

Global Platform for Theological Reflection 2010
Unity and Mission Today: Voices and Visions from the Margins
Bucharest, Romania, October 4-10, 2010

Aide Memoire

Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous to see.'"

Matt.21:42 (New Living Translation)

Background & Introduction

This report summarises the conversations on Unity and Mission involving thirty theologians engaged in WCC's work on Anti-racism, Migration, Dalit Solidarity, Indigenous Peoples, and the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network and the representatives of the WCC Commissions of Faith and Order and World Mission and Evangelism, in Bucharest, Romania in October, 2010. This event marks a continuation of a theological journey that began in La Paz, Bolivia in 2007 and continued in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2008 and Nagpur, India in 2009.

While inclusivity, justice and hospitality were the themes of the earlier three events, the Bucharest Conference focused on Unity and Mission – the two most important concerns of the ecumenical movement with a view to challenge and to contribute to the ongoing wider reflections facilitated by the Faith and Order and World Mission and Evangelism with perspectives from the margins. This attempt has been made with the conviction that the ecumenical movement in the 21st century needs to be re-imagined *in the light of* and *through an active engagement with* the struggles for life and with the theological resources arising out of these experiences of struggle to overcome injustice, discrimination and exclusion in many parts of the world.

The Process

The conference took place in Apostle Andrew Social Cultural Centre in Bucharest at the hospitality of the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church in Romania, in a context that is largely unfamiliar with non-traditional theologies. The participants reflected on unity and mission, each from their vantage points, debated, agreed on some points and disagreed on others, and in the end, in a spirit of partnership articulated their visions and expectations of the churches and the ecumenical movement on the two important vocations of unity and mission. They shared their understanding and visions of unity, each from their perspective, on the first day followed by responses from the representatives of the Faith and Order Commission. Likewise, the focus of the next day was on mission with responses from the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism. The third day involved visits to a project run by the Romanian Orthodox Church for the Roma communities in Bucharest and another one run by the Coptic Orthodox Church for the migrant communities from Egypt. During the next two days, the participants identified and worked on four key areas, which they felt were integral for the articulation of their common understanding of, as well as, critical reconceptualisation of unity and mission. These are:

- I. Methodological Issues
- II. Agency of the voices from the Margins
- III. The problem and promise of the Bible
- IV. The cosmological vantage point

The five days of fellowship, common worship and passionate theological discussion proved to be an enriching time where insight was deepened (in the context of perceptive and deeply challenging conversations) and solidarity strengthened (by a shared awareness of each other's struggles and gifts), as the participants sought to re-imagine mission and unity primarily as instruments of God's promise of life in abundance not just for some but for the entire creation.

I. Methodological Issues: Towards an inclusive methodology!

Shalak Nai – “You are all my relatives!”

The elders that guide Indigenous Peoples in the practice of wisdom tell us to treat all things, especially our fellow human beings, as relatives. Shalak Nai (to use only the Gwich'in version) – “You are all my relatives” – is the respectful way to greet others, even other creatures. The foundational command to treat all things as related is a simple and compelling guide to life. It is also the beginning of any meaningful understanding of unity. The elders would also say that there are an endless number of identifiable aspects of unity. They would, however, say that unity should be discussed from a minimum of four directions, the directions themselves being trusted and essential relatives. Firstly, there is a unity with all things that comes from our origin, simultaneously from both our ongoing life in the Spirit and, also, from our necessary and vital connection with the Land. Secondly, relatedness is a characteristic and a vehicle of the humanity's unity and the unity of all that is. Thirdly, humanity has a unique role in carrying the image of relatedness. Lastly, all of creation has a final unity in its joint destiny of fulfilling God's design. This dynamic nature of human unity is near the heart of the Indigenous Peoples' conflict with the nations and the globalizing culture of money. This understanding of unity, intensely human but connected to the earth, raises questions in regard to the style, pace, and goal of industrial and technological development.

*- From the traditions of the Gwich'in Nation, Canada as shared by
Bishop Mark Macdonald, “Unity in the perspective of the Indigenous Peoples”*

Reflection on Unity and Mission from the perspective of the margins can be distinct only if it is guided by an inclusive ethic and also uses an inclusive methodology. In other words, such a methodology should not *just address* issues of justice but should be a *form of justice* in itself. Only then can it be relevant and challenging to those who experience being on the margins as well as to the wider ecumenical community.

Certain dominant methodologies because of their susceptibility to the politics of power have always disenfranchised and denied epistemological privilege to the marginalized voices. So far we have been told to understand western and other dominant forms of theologising as being normative and taught to mimic them in order to be successful. The authority has always been centered in the west. However, a methodology from the margins, seeks to transcend this tendency and make our theologizing closer to real life, more indigenous and contextual not only in its application but also in its epistemological framework.

Along with this, given the diversity of the oppressive structures and systems, an inclusive methodology must address, and guard against, the tendency to generalize experiences of oppression with expressions such as ‘preferential option for the poor’. Such generalizations often reduce different groups into a monolithic, homogenous group using an overarching class analysis. Such generalizations need to be avoided because what then go unnoticed, unnamed, and in the process, unchallenged are the various structural sins that make and keep many marginalised in diverse ways.

