did not hear the voices of women and young people suffering from COVID-19, nor did they offer any consolation for women.

Now, the church has to turn away from its previous direction. The churches have to work harder than anyone else to hear the voices of women who are suffering. Instead of listening to the voices of male leaders in the church, we should listen to the voices of women and young people who have been alienated from the church. For this, the church should establish a system to collect opinions from women. Just as Jesus was the first to deliver the joy of resurrection to women, the Church should be the first to deliver joy and liberty to women.



## Sharing Session: Youth

### **Meta Ginting** (*WCRC intern*):

**A**t the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, reports indicated that the disease was mostly affecting older adults, and that young people were more likely to have milder cases of the disease. But young people are among the most affected by the economic crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in countries where job loss rates and related financial difficulties were relatively low, young people are worried.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the mental health of young people as we've heard in social media or other reports: Some young people say that they are deeply anxious, have started self-harming, are having panic attacks, or are losing motivation and hope for the future. We know that some young people will deal with multiple pressures, especially those who have been bereaved or experienced other trauma during this time. In such a time as this, it is important to be hopeful and look beyond the situation.

### **Raíssa Brasil** (*WCRC Vice President, Brazil*):

We have somehow learned to live in crisis. This, the biggest health crisis of the current times, has an impact that is aggravated in Latin American countries by other social problems.

The region is going through problems of violence, poverty, inequity, economic development, instability in democracies, enforced migrations: all of these affect a large part of society and especially children, adolescents, young people, people with disabilities, African descendants, and women. The scenarios of violence are closely related to social inequality, most affecting those in poverty.

The pandemic has greatly aggravated poverty in Latin America in 2020, with millions of people having found themselves in poverty. In Brazil, there are already 27 million people below the minimum of poverty. This affects young people, especially; many of them cannot find jobs or they find jobs that are informal and do not guarantee dignity or security. Many young people could not work at home or have safe conditions in the workplace, so they have needed to expose themselves to the virus daily.

We have lost a lot during this pandemic: We lost people we love, we lost the affection and the sensibility of touch in relationships during social distancing. We felt all of this affecting our emotional stability and our mental health like never before. In this scenario where society in general, churches, and youth are affected, hope seems to fade. As we get used to the pandemic context, many of us leave, in spite of the ongoing reality of violence, inequity, and climate injustice among other problems.

In this context, we see very engaged Protestant youth and Reformed youth who refuse to accept the shadow times. It is a relief that the young people of AIPRAL have met monthly online, addressing issues that challenge us; in these meetings we work as a group, discern, and pray together.

The reality in Latin America is very harsh, but as young people we refuse to close our eyes and alienate ourselves. Whether by voluntary work involvement through the church, participating in civil society in the fight for human rights, participating actively in mass manifestations—young people have a key role in combating the problems mentioned before.

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On one hand hope seems to fade due to the difficult reality in which we live. On the other hand, youth have chosen to be resistance, taking the leading role in the fight against poverty and violence in its many forms.

**Ente Muan Puii** (*Presbyterian Church of India, Mizoram Synod*):

Normality still seems a long way off, as India happens to be one of the worst COVID-19-affected countries. As part of an Indigenous community in the COVID-19 outbreak, unfortunately the impact began with racial discrimination for us. People from the northeast who resided in the mainland of India for work and studies were harassed, abused, traumatized, and disparaged for our physical appearance as much as for coronavirus.

As in other places, thousands of youth, who are the backbone of our society, lost their jobs; their long-term career prospects have been badly affected by the pandemic. About two thousand working youths have been displaced and forced to return to their homes from different parts of the country; educational institutions have been closed since March last year because of the COVID trauma. Many students had to give up their education, as they could not afford smartphones for online classes. Several rural areas in Mizoram, in fact, are still deprived of technology and proper internet connection. Cases of anxiety and depression have risen, with many people experiencing a relapse as the pandemic takes a serious toll on people's emotional well-being.

The closing of churches for worship also proves to be a test of faith for youth. While some remain faithful witnesses of Christ and the gospel, some have become lethargic and ultimately adulterated their allegiance to God while waiting for churches to reopen. Since most of us are avid social networkers, I believe we can make use of social media platforms to suit their interests and create space for indirect evangelism. We also need to invest in young people and provide sustainable futures for them in flourishing economies and societies.

The impacts of a crisis are never gender neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. As an Indigenous woman, I also feel the need to talk about some issues faced by women. India, as a society, has been rooted in patriarchy. Increased household responsibilities during lockdown compelled women to remain at home. Women found themselves in an endless cycle of cooking, cleaning, and providing care at home; mothers have to balance work with childcare and schooling responsibilities. Many women, young and old, lost their income, and were forced to engage in physically demanding work like rock crushing, some even resorting to commercial sex for survival, which is truly heartbreaking. Meanwhile, reports of spousal violence and domestic violence suffered by women are clear indicators of lockdown fall-out.

