



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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CWME Moderator's Address

Metropolitan Geevarghese Coorilos

Introduction

I greet you all in the most precious name of the Holy Triune God!

On behalf of the Vice Moderator of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), the Rev. Dr Janet Corlett and the Rev. Dr. Jooseof Keum, our Director, and on behalf of the entire Commission, I should like to extend to all of you a very warm welcome. KARIBU!

As Moderator of CWME, I have great pleasure in thanking you for having responded positively to our invitation to be part of this historic mission conference here in Arusha. It is our hope and prayer that your gracious presence and active participation and our praying and reflecting together here would make it a rich and meaningful encounter. Let me also take this opportunity to express, on behalf of all of us, my deepest sense of gratitude to the African Churches, the All Africa Council of Churches, churches in Tanzania, especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania for hosting us here and for the warm hospitality. ASANTE!

The Arusha World Mission Conference is historically significant on many counts. As the 14th World Mission Conference, it marks the continuation of the rich tradition from Edinburgh 1910. Holding the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism has been an enduring legacy that CWME has inherited from the International Missionary Council (IMC) which was organized as a fruit of the first ever World Mission Conference in Edinburgh 1910 out of which the modern ecumenical movement was born. The Conference also assumes special relevance as it is designed as an African mission conference. The last time the IMC convened a mission conference in Africa was in Achimota (1958) where the historic decision to merge the IMC with the WCC was taken. The decision became a reality in the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961). The main objective of the integration was that, with the merger, concerns of unity and mission would be held together in the life and work of the WCC. Six decades later, the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism has returned to Africa where the centre of gravity of world Christianity is now felt and where the Spirit is moving vibrantly. We sincerely hope that the spirit of Achimota, i.e, the spirit of merging unity and mission, would be taken seriously here in Arusha. After the integration, WCC even amended its constitution to reflect the missionary nature of the Church. It is also important that the World Council of Churches is celebrating 70 years of its existence and ministry this year and the CWME is excited that the Arusha mission conference can celebrate this significant milestone. On questions of unity and mission, the Faith and Order Commission and CWME have been working collaboratively, especially in the recent past. We have established a practice of inviting each other for major conferences and initiatives. The recent Faith and Order publication, The Church: Towards a Common Vision also affirms that unity begins with mission, *albeit* with God's mission. We can partake in this *Missio Dei* meaningfully only when we do it **together**. The CWME mission document Together Towards Life (TTL) also highlights this interrelationship between mission and unity in its section entitled "Church on the Move". It articulates that the Church is called to be **on the move** and hence Church, by its very nature, is missionary, a pilgrim church, itself a notion which has much to contribute to the WCC's main programmatic thrust between the 10th and 11th assemblies, of the "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace". It is, therefore, our hope

that the high priestly prayer of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ "that all may be one so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21) becomes an experiential reality in this conference.

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

This is the second term that I am serving the CWME as Moderator. I feel really proud of being part of both the Commissions that I have had the privilege of serving. The previous CWME commission made a huge contribution to the world of ecumenical missiology by producing the new mission statement of the WCC, Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (now popularly known as TTL) which has been widely received and affirmed. The current commission has been working hard, right from its inception, on organizing this conference which is an integral part of the mandate of the Commission. At this moment, I want to thank the WCC Central Committee, particularly its leadership, for approving our proposal to hold this conference here in Arusha around the central theme, "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship". We hope that the reflections that TTL has sparked off will continue to influence our deliberations here in Arusha. I would like to share with you a few thoughts as we continue to ponder over the theme of Transforming Discipleship.

Transforming Discipleship: Mission as Turning the World Upside Down

According to David Bosch, mission is to turn to God; and to turn to God is to turn to the world. I would like to go a step further in this Biblical direction and affirm that mission is to **turn the world upside down**. One of the salient features of the mission of the early disciples of Christ was the revolutionary nature and content of their discipleship. They were branded as subversives that **turned the world upside down**. In Acts 17:8-9, it was said about Paul and Silas that "these men who have turned the word upside down have arrived here too". What is even more striking is the fact that the disciples of Christ were accused of questioning the decrees of Caesar and proclaiming that there was another Lord, Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:9) Discipleship, for the early disciples of Christ then, meant confronting the hegemonic empires and announcing the arrival of a new dispensation, the reign of Christ. Resistance is not a mere reaction to the status-quo, but a pro-active **no** to its oppressive character; and a pursuit of justice, peace and integrity of creation which is what mission is all about. It is for restoration of justice and in affirmation of life, that we are called to resist the forces of "death" and in that our Discipleship stands out as Transforming. This means then that mission and evangelism today vis-à-vis Transforming Discipleship should be about **turning the contemporary world upside down**. Nothing less would qualify Discipleship as Transforming.