Having argued for an epistemological shift, we are aware that any counter-methodology, even the ones that seek to deconstruct a certain kind of authority, can easily become a reconstruction of a new kind of authority. That is why there is a need to have a balance of epistemological humility (which recognises that our experience is not the only valid standpoint for knowing God and that there are other experiences which widen and complement our perspectives) and theological confidence (which affirms that God is revealed in the experiences of those at the margins). However, while discussing the issue of methodology we also felt the need to take into consideration the discomfort that prevails over the dichotomy inherent in the language of centre and margins.

The metaphor of the circle¹ encapsulates such an inclusive methodological principle. A circle made

¹ As elaborated by Philip Peacock in his Paper; “Reflecting on Unity from the Dalit Perspective” in Bucharest.

up of different circles would be an appropriate methodology since it encompasses a relational and mutual dimension to God and each other. The circle emphasizes that mission has its centre in God's activity and that authentic and inclusive mission has an interconnected and relational dimension. Individual and different narratives which are diverse yet complimentary can emphasise the idea of difference and the uniqueness of each group.

The authority of the Risen Christ is present through the Spirit in the circle made up of other circles. What characterizes this method is a combination of *epistemological humility* and *theological confidence* which both recognizes that a special knowledge of God and God's presence can be discerned in the different communities engaged in struggles for dignity, and that God will speak through these broken communities. The critical factor is that the circle broadens the authority of God who speaks through local consciousness, which in turn speaks to a larger consciousness. On a certain level the local circle needs the challenge of the other circles. It needs the discernment of other communities and therefore, epistemological humility is necessary.

Certain major methodological principles that can constitute an inclusive methodology are:

- a) *Inclusion of experience as an epistemological tool, including experiences of aspiration and struggle;*
- b) *Striving for solidarity in terms of shared experience of the margins; and*
- c) *Discerning what the spirit is saying in this experience of being in solidarity.*

The dominant theological methodologies have, to a large extent, evaded and elided the particular experiences, traditions and cultures of the marginalized as having epistemic value in knowing God and discerning God's mission. An inclusive methodology would seek to reverse this tendency through a 'methodological *metanoia*' (repentance of methodology) which would recognise the inherent and intrinsic worth of the experiences of the margins not only to enrich and 'enlighten' theological methodology but also to restore moral credence to our theologising. By seeking to recover this marginalised trajectory of God's world, we experience the breaking in of the realization that there is a trajectory of grace - a presence of God - in each of our communities.

This methodological transformation will also enable us to rediscover the gospel's understanding of the human being - that even the most marginalised bear the image of God - and thus redeem the exclusive anthropologies of prejudice, discrimination, hierarchy and hatred, which stifle the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is "life in all its fullness" for both the oppressor and the oppressed. Further, such an inclusive understanding of the human being will be integrative; drawing various under-privileged groups together in a spirit of solidarity to resist whatever tarnishes human dignity and threatens life and thus seeks to denigrate the image of God in us. Our concerns, though distinctive, are yet connected in this search for dignified human existence and therefore we embrace the joys of mutual accountability in discerning ways in which our visions and actions can further the cause of justice and equality in this world. In this sense, an inclusive methodology will also be perceptive to discern commonalities of experience between the different communities on the margins in order to forge pragmatic ways of solidarity, which can be sources of mutual encouragement and empathy and can help foster visions of equality and justice. In order for this methodology to be more authentic and relevant we need to be more conversational – be an open circle - in order for our solidarity to be solidarity *for life*.

II. Agency of the Voices from the Margins: Their theological credentials

"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have

come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."²

What is distinct about the contribution of the voices from the margins? Or why do they claim that their experiences and visions are crucial for re-imagining unity and mission today? The voices, experiences and visions from the margins are:

- not merely objects or additives but resources for creative theological breakthroughs;
- not only experiences of suffering but also of overcoming suffering;
- not only about solidarity in struggle but also of shared visions for a better world;
- not only with accents on personal salvation and commitment but also on larger and historical expressions of salvation and celebration of life; and
- not only with accents on 'justice for the victim' but also on 'healing for the offender'.

In sum, these are about and for the realisation of the values of love, justice, freedom and transformation of the world – the very essence of the Christian hope of the coming reign of God. The features of this agency of the margins are the following:

a. I am because you are: Affirming life in human solidarity

Recently, I visited Cape Town in South Africa. The hotel where I was staying organized a taxi to take us to a tourist attraction centre called Water Front. As we drove, my assistant kept explaining the places and landmarks on our way. She also asked the driver to tell us what there is for visitors to see in the city. It occurred to me that the driver, a white South African Man was all along thinking about my blindness. He struck a conversation and his first question was where I came from and why I was in South Africa. His next question was whether it was really necessary for me to have travelled all the way from Kenya to South Africa. Before I could even respond, his next remark was very surprising to me. He told me that if he went blind, he would kill himself. I asked him why. In a rather animated spirit, he explained that he cannot imagine living without watching the television and visiting the stadium to watch football and other sports. He could not perceive the purpose of life without being able to see what is around him let alone the beauty of nature. I asked him how he would go about to kill himself. He said that he would climb up the Table Mountain, a tourist attraction site nearby and then throw himself down the cliff. I asked him what would happen if he tried that, fell down the cliff and broke his legs and not die but get double disabilities. He did not want to pursue that line of argument but was very firm that he would kill himself. Perhaps the Christians will not manifest that boldness to speak their mind but instead their approach will take the form of reminding the individual with a disability that God owes her/him a cure. This has been at times the case with me even after many years of blindness, adjustment and I would say living a fulfilled life. To them, I am imperfect, and some quick fix is necessary especially if I have to fulfil a yearning to serve God. Responding to this kind of pressure, many people with disabilities with all earnest live in constant search of faith healing forgetting that God has his own plans for their lives. ...The church need not only to be inviting but fully inclusive in its attitudes towards people like me to enable us to accomplish their mission.One thing is clear, the church as the body of Christ and a place of communion will not be complete, and it will not be what it ought to be without part of itself, which is made up of people with disabilities.