On a positive note, churches and NGOs offer their premises to be converted into COVID care facilities. Mizoram also takes pride in the existence of dedicated task forces all over the state, comprising largely youth volunteers, churches, organizations, individuals, and even children, that raised and donated large funds. All these, to me, point to the middle people, honoring our Christian beliefs and humanity in the midst of the pandemic. We will show others the way forward and confidently stand up to any storm, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Victoria Turner** (*United Reformed Church and Ph.D. candidate, Edinburgh University*):

Young people have continuously been scapegoated by our government during this pandemic. When COVID-19 cases rose at the start of the university semester, it was made to appear to be the fault of young people who followed the advice of the government to go to a new city, without available testing, and live with new people in student halls to start in-person university. These young people were encouraged to leave their support systems at home and venture to universities that do not care for their welfare but have an abundance of care for their tuition fees and rent payments.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson made it perfectly clear that sacrifices would have to be made in his lockdown announcement speech. I don't think we quite realized that he meant the sacrifice of our grandparents, parents, friends, and siblings to allow companies to have tax breaks and the government to squander money on its rich friends. Those driven by morals in our country locked down before the government took action: closed their shops, sacrificed their wages, and wore masks, but our borders weren't closed. The economy is the god in Western society that has to be saved at all costs. Capitalism with its lie of trickling-down wealth, is so embedded in this country that for others is completely unfathomable. My own family, who live in Wales, which was hit with the pandemic worst (I was in Scotland) would not stop working before the announcement, even though one of them has an autoimmune disease and is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19.

It is completely evident that human life in the United Kingdom is valued economically. Many parents on welfare support in the UK rely on schools to provide their children with cooked meals. Obviously, with schools closing, this is no longer possible. A Conservative MP, however, argued—without any evidence—that the food vouchers already given instead of money to families were being swapped for drugs, and instead food packages were given to the hungry children. The food vouchers were for fifteen pound a week, but the food provided in these packages cost under five pounds. The company made ten pounds' profit off every child that was dehumanized and hungry. Many reacted saying that the food was enough, and the company needed to make a profit. Injustice is embedded in this society.

**Gena Boateng** (*Presbyterian Church of Ghana*):

What does it mean to be a Christian Reformed young person in my context? To be Reformed in my context, which is Ghana, one needs to be orthodox and confessional. To be Reformed in my context is to belong to a rich tradition, which includes a full voice in the independence struggle of Ghana, a pacesetter in education and educational reforms, a strong presence in social intervention programs, especially in the areas of health, agriculture, and poverty reduction projects. To be a young person that is Reformed is also to belong to a church or a tradition that is sometimes painfully conservative. To be a young person that is Reformed in my context is to be restless. Reformed churches like the one I belong to are what I call conservatively confessional and orthodox. This means that young and Reformed in Ghana today are being asked to sit still and have low adaptability to change. It means holding on to old confessions of Westminster





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As a young person I would like the church to address social issues that affect me and other young persons of the church and society at large in real time by reading the signs of the times.

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and foundational Calvinism with little room for evolving confessions. A typical example is the Accra Confession drawn up in my own country in 2004.

It is frustrating when the world is moving so fast, yet our church implores us to step on the brakes. It is frustrating when we see all around us deepening poverty and waste, when we see deepening inequalities, amassing of wealth by sections of society, political corruption, relentless environmental degradation, and a big health challenge—COVID—and all we have, as Reformed Christians, is the heritage of old. As a young person I would like the church to address social issues that affect me and other young persons of the church and society at large in real time by reading the signs of the times. I would like to see more engagement of my ideas and energy and transformational processes. To be Reformed appears, from my point of view, as though I must be averse to transformation and look upon every new thought with enough suspicion not to entertain it.

If the Accra Confession told us anything, we would have been better placed for advocacy. During the early days of the COVID pandemic, Ghana had only three weeks of lockdown, even though some sectors were shut down for longer. During those three weeks, the environmental impact was vast. The church had not been involved in or seeing the lessons, but three weeks of lockdown brought on a lot of sharing. Those who were able graciously gave to those without food; the government, the churches, and NGOs handed out food items, etc. But events made clear the level of poverty and inequalities that exist in the nation, since during the lockdown cooked food had to be handed out not just to squatters, but also to survivors' households.

The church did well in that moment, giving food items to those in need; but how does the church address structural and systemic failure to better help people come out of this kind of poverty? I would like to see the WCRC give even more attention to Sub-Saharan Africa, especially by creating more opportunities for youth to be brought into the discourses and engagements, programs and projects of the international body to have a greater impact on reform for attorneys in Sub-Saharan Africa. The WCRC may also find a way to hold its member churches accountable to some degree on the ways in which they journey with the world body in its programs and projects.