We live in a fast changing world and there is need to reflect deeply on the signs of the times. There are new incarnations of Caesar. There are new avatars of Herod. There are new emperors. This is a new imperial era where numerous "little empires" are being created within the orbit of a "mega empire" that is working in hegemonic ways.

We come across a supreme example of what we call mission as Transforming Discipleship in the witness of the early Church, as we read in the Book of Revelation. Suffering under the yoke of the Roman Empire, the early church under the leadership of John resisted the imperial dictates of Rome. They were required to declare the Lordship of Caesar once every year before the Magistrate. As long as they did that they had the freedom to believe in any other god and practice any other faith. However, the early church would not compromise on their fundamental faith and would proclaim Jesus Christ as their only Lord. Of course, they had to pay a heavy price for this kind of discipleship. It was costly discipleship all the way. Their unflinching faith in the lordship of Jesus Christ alone empowered them to challenge the dictatorship of the empire and its unjust decrees. The way the early church denounced the empire was indeed prophetic. Not only did the church challenge the empire but it also announced its fall proleptically.

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great" (Rev.18:2).

Mission as Transforming Discipleship in today's imperial global scenario is about challenging the empires of our times and announcing their fall as if they have already fallen. Discipleship is about challenging

idolatry which try to replace the Sovereignty of God with human power and money. It is about **turning the world upside down**.

Another characteristic of the Roman empire then was its worship of mammon alongside Caesar worship. The "harlot" in Rev. 18 represents the enormous wealth of the Roman empire and its luxury and pomp. In our own world today, dictatorship and neo-liberal capitalism are combined and imposed on citizens as a package by several contemporary imperial/fascist regimes. The greed-driven economy has effectively replaced the regime of justice and equity with mammon. Moving in the Spirit here would mean confronting the idolatry of money. On his pilgrimage towards Jerusalem, Jesus **occupied** the Temple by cleansing it of the forces of mammon that had converted the Temple into a market place, a trade centre, an exchange bureau, and a stock market (Mtt. 21). Inside the temple, Jesus turned the tables of market forces upside down. Mission as Transforming Discipleship then is also about **turning the tables** of unjust economies **upside down**. TTL conveys this message thus:

"We affirm that the economy of God is based on values of love and justice for all and that Transformative mission resists idolatry in the free market economy".

The ecumenical movement as a mission movement should resist empires of our times. However, many a time during the past two decades of my engagement, I felt that some of our ecumenical institutions themselves are not free from the value orientations of the modern-day empires. The very word "*oikoumene*" had its original context in imperialism, the Roman Empire, that is. As K. M. George would argue, the term "*oikoumene*" was understood almost as a synonym for the hegemonic Roman Empire. The expansion of the Roman empire was then identified with the building up of the *oikoumene*. We must remind ourselves of the fact that the context of the 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference where the modern ecumenical movement had its genesis, was also one of imperial triumphalism. The call for "the Evangelization of the whole world in this very generation", for many meant or resulted in the imposition of Western values of Christendom on the rest of the world. Mission as Transforming Discipleship today then is also about **turning** this imperial mission logic and praxis **upside down**. It is about **turning the world upside down**.

This would mean that we as churches and ecumenical movements should undergo a soul searching and renounce all traces of these imperial vestiges from our structures and ministries. Sadly the logic and legacy of the empire has kept coming back to haunt us and at times to hijack the agenda of our churches, mission organizations and ecumenical institutions. Rogate Mshana, the main coordinator of this conference here, a noted economist and ecumenist himself, warns us of this danger when he says, "Regrettably, money-theism has infiltrated some churches and made them forget that it is God's justice that is at the heart of the Christian faith". Partnerships in mission continue to be resource and power driven even now in 21st century mission relationships to the extent that they miss out the purpose of both mission and partnership, resulting in the sources and dynamics of money shaping and sustaining certain expressions of mission. As Jesus evicted the market forces from the life of the Temple, we must get rid of the influence of mammon and its worship. Combating marketization of the Temple was an integral element of Jesus' pilgrimage towards the Cross. Therefore, a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Moving in the Spirit (our theme here) that does not address the issues of moral degeneration of the secular and the ecclesial world that we are part of, especially the influence of the idolatry of mammon and the logic of the corporate world, cannot be a sacred walk in the Spirit. This means that mission as Transforming Discipleship is about **turning the world upside down**, both the secular and the ecclesial world.