-Samuel Kabue, Coordinator, Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network

The healing of the paralytic man in Mark 2:1-12 is actually a story about human responsibility, sensitivity and availability. The desire of a paralysed man to be healed could be fulfilled with the support and solidarity of his friends. They were able to overcome the obstacles, were creative,

² Lilla Watson , Aboriginal Activists Group. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson. Accessed: 10/01/2011

courageous enough to take a physically risky action, making healing possible. Solidarity in suffering and hope is not merely a soothing balm but a powerful panacea to the malaise of human brokenness caused by greed, indifference and self-centredness. Promoting marginalized people's agency is also about interdependency. Interdependency not based on patronizing gestures of kindness but on sincere realization that our freedom is tied up on other people's freedom. Jesus saw the sick man and noticed the sick man and his friends' faith and Jesus did something transformative. Although it took a collective effort to get the sick man to the healer but he ultimately is the one who needs to stand up, pick up his stretcher and go home. With his friends' help the sick man is able to ultimately be the agent of his own healing. Vicky Terrell who herself lives with physical disability and a participant of the Bucharest Conference writes, "How often do we, with our various impairments, feel clumsy, inept or impotent in the face of the attitudes of others or barriers in the environment? We hear clichés like 'it's not dependence but interdependence' and think, 'Yeah right!'"³ The church should neither be seen further marginalizing the poor nor capitalizing on their plight by taking over their own agency. There is always a temptation of exerting power over the poor and the marginalized by assuming statuses of expertise or simply riding on the tide of cause-célèbre. Madlingozi, in his paper warns against this patronizing approach: "...it can be argued that the encounter between the victim and the expert reproduces relations of inferiority and superiority. In this encounter, the one is the victim and the other is the saviour. Politics of disempowerment and trusteeship – with a heavy missionary slant – are produced."⁴

b. Resistance and hope

The poor, the discriminated and the excluded people were too often and almost always seen as recipients of charity and services. But today they are a community of resistance, analysing and exposing their sources of oppression and suffering, asserting their rights and proposing alternatives. Therefore, the church must move away from the tendency to be the 'voice of the voiceless', 'defender of human rights'. In fact, the church must open its eyes to see the many manifestations of the power of the powerless or the disempowered to struggle for justice, freedom and life. Their resistance, therefore, is not mere reaction but a conscious moral and spiritual choice to stay away from being co-opted into systems that thrive on and legitimize injustice and suffering. It is risky because most often the resisted are the powerful. In many places, the interests of the mighty and powerful commercial establishments have been successfully countered by united actions of resistance by the marginalized groups. The church needs to become part of this prophetic resistance on the margins. In their struggles of resistance lie the seeds of hope for a new polity of justice, freedom and life for all. These expressions of resistance to oppression and injustice are also often featured with alternative paradigms and possibilities for human living. In some places, resistance to market economy is expressed through the establishment of micro, grass roots level businesses, engagement in subsistence agriculture, and development of small crafts to sustain the local community. The church cannot be in solidarity with those who are on the margins unless the church understands what is happening on the margins. The church should not be the voice on their behalf but be part of them. This implies that the church goes to the margins in order to feel, taste, hear and see what is happening there in order to know with whom the church is in solidarity.

c. Changing and effecting change

We need to understand the messianic nature of the marginalized people's suffering as they give their lives away in order to give life to others. This, however, does not mean glorification of injustice but an attempt to discern the locale of God's power effecting transformation. The difference between the marginalized people and Christ is that nowadays people are structurally coerced to give their lives away so that others can live their lives better. For example, the Dalits build the roads but they are not allowed to walk on them. They build and clean houses but are not allowed to enter them because 'they will pollute people'. Marginalized and poor people around the world build the economies and produce but are not allowed to partake in the profits - the socialization of production, risks and losses

³ Vicky Terrell. "God's economy: Reflection on Exodus 4: 10-17" in *Oh Light*, Anna Gilkison (editor), Disability, Spirituality and Faith Network, New Zealand, 2008. Page 9

⁴ Tshelo Madlingozi. 'On Transitional Justice Entrepreneurs and the Production of Victims'. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. Vol. 2. No. 2. 2010. Oxford University Press. Pg 208-228.

but privatization of profits. The marginalized are not those who are looking for charity and compassion. They are involved in historic struggles of social change. They are able to forge themselves into networks and movements with identities shaped by their commitment to certain goals rather than to certain given or imposed identities. The Dalits, for example, are those who have rejected their imposed caste identities and have taken upon themselves an identity marked by their commitment to a vision of a caste free Indian society. To put it differently, through their struggles for identity, freedom, dignity and justice, the marginalized communities are also the voices and agents of social transformation. Anti-racism groups are exposing the uncivilised nature of many of our communities, institutions and people who hold some as ontologically inferior on account of the colour of their skin.

d. Forgiving and seeking forgiveness

A mongrel (dog) brought up in an upper caste home in Morena, near Bhopal, India, was kicked out after the Rajput (a dominant caste) family members discovered that their Sheru had eaten a roti (bread) from a dalit woman and was now an "untouchable" dog. Next, Sheru was tied to a pole in the village's dalit locality. The black cur, of no particular pedigree, was accustomed to the creature comforts in the home of its influential Rajput owners in Manikpur village in Morena. Its master, identified by the police as Rampal Singh, is a rich farmer with local political connections.