**Mathilde Sabbagh** (*National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon*):

I have pastored this church since 2016. I was born here. I was raised here, and this is my church. The northeast of Syria is divided among two groups: the Syrian government and the democratic forces that belong to the Kurdish forces that took control of the city, divided it, and put people under pressure. This is a city living since 2012 without electricity: I call it then no city. There is no electricity, there is no medication, and since 2019, Turkey has cut the water from the city. For the last two years, there has been no water for drinking, for washing, or for daily needs. This is a very difficult and critical situation that we are experiencing. As you know, many people left as immigrants or as refugees to other places in the world, which made the city a city for only the elderly and very young children. There is this missing generation in between, between 30 to 60 years old.

This is a very miserable situation. I know that I was asked to speak about COVID-19. I cannot say that COVID-19 really threatened us because we are already threatened by different circumstances and challenges that present problems that we ourselves cannot solve. COVID-19 is quick death, but here we live under slow death.

The people are really suffering; they are in a very terrible situation, and the church is trying its best. We serve as a church. We serve many, and our ministry is ecumenical. We serve more than 250 children, over 100 teenagers, and over 80 women each week. Every day, there is continuous ministry. We serve the teenagers with their studies; we have an empowerment program for them to teach them whatever they cannot be told at their schools because even the educational system collapsed.

This is who we are. This is our church. We have many relief programs: we help with food parcels, fuel payments, water distribution, jacket distributions for children, blanket distributions. We help with tuition for students and their education, because here we have a private school at the church. We cover the tuition of the Christian people who became poor and cannot survive the day without the help of many, not only the church.

This is who we are. We seek for you to know about our situation and speak about it. Let the world hear how human beings are living without electricity and water and medication and education and their daily needs. We are trying our best, and we ask you to pray for us, to think of us, and to share our voice with many.

**Kate Jones** (*United Church of Canada*):

One thing the pandemic taught me is that the community is essential. We've had to remind one another that even when we're physically distanced, we are never alone. My hope for the churches in North America after the pandemic is that we might continue to embrace the creativity that the pandemic has sparked in us that we might always be finding new ways to embody Christ's presence and live God's love in the corner of the world where we find ourselves.

**Rev. Shawn Harmon** (*Presbyterian Church (USA)*):

One thing the pandemic taught me is the importance of the priesthood of all believers in God's mission for the world that the church has to carry out. We are to pray on behalf of the world, to mourn with those who mourn, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to lay the prayers of the world before God, our heavenly Father, in a time when there's so much turmoil and strife and sadness and hope and excitement, and a new news, God gives us the gift to pray on behalf of the world.

## Discernment Questions

1. From what you have heard, what do you think are the major issues facing young people from our Communion?
2. Why do you think listening to the voices of the young is important for the church?
3. In what ways do you think that the WCRC can introduce structures that allow us to hear young people and their dreams and aspirations?

## Sharing Session: Human Sexuality

**Philip Peacock** (*WCRC Executive Secretary for Justice and Witness*):

We are called to communion and committed to justice as revealed in Jesus Christ. We have embarked on a journey together seeking God's voice and wisdom related to human sexuality. In our last General Council, we already made the following actions: Firstly, a decision that condemns all acts of violence against LGBTQ persons, regardless of our theological views around the globe. Secondly, confessing our complicity in supporting this violence through our silence. And thirdly, to continue to commit ourselves to work for justice, freedom, and a safe world for all persons to flourish.

In 2017, we had a consultation on human sexuality, using communion as a lens through which we look at this issue, and we have found the following commitments; a commitment to the Bible, a commitment to critical Reformed theological engagement, a commitment to journeying together seeking God's voice, a commitment to the radical hospitality that Jesus has called us to, a commitment to continue the conversation that involves respect, love, trust, and listening to a variety of voices, including those most affected, and a commitment to praying for and with one another.

And as we move ahead now on this journey, the question that lies before us is, "How do we speak of human sexuality from a justice lens as well?" We would like to do this in three ways. Firstly, placing this conversation in the larger context of the Belhar Confession. And by this we mean that we may disagree in a number of things, but there is a place where we have to draw the line—which is action 56.1 of our General Council, which condemns all acts of violence against LGBTQ persons. Secondly, to listen to experiences of churches, working with LGBTQ persons, and the voices of LGBTQ persons themselves. And thirdly, to frame this conversation ecclesologically in terms of what the church has been doing and what the church can do.

**Nico Koopman** (*University of Stellenbosch*):

The Belhar Confession was formulated in the context of apartheid in South Africa, and it has meaning for all contexts where human beings are inferiorized, stigmatized, dehumanized, discriminated against, and excluded. Belhar confesses that God is the God that calls each of us. God is the one who brings us together, the one who assembles. Article One says, God brings people together through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that we can live in unity, unity in togetherness, unity in proximity, unity in diversity and unity despite dividing lines. Article two confesses that God reconciles God's people to God, into each other and the rest of creation; in Jesus Christ, people overcome the alienation and estrangement. For the most marginalized and excluded, to the most silenced and ignored ones, to the most stereotyped, the most stigmatized, and the demonized ones in society. And then Belhar concludes that Jesus Christ is Lord. Christ empowers us for a life of obedience. LGBTQ+ beloved and heterosexual beloved were challenged by Belhar to jointly practice unity and solidarity, to together seek a reconciliation in the determination of discrimination and dehumanization, to jointly seek the overcoming of marginalization and exclusion, silencing and ignoring stereotyping and stigmatizing in the demonizing our LGBTQ+ beloved. Yes, Belhar challenges us to know, we shall overcome, because Jesus Christ is love.

Belhar confesses that God is the God that calls each of us. God is the one who brings us together, the one who assembles.



He reigns supreme. To him, we pledge highest loyalty. The Confession of Belhar is this wonderful message. A message of equality before God, even more than equality. Heterosexual beloved and the LGBTQ + beloved, don't just say we are equals, we say we are beloved, now that we are more than equals. We've honored each of us together, we constitute the children of the loving God, the church of the living God, the society of the living God.

**Kakay Pamaran** (*Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines*):

Union's primary task is theological education and pastoral formation for both the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and the United Methodist Church, our two sponsoring denominations. I came to Union as a student in the MDF

program in 2012. So, at the onset, I came out as lesbian and kind of did my own thing. I knew then that the decision to come out in seminary was, more than anything, a political act. I remember having a serious conversation about it with my then-partner (we're no longer together). And she said that once I say it out loud, I will not be able to take it back. I put myself out there.

Why was integration into the seminary community possible? It wasn't because I was a flaming lesbian or I was brave or I was articulate, it was because Union is very clear about its ethical and pedagogical commitments in the first place. I was admitted to one of its strongest pastoral formation programs without much fanfare. I remember the Dean of Students who is also Hebrew Scripture professor, she simply asked, "You are admitted to our residential program. Will you be okay if you have to travel?

Three hours by bus in the weekends to see your partner? We really wanted to have the full community experience here so perhaps you can work out an arrangement with her so she can come visit you instead." That pretty much summed up the whole conversation about my sexual orientation. I've never worked so hard in my life, but that simple act of welcome, which evolved into full solidarity and commitment to work it out no matter what, that mattered to me.

**Dan Gonzales** (*Comunidad Teologica, Mexico*):

The Church of Jesus Christ, particularly in the Reformed tradition, is called to be a community of believers with theological thinking, an open church to reflection. The COVID-19 pandemic has made brilliantly clear how many other pandemics are also around in the world, and one of them is the lack of inclusion. Beyond the

CONFESSION OF BELHAR  
  
 10TH COMMEMORATION  
 (1986-1996)

*We* believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers and protects and cares for His Church by His beginning of the world and will do to the end.

*We* believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

*We* believe

that Christ's work of reconciliation made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled; that unity is, therefore both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the work simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit; one faith have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope.

## Discernment Questions

1. Action 56.1 of the 2017 Leipzig General Council “condemns all acts of violence against LGBTQ persons, regardless of our theological views, around the globe.” In what ways can our Communion live out this action?
2. How can we apply the principles of the Belhar Confession (that we may disagree on a number of questions but there is a firm point on which our faith either stands or falls) to the question of human sexuality?

lack of debate in some countries, and particularly the Global South, but sometimes in the Global North, as well.

In Latin America we have seen with all these social groups that are openly visible in the streets without considering if the churches find this pertinent or not. And this is the correct attitude. It’s one of the first questions, which the churches have to face: Where do we stand as churches? With this imminent reality of people seeking their rights, are the churches going to accompany these processes? Are the churches going to be part of the search for answers to those who have been most marginalized? Isn’t the church being called to accompany these sectors of society? Is salvation inside the church, or does the church save itself by being immersed with these movements?

We have to think what the theological movements that come from the LGBTQ communities have produced and are more important epistemologically, in part, to our theologies than anything else. These communities have produced so much to lead us on the reflection of us. The foundational elements within the biblical text are in the contextual settings of the readings, and we have to go to that research where it’s taking place. The ecclesiological goal is to build community, faith communities, with theological thinking in our Reformed tradition. The Reformed church is called to be always reforming.

**Asir Ebenezer** (*National Council of Churches in India*):

We need to discern a sense of urgency in responding to the concerns of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, particularly from what we have learned from COVID-19. We realize there’s a lack of privacy, a lack of touch, and a lack of safe spaces for these friends. We also realize a sense of urgency because we address violence, and we need to respond. To do this, we realize there needs to be a change in perception, a change in our theological task. And unless we do that, we will not be able to change. Hearing is something very important in the context of listening to people with gender diversities, gender identities, and sexual diversities. It’s very important during COVID time because people could not talk to their parents, their siblings, their own friends. They had to talk with their own communities, but it was difficult to communicate. There should be some avenue by which the churches can open helplines so that we could save lives, from distress, and possibly even suicide.