A week ago Sunita Jatav, a dalit woman, was serving lunch to her farm labourer husband. "There was a 'roti' left over from lunch. I saw the dog roaming and fed it the last bread," Sunita said. "But when Rampal Singh saw me feeding the dog and he grew furious. He yelled: 'Cobbler woman, how dare you feed my dog with your roti?' He rebuked me publicly. I kept quiet thinking the matter would end there. But it got worse," she said.

On Monday, Rampal ex-communicated the dog. A village panchayat (local government) was called, which decided that Sheru would now have to live with Sunita and her family because it had become an untouchable. Sunita Jatav was fined Rs 15,000.

[//http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Doq-caste-away-after-dalit-touch/articleshow/6617039.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Doq-caste-away-after-dalit-touch/articleshow/6617039.cms)

As those subjected to intense and enormous suffering, these communities also have been locales of moral discernment in that they give place for the power of forgiveness to facilitate repentance and restoration of justice. The process of repentance and forgiveness leads to the healing of the community and the marginalized become the agents of such a process. Thus their aspiration for justice is one that is transformative as it seeks change in the aggressor. For e.g., Husbands oppress their wives yet the wives continue to serve their families; Dalits may have the ability to poison the water supplies they are compelled to construct yet they do not. It must, of course, be mentioned that the oppressed after a prolonged suffering lose the capacity and power to resist. Sometimes they do not resist also for the fear of losing their livelihood as is often the case with the poor rural Dalits.

What do these mean to churches?

Sometimes the nature of the very endeavours to support the poor in their own emancipatory project can reflect non-emancipatory tendencies. Efforts made with an intention to help can directly or indirectly contribute towards maintaining the status quo, which is characterized by asymmetries between those with power and others without power, those who count and those who do not count. This approach of strengthening the agency of the oppressed requires us to observe at all times some discipline that involves the following: listening, fidelity and trust.

1. The first step or action is to listen. *Listening* is a political act and is not passive. Many a times the church rushes in with resources without listening to the marginalized people's real pleas. Listening

restores dignity to the one who has been humiliated by oppression or suffering.

2. Strengthening of the poor people's agency requires some degree of *fidelity* to the methodology mentioned earlier. It has been argued earlier in this document that 'our methodology as the church should not just address issues of justice but be a form of justice in itself'. This means that there is a requirement of consistent fidelity towards this emancipatory cause. For example, we cannot speak about the poor without the poor being part of the discussions that pertain to their struggles lest we usurp their agency. There is a slogan that is popularly associated with South Africans who are living with physical disabilities, and recently even more popularised by Abahlali baseMijondolo (AbM) and Rural Network (RN)⁵, that says, "nothing about us, without us".⁶

3. Trust plays an important role in the promotion of the agency of the marginalized for emancipation. Unless we trust that the poor and marginalized can think for themselves, speak for themselves, and provide direction for their own cause it is not possible to be with them in solidarity. Paulo Freire said, "to achieve this praxis it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason". Freire further argues, "Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about, or will abandon, dialogue, reflection and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues and instructions."⁷

Therefore, agency should mean the oppressed being agents of their own liberation. Emancipatory action liberates not only 'the oppressed' but is universal hence it is a 'salvific grace' for all. It marks the possibility of all our salvation or liberation.

III. The problem and promise of the Bible

The late dean of the chapel at Howard and Boston Universities, Howard Thurman, a mystic and philosopher, tells the story in his book Jesus and the Disinherited about his grandmother, a former slave who, because she could not read, made him read the Bible to her in the evenings. He was free to read any portion of the Bible, except one. For years she wouldn't permit him to read anything from Paul's epistles. Her favourite portions were the Psalms and the Gospels – from these two he could read as many times as he liked. One day he timidly asked his grandmother why she disapproved of Paul's epistles. She told him that for years the overseer on her slave master's plantation would read to the slaves how Paul enjoined slaves to be obedient to their masters, and she decided that if she lived to be freed from slavery she would never again read or have read in her hearing anything from Paul. The overwhelming evidence from the Gospels, the first five books of the Torah, and the Psalms was that God aimed for people to be free. God did not confine them to a permanent state of slavery. 'God was a God of love', Thurman's grandmother insisted, 'and love does not enslave the beloved. Love frees the beloved'. Unable to read the Bible for herself, having heard the stories of the Bible read to her all of her life, Thurman's grandmother proves that encountering God's truth takes place in many ways. The overseer thought that because he could read, and because he was, he thought better than slaves, he had the power to filter the truth to the slaves any way he saw fit. But the story of Thurman's grandmother proves otherwise.