Learning is another important aspect. We can learn from the Scriptures referred to in Acts 17:11. We need to have a deeper learning and base ourselves on the Scripture, and see how Scripture addresses diversity, encompasses diversity—and in this context within human sexualities. It is also important to learn from each other in the community and because some of us think differently, those who think differently can learn from each other.



## Sharing Session: The Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC)

**Norbert Stevens** (*United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands*):

Jamaica has a population of 3 million people, and up to Sunday of this week, only 5% of our population has been fully vaccinated. We are a church in two nations: Jamaica and Cayman. In Cayman, by comparison, 60% of their population is fully vaccinated. Of our population, 1.7% have been exposed and have contracted the COVID virus; over a thousand deaths have challenged our circumstances socially and otherwise. Our first case was confirmed in March 2020. Interestingly, it came through a funeral service in a church.

We have received vaccines, through the global access vaccination facility. For the most part, we've only been receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine, the first of which arrived in April of this year. The government's target is inoculating 16% of the population by the end of 2021; only 5% so far have been fully inoculated. At the current rate, it will be 2029 before we arrive at the full vaccination of the population. We remain one of the least vaccinated populations in the English-speaking Caribbean. We're behind a number of our neighbors, Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Lucia. There are even others behind us: Haiti, for instance, only received its first dose of vaccines in this month. We are struggling as a region in relation to access to vaccines.

The challenge we have is a vaccination gap between the global rich and the global poor. COVID brought all of us to our knees, but some have risen more quickly than others in response. We've hardly started and the United States is close to vaccinating 50% of its entire population of 330 million people. Canada has procured more than 10 doses for every resident. And part of the struggle for those of us who are among the global poor, is that, unlike the global rich, we can't expand vaccinations to go beyond the most vulnerable. So in our country, for instance, many younger people have not been exposed to the vaccine.

And because we are struggling to access the vaccine, the problems compound. The government has stopped issuing a first dose of vaccine because they cannot guarantee that they will procure sufficient vaccines to administer a second dose. At the moment, we are scurrying around looking for other options. There is a conversation with South Africa about receiving the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, and we are in conversation with Cuba, which is developing a vaccine. We were





## Discernment Questions

1. Eugene Carson Blake, Presbyterian leader speaking at the March on Washington in 1963 said in part, “We come—late we come—but we come to present ourselves, our souls, and our bodies to be ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service.’” How can the church work to witness proactively to this present moment?
2. Where should the church be standing early as it seeks to help co-create a more equitable world for black and brown lives?
3. Where do you see your church’s complicity with or challenge to ongoing colonialism?
4. What are your reflections on reparation as means of rebuilding relationship?
5. In the midst of this ecological crisis, how do we respond to a God who calls us to the fullness of life?

promised doses from the United States last month, and there’s still no clear date as to when we will actually receive any vaccine.

The role of the church in the midst of this is to do a number of things. We encourage our people to be vaccinated and encourage our members to adhere to the protocols that are established in both nations, and also to be responsive to the needs of persons who are most vulnerable in our society. As an example of that, one of our local churches started a fund to ensure that persons who might have to pay for vaccinations could actually afford it. That’s what we’ll need if persons are not able to access free vaccinations.

**Joshua Narcisse and Samuel Son** (*Presbyterian Church (USA)*):

“We confess... that... Systemic racism has produced, and continues to produce, deeply entrenched differences in health care and the social, economic, and environmental conditions that account for inequities in longevity and the likelihood of disease. This was true long before the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed ... and will remain true unless the resources and will exist to make systemic changes.” God, we pray that you would give us the will and the courage to imagine a new way of being as we seek your kingdom right here and right now.

Eugene Carson Blake, Presbyterian leader speaking at the March on Washington in 1963 said in part, “We come—late we come—but we come to present ourselves, our souls, and our bodies to be ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service.’”

Are we therefore called to come to “organic ecumenical relationships forming [against systemic racism] around social justice in our context” which must also be a living sacrifice? If so.... whose sacrifice?

**Karen Georgia A. Thompson** (*United Church of Christ*):

“signposts”

before the dawning of a new creation  
 icebergs turned islands floating by  
 in boiling seas  
 ocean waters rising  
 children eating from the trash  
 while parents beg for scraps on the streets  
 no concern for the blood of humanity  
 conscience washed away by greed  
 politics and religion holding hands  
 each feasting on power platters  
 abusing trust  
 hoarding authority  
 nurturing hatred  
 ruining economies  
 content to watch the poor die  
 right-wing religious fundamentalism  
 stoking hatred and spreading lies  
 planting seeds of suffering and violence  
 sowing discord and distributing despair  
 suppressing the image of God in all life  
 promoting Empire—a god that does not care  
 these of unholy leanings  
 gorging themselves on the best of the land  
 replenishing nothing as they take all they want  
 pushing the innocent to flee  
 no shoes on their feet  
 running from the cruelty of Babylon reborn  
 blamed for being migrant, refugee  
 loathed for being asylum seeker  
 their lives disrupted by xenophobia  
 victims of radicalized nationalism  
 weeping and longing for home  
 crush the yoke of oppression  
 defeat the principalities and powers manifesting  
 gender-based violence  
 racial violence  
 homophobic violence  
 violence whipping human beings while binding their lives in chains  
 chauvinistic nationalism closing borders with violence  
 neo-colonialism on display  
 walling themselves in to protect the lies  
 of land stolen  
 illegally occupied