(New Proclamation Year C, 2000-2001, edited by Marshall D. Johnson, 1999)

In Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as in the rest of Africa, the Bible is a sacred text and is taken seriously by the majority of people. It is thus

⁵ AbM and RN are popular social movements South Africa involved in the struggles for land, houses, justice and dignity in both urban and rural areas respectively. For more information see: <http://www.abahlali.org/taxonomy/term/1090>

⁶ This slogan is probably taken from the title of James I. Charlton's book titled *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. University of California Press, 2000

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p 41-42, quoted in *Isabuya iAfrika: Securing Land for the Poor*. Occasional Paper Series on Church and Land. "Learning to Walk: NGO Practice and the Possibility of Freedom", August 2007, page 11.

problematic that people with disabilities have been portrayed in sermons and Biblical interpretation as “lesser human beings”, pejoratively called “Handicapé” (the disabled), individuals who are viewed as subjects of a curse needing deliverance. Because the Bible is frequently read in the community using oppressive interpretation that justify those who oppress the poor and marginalized, it ‘continues to be used by some to maintain wealth and power...’. These people (the community who are often passive recipients of this interpretation) are powerless and lack the resources to challenge it.

Micheline Kamba Kasango, Democratic Republic of Congo in her paper: The mission of the church towards people with disabilities: A Re-reading of Acts 3, 1-11

What do we do with the Bible? On the one hand, we have been victims of its wrong interpretation and on the other, we have also been drawing enormous strength and inspiration from the bible for our struggles for justice, freedom and life. In other words, the Bible for us is both a problem as well as a promise.

It is a problem for the following reasons: i) it is abused to explain and justify social inequalities, race and gender theories, human bondage and exploitation; ii) certain portions of the Bible tend to reject and exclude persons with disabilities as sinful and worthless; iii) with accents on monotheism and endogamy, migrants and foreigners receive strong condemnation in some parts; and iv) certain Biblical texts are used to help accept or cope rather than to challenge injustice (E.g. Jer. 29:11).

On the other hand, it also holds the promise for the following reasons: i) it gives enormous strength to survive against odds and to be positive towards life and the world around; ii) it affirms the dignity and worth of the disabled person (e.g., the exodus God calls the disabled Moses; Jesus touches the blind and the lame; Jesus also said that the healthy don't need him and that he came for the sick, suffering and the rejected); iii) it unveils Jesus' mission as one of liberation, establishing God's justice and of healing and restoration; and iv) It also is a great long story of migration which reveals to us a journeying God. In many places, it welcomes the stranger and makes responsible attitudes towards strangers normative for authentic Christian discipleship.

Some Challenges:

In the light of the ambivalence of the Bible being a problem as well as a blessing, we need to constantly pursue the following questions: How do we allow people's experiences to enter the text to deconstruct and reconstruct? How do we respond to the trend of selective reading, taking what is convenient and familiar and rejecting the rest? How do we counter the trend of race and gender theories drawing on the Bible for legitimacy? How does the Bible inform our ability to journey with each other?

The parables of God's reign offer utopias of human togetherness based on the values of justice and compassion. We need to take note of these as we attempt to re-imagine mission and unity. These parables are about the life-world of the marginalized people and about their aspirations of justice and inclusion. To that extent, the Biblical story itself is an account of the relentless struggle for justice. Unity or an inclusive community is possible and real only if just relations exist. If there is no justice, not only unity but also peace is not possible. Unity and mission depend a great deal on mutual responsibility and accountability and the Bible amply testifies to this.

Paul's major focus while speaking of the church as the body of Christ was to combat factionalism that threatens the Corinthian congregation. He was aggrieved of those elitists and so-called superiors in the church that excluded others who were apparently considered less spiritual and thus threatened to fragment the unity of the body (cf. 1 Cor. 8, 1 Cor. 14). From a disability perspective Paul's insistence of the unity of the body involving diversity takes on greater significance, where the diversity includes the

weaker ones. It is also interesting to note that Paul's theology of strength resides wholly in his theology of weakness, and then his views regarding the strength of the ecclesial body depends wholly on the 'weakness' of the bodily members. ...The unity of the church is grounded in that each person is an indispensable part of the body. The individuality is honoured in that each believer serves the body in a distinct way – neither less nor greater. Christian unity neither requires uniformity nor encourages it. For Christians to be different is not only acceptable, but it is expected and even necessary as explained above, for the richness, wholeness, and vigour of the body. Difference is extremely important for the life and survival of those who are on the margins. Abolishing differences and diversity is a programme of domination, whereas affirmation of difference is the way of victims.⁸ God is on the side of the 'different', the 'weaker.'

Samuel George, "A Disability-informed-reading of Pauline Metaphor of Church as body of Christ".

4. The cosmological vantage point

On August 28th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, hit southeast Louisiana. Millions of gallons of storm water gushed through failed levee systems into the city of New Orleans. The levees broke as a result of 25-foot storm surges produced by the hurricane the night before. The waters of Lake Ponchartrain, the massive aqueous basin to the North side of the city, moved inland through neighbourhoods. For the next day and a half we watched as 80% of New Orleans was covered by 20 feet of water. The Katrina Aftermath should not be blamed on the forces of nature alone. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina can be used as an astrophysical witness that reveals our underlying astral imbalance. Many suffer as direct result of the local, state and federal government's failure to maintain, modify or replace sufficient levees due to outright racist greed for land and natural resources. Thousands of poverty stricken people of colour throughout New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of Mexico died. Many have been lost in the government's "State of Emergency" paper shuffle. Others, who were herded like cattle to various parts of the United States, are now facing migration issues because they are unable to return to their birthplace due to limited amounts of affordable housing and even fewer resources for persons in ill-health.

A story from Erica Kierulf's paper, "Visualizing the Gospel"

Nature is our witness to the imbalance that we have created. We have adopted a globalized, capitalistic, *anti-terra firma* worldview, which causes us to be controlled by our greed for land and natural resources. Bound by our social, intellectual and spiritual colonization we display unjust interactions with each other and exhibit blatant disregard for plant and animal life. Using nature as our signpost we are able to understand how the unusual frequency of natural disasters, extreme weather conditions, premature seasonal changes and widespread desolation (famine, drought, glacier melting, volcanic eruptions, and toxic wastes) are a reflection of our hegemonic cosmology. These display how our connections to the cosmological universe have become tenuous and distorted.

On the other hand, nature also offers the corrective. It gives us a right perspective of life, which is about its interconnectedness. The stories of the indigenous peoples, particularly women, show how this imbalance can be rectified.

When we were children, growing up in Chuquibamba, a small town in the Peruvian Andes, one of our chores was "Tuwayar". It meant that we were

⁸ Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2008, p.xvi.

responsible to prevent the birds from eating the wheat, barley, or quinoa (a traditional Andean cereal) sown on the fields. Early in the morning, when flocks of birds would arrive for their feeding, we had to chase them away hitting sticks on empty cans to make a loud noise. While doing this, we chanted “Tuwaya (go away), tuwaya, don’t eat my wheat.” In Argentina where I live, I have a vegetable garden with tomatoes, parsley, chives, and squash giving me the opportunity to teach my daughter what I did as a child. She loves to hit her little stick on an empty tuna fish can singing “tuwaya, don’t eat my vegetables.”

Tuwaya – A story about Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to the land

The Andean indigenous cultures of South America know that everything that exists is alive and interconnected in a network of life. Such a web of life is in a delicate balance. When the balance is upset, the whole community of life suffers in different ways: humans, animals, lakes, rivers, mountains, soil, seeds, products, spirits, cultures, etc. In order to restore the balance, many rituals will be performed: e.g. going to the mountains to ask for forgiveness from *Pachamama* and *Achachilas* when hit by a strong hailstorm or drought. Also, rituals to restore the community will be performed so that people can celebrate the restoration of the balance as well.

Nowadays, in spite of all the rituals we perform, the danger for nature does not disappear. We realize that nature is out of balance? The ecological crisis is just the tip of the iceberg of a crisis that requires more than our rituals. For centuries, the western or the dominant understanding of the creation narratives in Genesis permitted a domination of the earth, rather than promoting wise stewardship. The present situation requires “listening to the voice of the nature”. Most western, conventional Christian dogmatics based on a traditional understanding of the Bible allow for only one Holy Spirit and do not conceive nature as spirited or spirit-filled. They were reluctant to consider alternative sources of knowledge, which have sustained communities for centuries:

When the conquistadores came, they were received to meet the elders in the Indian tent. They met the male elders, sat before the fire inside the tent and negotiated their treaties with them. When something difficult came up, the elders had to consult and they usually looked to the back of the tent. The British Colonizers who thought those men were the powerful people there, did not realize that, back in the tent and hidden in the shadow, was the Wise Woman. If the conquistadores had realized that, they would have killed her. Fortunately they didn’t, so the Native Americans can claim their identity today.

-A story by an Osage Elder

Memory transmitted by the older generation is an important part of the cosmology of indigenous people. It is still alive today having been transmitted from generation to generation by the women. It is an invitation addressed to the younger generation not to forget their roots, but rather build alternative life projects in the present and for the future. One such alternative project is the practice of Pallapando:

In Quetchua, “pallapa” means gathering what is left after the harvest. In a similar matter to the one described in the Biblical book of Ruth, men, women, and children carrying “lliellas” (colourful woven cloths), shovels, bags, and baskets follow the workers. They are allowed to pick up all that they overlooked or left on the field. The owner orders food to be prepared for everyone, his hired help as well as the “pallapadores” and the meal shared is a lovely moment with everyone enjoying the goodness of the “Pacha Mama”, the land.

Pallapando – A story of sharing the harvest

The future of the created order rests in paying serious attention to alternative practices emerging from life-affirming cosmological vision and divesting ourselves of the legacies of life-denying

cosmological visions of accumulation and exploitation. Embracing a new cosmology for mission and unity challenges the prevailing cosmologies of domination and exclusion. An alternative cosmology is essential for unity and mission. We are speaking about a cosmology of sharing in community and not an ideology of greed and accumulation of wealth, taking from nature only what we need for the period until the next harvest. Taking care of the needy, sharing resources evenly is also part of the custom of the “fiesta” a time of celebration. Through the act of sharing resources, those who have and those who don’t end up on the same level.