## Worship Resources

### Call to Worship

**Leader:** We come to worship You God

**All:** We long for Your light to guide us

**Leader:** We come to worship You God

**All:** We ask You Lord what do you require of us?

**Leader:** We come to worship You God

### Opening Prayer

Our eyes have seen and our ears have heard the signs of the times, but it is for understanding that we ask and for voices that will rise up a prophetic cry against all that destroys life. Be present among us Lord as we approach you in worship; we pray that in this time that we have set aside to worship you our vision of the world will not be clouded but that we will be enabled instead to see exceedingly clearly. For it is in the name of that Carpenter from Galilee who made the blind see that we ask. Amen



**Prayer of Lament:**

**All: God, I ask you, what is our purpose?  
At such a time as this Lord, what is our role?**

Leader: When my brother cannot breathe, Lord, what should I do?  
When the police put a knee to my brother's neck, Lord,  
When the oxygen runs out in the hospitals, Lord,  
When the air pollution suffocates, Lord,  
When the funeral pyres burn, Lord,  
When my brother cannot breathe, Lord, what should I do?

**All: God, I ask you, what is our purpose?  
At such a time as this, Lord, what is our role?**

Leader: When my sister is beaten and bruised, Lord, what should I do?  
When she fears the jealous wrath of her husband, Lord,  
When the police show impunity, Lord,  
When her children go hungry, Lord,  
When the pandemic impacts her the most, Lord,  
When my sister is beaten and bruised, Lord, what should I do?

**All: God, I ask you, what is our purpose?  
At such a time as this Lord, what is our role?**

Leader: When the earth cries out, Lord, what should I do?  
When the greed of humanity has made Your creation vulnerable, Lord,  
When the indigenous rights of the people are denied, Lord,  
When the privatization of healthcare denies the poor life, Lord,  
When the vaccine warfare continues, Lord,  
When the earth cries out, Lord, what should I do?

**All: God, for just such a time as this,  
We have assembled the people.  
We need actions, not just words.  
We need repentance, not just lament.  
At such a time as this, Lord, help us to act.**

**Prayer of Reflection:**

**“If I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16)**

If I remain silent when God’s people suffer,  
who will rise up?

If I close my eyes when God’s people suffer,  
who will see the injustice?

If I do not listen when God’s people suffer,  
who will act with mercy?

What if I was called  
for such a time as this,

to see through different eyes  
and move to a different drum.

Holy God, Creator, and Reconciler,  
I invite your presence among us today.  
Send your Spirit at such a time as this,  
And if I perish, I perish,  
Because in You, O Holy One, I have found hope. Amen.



## Confession

From the prejudice that makes us only listen to those who are “mature” or “experts”

**Heal us, O Lord**

From the Exclusivism that arises out of our own insecurity so that we cannot see your voice and work in the lives of young people

**Keep us, O Lord**

From our unwillingness to be ministered to by babies and children

**Save us, O Lord**

From our ignorance of others

**Enlighten us, O Lord**

From our weakness and helplessness in the midst of violence and hatred

**Enable us, O Lord**

From our tendency to exploit both our neighbor and the earth

**Correct us, O Lord**



### Closing Prayer

Ancient of days, you are the one who has from of old attended to the cries of your servants. You have come to the aid of your people in times of need and distress. Come, O Lord, we pray, and enable us to overcome the darkness of this world. Stand with us in our struggle to overcome hatred and prejudice. Help us to understand that we who have gathered here are the “new life” that will replace the old. Bless us as we attempt to bring peace here on earth. But most of all, Lord, we pray that we will be made bold enough to learn from others and humble enough to correct, that we will be courageous to forgive and gracious to be forgiven and that we will be secure enough to love and take the risk of being loved. For it is in your name that we ask. Amen



## WCRC Witness Message: “Trust the Spirit: Be Wild, Be Bold”

**W**ith the Pentecost message to the churches of our Communion in mind, let us together meditate on the subject: “Trust the Spirit: Be Wild, Be Bold.”

The Book of Acts was written during the year 70, which followed a decade of great upheaval and chaos across the Roman Empire. Throughout that period, the empire was disrupted by violent dissent and engulfed in civil war, with attacks from without and rebellion from within. Rome is struck by an epidemic. Emperor Nero commits suicide. In the period of chaos that followed, no less than four emperors rapidly succeeded each other.