Perhaps the most powerful symbol of unity, though mournfully the most contested, is the Eucharist. While there is a lot of denominational debate over the nature of the Holy meal few can debate that the sharing of the Lord’s Supper is symbolic of Christian unity. The sharing of the one loaf and the one cup is a radical symbol of the unity that we share in Christ and within the context of the caste system has several implications. In a context where food is not shared together because of notions of purity and pollution, the eating of one loaf and the drinking from one cup is a counter cultural ritual that not only cuts away at the ideology of caste but also exposes its ugliness. Yet it is important for us to note that this symbol of Christian unity is rooted in an understanding of justice. By placing the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with the celebration of the Passover, the Gospel writers were invoking for the early Christians a connection with God’s intervention into their ancestors’ lives that changed the socio-political order of their day. They knew the story of how God had heard the cries of an oppressed people, intervened into history bringing them out of economic, political, social, spiritual and physical bondage, leading them on the journey of a free and responsible covenant people.

Philip Peacock, “ Reflecting on Unity from the perspective of Dalits”

Today there is a need for us to remember such alternative memories and embrace life-affirming cosmologies in order to ensure that we participate fully in Jesus’ promise of life in all its fullness.

Re-imagining Mission and Unity

From these above vantage points, we may critically analyse the concepts of unity and mission in the following manner:

- The agenda for unity should not be dictated by the politics of power. We need to analyse the questions: Who is given the power to define unity? Who calls whom into unity? And for what reasons? Do these invitations to unity address issues, which are important to communities on the ground, who are visibly excluded on a daily basis or do these attempts detract attention from issues of justice? Is there a danger of unity being cosmetic and not having a healing dimension? Can unity be a scandalous cover-up for inequality and maintenance of status quo on issues that really affect millions of people inside the church?
- We need to recognize the role of communities, and the agency of the people in fostering unity and in the process coming to an awareness of the presence of God among us. Such a ‘world-view from below’ places the onus for forging unity on people and de-centers the general assumptions about unity, which place the agency on God, which often tends to be too abstract and lack inspiration for human agency.
- Mission is the reason for our unity. In other words, unity is a means through which mission is accomplished. Any concept of unity that does not begin with the need of restoring and addressing the question of justice is in danger of becoming merely an approximation of the

dynamics of power relations.

- The primary task of mission is to reconcile the world to God and humans with each other and the entire created order. Mission is an activity in the struggle for life and therefore the *'habitus'* of mission should be justice and inclusivity. In other words, mission is not for triumphalistic Christian assertions but for healing and restoration of God's world so that everyone has a space to take root and branch out.
- While being cautious about notions of unity which thrive on the co-option of the weak, we can re-conceive unity as solidarity, even widening it to include the oppressor but on the precondition of his/her commitment to be just and to restore justice. To that extent, mission could also be re-conceived as enabling everybody to participate in the discovery of one's own and our collective humanity.
- The new methodology sees reading of biblical texts as an act of self-actualization and self-determination through which readers read themselves into the texts and derive a sense of self-worth and inspiration in their struggles for liberation. The experiences of the readers become 'texts' along with the biblical text.
- It also implies moving beyond understanding theology primarily in terms of words and texts as *theo-logia*; to conceive of theology also as *theo-drama*, *theo-phoneia* and *theo-graphia*, so that people who belong to non-literary traditions can also be active participants in the task of theologizing.
- An inclusive ethic also implies an empathetic awareness of other forms of discrimination and exclusion, even if these are not always named. Inclusive justice should be inherent in everything we say and do.
- The marginalized people become the agents of mission and unity. It is the reversal of role in terms of envisioning mission and unity. It is biblical too because God chose the poor, the foolish, the powerless to further God's agenda of mission and unity as justice and peace. Therefore, any concept of mission and unity that does not have an epistemological start from the point of view of the marginalized is not a mission from God at all.

For those who suffer under and struggle against cultures of discrimination and exclusion such as racism and casteism, unity implies a pattern of relationships that affirms the dignity and image of God in every human being. It is a polity in which the negative dynamics of power are not able to deny or diminish for some the possibility to live as full human beings. For people living with disabilities, it implies a new community that is sensitive and available. For the Indigenous people, it is a pattern of deeply inter-twined and interdependent relationships. And for those who are displaced and on the move as migrants seeking a space, an identity, safety and community, unity means a community that accepts and celebrates diversity and difference and ensures dignity for all. Unity then is for mission and without the goal of mission, unity becomes vulnerable to the dynamics of power. However, mission is not just doing works of charity nor is it a mere narration of the salvation story; it is being and becoming people who live, according to the biblical tradition of justice and life and the way of Jesus of Nazareth. "If Christian unity is for mission, then that mission is about 'doing justice' in God's world (Mic.6:8), so that God's good creation is restored and the things in heaven and on earth are reconciled.

Discrimination, exclusion and exploitation of some on account of certain social and economic structures and cultures are its visible and concrete expressions of injustice that distort and counter the will of God in the world today. God's justice as revealed to us through the Bible is inclusive and transformative. It is about restoring right relationships in all that God created. It pleads the cause of the victim as well as speaks truth to power; it seeks to heal both the wounds of the victim as well as the immorality of the aggressor; it advocates for power to be exercised in responsible ways in which it enhances life primarily through, ensuring opportunities of life for all, so that God's grand plan of a universal reconciliation in Christ may be possible through our participation towards the same (Eph. 1:

8-10).

Mission, therefore, involves creating conditions which foster the breaking in of the reign of God in each such situation and time. To that extent, the Christian vocations of unity and mission cannot be sought apart from the larger pursuit of these aspirations for a just and inclusive world and church. Therefore, unity and mission assume credibility and relevance only if these are rooted in justice. Without justice the notions of unity and mission run the risk of mirroring the existing power imbalances and being co-opted by the status quo. Therefore, with our partners in the Faith and Order and Mission and Evangelism, we hold that unity and mission cannot be separated. The locus of unity is God's mission. It is in the frontiers of mission for justice and life that unity becomes and is real. It implies naming the sins of casteism, racism, xenophobia, discrimination against the indigenous peoples and people living with disabilities; claiming restorative action; healing the malaise of the systems and situations within which we share our lives; deconstructing oppressive ideologies and nurturing life affirming attitudes and values; and safeguarding the weak and the vulnerable from abuse, exploitation and dehumanisation. All this points towards an active partnership with God in speaking truth to powers, confronting and transforming unjust, inhuman, discriminatory ideologies, cultures and realities, so that the world may be what God always wanted it to be.

We all sit round the fire,
Each with our own perspective
Listening carefully to each other and the Spirit of God,
Calling us to be in solidarity with each other and with God.
Calling us on to discover the unity we share as being made in the image of God,
Struggling together for justice proclaiming that the Kingdom of God comes near in our
suffering as well as in times of celebration.

By Vicki Terrell, Aotearoa/ New Zealand

Appendix: 1

Listening to Visions and Voices from the Margins in Our Own Context:

Some practical steps

Share insights gained and lessons learned through the publication of articles or books on the subject.

First nations, indigenous people privilege an oral culture. Their cosmogonies lend themselves more to presentation of narrative material on CD, or, with images and films, on DVD.

Reach out to parishes, women's, men's, youth groups, or catechism classes as well as Sunday schools. Teaching tools and lesson plans need to be developed to be shared by churches/communities active in the different networks.

Games can stimulate learning while participants are having fun exploring unfamiliar territories and realities.

Churches can join in the secular commemorations promoted by the State or NGOs, e.g. Aids Day, the Day of the Refugee, the Day of Disabled Persons, the Day of the Volunteer, etc.

Churches are invited to use their own celebrations to reach out and include voices and visions of minorities, such as asylum seekers, refugees, the physically and mentally disabled by giving them space in their Sunday celebrations, promoting their rights, being inclusive communities by ordaining, electing, and employing members of these often excluded constituencies.

When dealing with subjects concerning discriminated people, include representatives from these groups in the decision-making process.

If the speech of a disabled person is not understandable to some members of the congregation, offer a written text or a translation, may be via headphones as one would with a foreign language.

Churches need to actively promote a culture of dialogue with minorities.

Churches are well placed to offer mediation in conflicts.

Whenever the law forbids discrimination, but the latter persists in spite of legislation to the contrary: Actively promote involvement and election of women, racial and other minorities through a quota system.

In order to remove barriers separating "ethnic" or "migrant churches from local communities, practice mutual hospitality: experiment with cooking, local or traditional foods, handicrafts, share special talents, and abilities of minorities to make them known to the general public. Get together as neighbours, brothers and sisters in Christ: Organizing a common event means a chance for all to use their talents and get to know and appreciate each other.

Use Sunday school classes to present role-plays, theatre, and dramatization of Bible stories in worship experiences with a racially mixed attendance, special events to promote integration, or gatherings including the general public on a holiday.

Share the organization and outcome of your activities with the wider networks and the ecumenical communities. A good example is the development and publication of the MIRACLE program and series of publication by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe.

Appendix 2

Participants

Rev. Michael Blair, Canada
Rev. Dr. Daniel Buda, Romania/Switzerland
Ms Anjeline Okola Charles, Kenya
Rev. María Cazilda Chávez Quispe, Bolivia/Switzerland
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Vedanayagam Devasahayam, India
Dr. Samuel George, India
Rev. Dr. Roswitha Golder, Switzerland
Dr. Laszlo Gonda Ph.D., Hungary
The Revd Christopher Honoré, New Zealand
Sra Luisa Rosario Ibarcena Loayza, Argentina
Dr. Samuel N. Kabue, Kenya
Rev. Micheline Kamba Kasongo, DRC/South Africa
Rev Dr Jooseop Keum, South Korea/Switzerland
Ms Erica Kierulf, USA
Mr. Simon Joseph Kierulf, USA
Ms Natasha Klukach, Canada
Pasteur Samuel Komlan Kpoti, Italy
Rev. Dr. Glenroy Lalor, Jamaica
The Rt. Rev Mark Macdonald, Canada
Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, India/Switzerland
Ms Seta Margossian Hadesian, Lebanon
Ms Mukami McCrum, United Kingdom
The Rt. Rev. Julio E. Murray T., Republic of Panama
Rev. Istvan Muzsnai, Hungary
Rev. Tulani Ndlazi , South Africa
Ms Sydia Nduna, Zambia/Switzerland
Rev. Philip Vinod Peacock, India
Fr. Cristian Popescu, Czech Republic
Rev. Ms. Seelam Sujanna Raj, India
Rev. Dr. Peniel Rajkumar, India
Rev. Victoria Pernel Terrell, New Zealand
Rev. Karen Georgia A. Thompson, USA