Finally, Emperor Vespasian is triumphant. Like all tyrants, Vespasian believed that violent suppression of all dissent, the ruthless persecution of all declared enemies of the state, and the brutal oppression of the populace in general was the recipe for stability. He imposed the imperial will everywhere and upon everyone. To secure religious unity, he reinstated emperor worship as central to the life of the empire, and once again claims the titles, “Lord, God, Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Savior of the World.”

This was not the time to proclaim, as does the Book of Acts, that another god, not Jupiter, was God; that Jesus of Nazareth, not Vespasian, was the Savior of the world. This was not the time to tell the world that Jesus, executed by Rome, had risen from the dead; shattering the empire’s belief that not their beloved Titus had ascended into heaven, but Jesus did. That Jesus was now sitting at the right hand of God, ready to judge the world, including Rome and its revered emperors. This was not the time to preach, as Peter does in Acts 2, 3, and 4, telling the world that Jesus, the peasant revolutionary from Galilee, crucified by these same Romans as a rebel, a serious threat to the Roman Empire, was Lord and Son of God, not the Caesar, despite his claims. That despite all their efforts, in other words, the threat to Rome had not gone away.

Vespasian was done with chaos. He wanted order to return to the empire. He did not want disciples of that crucified rebel to go around “turning the world upside down” causing havoc and dissent, creating another kind of chaos defying the decrees of the emperor, “saying that there is another king named Jesus” as Acts 16:6,7 tells us. Roman society’s security was built on its hierarchies: on top the divine Caesar, then his nobles and generals, the wealthy and the privileged, then the ordinary men, then the women, then the “barbarians” not yet under Rome’s yoke, and then at the bottom of the ladder, the slaves.

In the eyes of Rome, the apostles are apostles to the vanquished, but they tell the church that “we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.”

So here they are, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, shaken by that violent wind, fired up by those tongues of fire, speaking truth to power and redemption to the lost, the bowed down, the trampled upon, the forgotten, the marginalized, the enslaved, the spat-upon—the dregs of Roman society—telling all of them that Caesar’s power has been conquered, that the crucified One has been raised from the dead, that he was lifted up into the heavens to sit at the right hand of God.

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In the eyes of Rome, the apostles are apostles to the vanquished, but they tell the church that “we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.”

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The Holy Spirit, blowing over, around, and into them with the rush of a violent wind, blows not only where she will, but how she will, and on whom she will. It is a “violent wind”—something wild and chaotic, uncontrollable and disruptive, flying in the face of the law-and-order mentality of the empire that desires division and control, subjection, and domination more than anything else. That holy wind is out to disrupt that controlled peace Rome so desperately needs. So the wind that day not only shook the building where they were praying. It also shook the foundations of the empire ruling over them, as it shook the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-generational crowds outside. That wind is holy chaos. *Something happened in Jerusalem that day!*

But God was not yet done. Tongues of fire appeared among them and settled on each one of them. The image of tongues of fire descending from heaven and coming to rest upon someone was not something new. But this was not like the tongues of fire on the ruler, the chosen one of the gods, the god among people on earth. That was an anointing of a singularity apart from, and above others; of divinity, of election, and of power given only to one. It was divine legitimization of the power of the Caesar, making that power unique, unchallengeable, and unshakable. That is the fire of absolute might, absolute right, and absolute impunity.

But now the Holy Spirit descends as tongues of fire on every single one of the apostles. It is the fire of the radical, indivisible equality, justice, solidarity, and inclusivity of God that the Spirit of God brings to the church; that burns in the heart and the witness of the church. *Something happened in Jerusalem that day!*

And it is this fire that empowers the apostles with a boldness that they have not known before. Those same disciples who could not stay with Jesus when he needed them out of fear of being associated with him, this terrorist from Galilee; the same ones who, unlike the women, were afraid to come near the cross on that Friday, and who kept themselves hidden from Friday to Sunday in that locked room—they were now speaking to the crowd in the name of Jesus.

Peter speaks of this Jesus, who lived and walked among us, who healed and inspired, who took the side of the poor and oppressed. This Jesus, who challenged the powers in the Temple, and the palace and the empire. The One would not grow weary until justice was established in all the earth—*this* Jesus. “Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you have crucified.” (2:14-36)

That day, every single one in the crowd could hear the apostles in their own language. But we should be clear. It is not the confused babble of the Tower of Babel which, the apartheid theologians argued, “proved” that their theology of separation, segregation, and cultural supremacy was right. That is what the *Belhar Confession* declared “sinful” and “idolatrous,” because it made what God intended as wonderful and multi-faceted human-beingness into inferior, demonized, racialized, God-ordained apart-ness.

That heresy re-creates in the church the divisions, the hierarchies, and the top-down, mind-darkening, soul-destroying ruling class mentality that ruled in Roman society, which the wild, chaotic wind of the Holy Spirit came to blow away.

And in all these languages, they all spoke of only one thing: the great deeds of God. That is the true unity the Spirit brings. Every language, every culture, every



tongue, every heart, each in their own unique way, without any feeling of inferiority or superiority, with the confidence that only the joy of the Lord can bring, testify to and praise the great deeds of God. All in equal measure, equal power, equal worthiness before God. That's church.

### III

"What do you know?" the wise men of imperial politics ask the church. What do you know about the subtleties of the globalized economy? What do you understand about the complexities of the market and the workings of power that necessitates endless wars and the indispensable connections between war and profits and power? You that cringe at death, who worry about children dying of hunger, of rape as weapon of war, all of them just collateral damage that you should place in the context of the greater good and the bigger picture? Let us worry about the real issues; you concern yourself with saving souls. You, with your unrealistic demands, only always bring chaos. Why don't you leave all of that to the experts?

So we did. And look at the mess we are in now.

The church might not be what the world calls "expert," but the church knows what the Lord requires: "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." The church might not be "expert," but we know that justice cannot "trickle down" from the overlaid tables of the rich, but rather should "roll down like a river, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The experts calculate their scenarios and future plans based on their belief that the rich will be on top forever, but the church knows that in God's scenario, the first shall be last and the last first; that God lifts up the poor from the dust of the earth. The experts look for security in weapons of mass destruction, in their drones and targeted assassinations, in their cluster bombs and nuclear arsenals. But Hannah sings to the church that God breaks the bow of the mighty and powerful, lets the weak gird on strength, and teaches us that not by might shall one prevail.

The church may not be "expert," but we know that without the love of God, which calls for solidarity, compassionate justice, and respect for the rights and humanity of others, our world will perish. We know that without the radical politics of Jesus, our politics is no more than calculated casuistry that leads the world from disaster to disaster.

Almost all of the questions asked that day were wrong. And because they were not the right questions, the answer also was wrong: "They are full of sweet wine."

That's right: you want to fight for justice? You want to take on the might of the empire? You want to stand with the poor and oppressed, the weak and the defenseless? You talk of peace and against war? You actually talk of redistribution of wealth and power? You actually believe that poverty should not just be alleviated, but should, and can, in fact, be eradicated? You preach against the destruction of creation? You speak of justice and equality for women, of the dignity of LGBTQI persons? You believe that the life of a child in Yemen or Palestine, in Colombia or Nigeria, is as precious in God's sight as the life of my child?

Really? You must be drunk!

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The church might not be what the world calls "expert," but the church knows what the Lord requires: "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

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### Discernment Questions:

1. How can member churches of the Communion concretely show radical plurality in their contexts?
2. In what ways can the whole Communion work towards being a prophetic witness in a world fallen among thieves?

But it should drive us to drink that nobody accuses the church of being full of sweet wine anymore. It should drive us bonkers that we don't feel the Spirit of wildness and boldness as she moves among us, as she did on that day of astonished amazement.

### IV

In chapter 1:11, the angels say to the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here, looking up to heaven?"

Yes, that's right. You people of *Galilee*, you who are deemed ignorant and poor and backward; you who are regarded as not educated and sophisticated enough; you who are despised because of your "mixed blood"; you who are discriminated against, whose lives do not matter, we are talking to *you!* Why do you stand here, looking up to the heavens? The Holy Spirit has come over you, so you can share in her wildness and her boldness and her power, not for heaven, but right here, on earth!

Right here, where there are people in need, where there is suffering and pain, oppression and exploitation. Right here, where there is sickness and war and death and destruction. Right here, where greed and sexism and patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia reign; where God's creation is being choked to death, and God's children are being crucified on a daily basis. Where there is fear and darkness and hopelessness. Right here, and right now!

So don't stand there looking up into the heavens. Ask the Pentecost question: "What must we do?"

This is the answer. Stand where God stands; fight for justice, fight for the poor, the excluded, the defenseless. Let that spirit of wildness and boldness loose upon the world. "This Jesus who has been taken up from you in heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." The same place where that violent wind comes from; the same place where the wildness was born; the same place from where the boldness has been loosed, not to settle on the head of only one, but all of you; to burn in your hearts and on your tongue so you can set the world on fire for the justice of the coming reign of God. So, on the lips of the angels, all the many, many, words spoken on that great day, come to mean just seven: "Trust the Spirit: Be wild! Be bold!"

## Becoming Involved

While hundreds of people participated in the process virtually through 2021, all members of the Communion are invited to join. This booklet provides highlights from the Witnessing Circle, including excerpts from presentations, worship material, and discernment questions. Highlight booklets from the inaugural session and each circle are also available.

All are invited to utilize these materials in their own contexts and join in the conversation by sending their responses to [require@wrcr.eu](mailto:require@wrcr.eu).

More information on the "COVID and Beyond" process can be found at [wrcr.ch/require](http://wrcr.ch/require).



World Communion  
of Reformed Churches