In a context where empires are striking back with their own dictatorial requirements of allegiance to mammon, market, consumerism, militarism, sexism, fundamentalism and fascism, Transforming Discipleship implies a willingness to confront the logic of the empire and to lay down our lives for the sake of Christ and the gospel. In other words, martyrdom continues to be an important expression of discipleship. This was exemplified most poignantly recently (2015) when 21 Egyptian Christians laid down their lives before terrorists. Even in the face of death, they had the courage to utter the name of Christ.

I am also proud to say that my own Holy Father, the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, who is here with us and will address the plenary on Friday, has been on such a pilgrimage of justice and peace,

risking his life for the sake of Christ. His Holiness escaped a bomb attack only narrowly during a visit to a congregation in Aleppo, Syria last year. Despite warnings about personal security, His Holiness continues to take risks for the sake of Christ and his people in the Middle East. This is daring terrorism, fascism and empire as part of Transforming Discipleship.

We lay down our lives for the sake of Christ not because we believe that Christ needs us to defend him but because our Discipleship of Christ calls us to uphold truth and justice, to restore these so that the poor, the earth and all else may have life in all its abundance. As we have seen, Transforming Discipleship is "Missionary Discipleship", as Pope Francis would put it. And there is profound joy in it.

About nine years ago, in Kandhamal in Odisha, India, Brother Suresh was brutally killed by Hindu fanatics. He was one among hundreds who gave their lives for Christ. Brother Suresh, then a new convert and an evangelist from the socially and economically disempowered Dalit community, was dragged from the bus he was traveling on and put into a pit with his body completely buried in it up to his neck. He was given a last chance to give up his faith in Christ but he would not surrender to their dictates. He said, "I am happy to sacrifice my life for Christ who sacrificed his life for me". This is the joy of costly discipleship! As Bonhoeffer would say, this is "keeping close to him (Jesus Christ)". Then they thrashed his head with a huge piece of rock. Today, Brother Suresh is celebrated as a martyr who witnessed that the gospel transforms the oppressed, giving them dignity and hope. Through their Transforming and costly Discipleship, they were able to turn the world upside down.

Mission as Transforming Discipleship also implies that we, as disciples of Christ, need to transform ourselves so that the world can be transformed, turned upside down, by us. We live in an age of consumerism with scant regard and respect for the environment. This has contributed to environmental damage which is almost beyond redemption. The Orthodox theological accent on "*Askesis*" is of great pertinence here. The Orthodox world of monasticism and asceticism is perhaps the locus where the tension between mastery and mystery is most creatively lived out. As "priests of creation", humanity here voluntarily stays away from the world of greed and destruction and opts for an organic lifestyle that is kenotic. As Elizabeth Theokritoff puts it succinctly:

"In this living, matter and material things become means of "communion" not "consumerism".

This **being** mode of mission, mission as living out an organic life, is therefore about replacing the world of consumerism with an alternate world of communion, a world of sharing and celebrating life, as TTL advocates. It is about **turning the world upside down**.

Mission as turning the world upside down is also about **reversal of existing mission paradigms**. One such paradigm shift was introduced by TTL in the form of Mission from the Margins (MFM). MFM is an alternative missional movement, a counter cultural missiology. Mission in this sense is not any longer a one way traffic where the rich, the powerful, the elite and the Global North are the sole agents of mission and the poor and the Global South are mere recipients of "mission". Here, the language of 'center' and 'margins' are constantly used to sustain power relations in mission. This is significant as money, power and mission have been historically close allies in world mission. MFM subverts this logic and turns the world of colonial mission enterprise upside down. It affirms the agency of the margins, the marginalized. It is important to note that the faithful in Asia Minor that formed the early church were primarily people of subaltern background. What is significant here, therefore, is that it was the marginalized themselves that organized the resistance movement against the Roman empire. It was Mission from the Margins. Mission from the centre has been associated with paternalism and superiority complex. People at the margins have claimed the primary agency of God's mission where God chooses the vulnerable and the marginalized to fulfill God's mission of establishing the just reign of God where the Magnificat vision (Lk 1) is materialized and where "the last would be the first" (Mtt.20:16). The purpose of mission here is not simply to move people from the margins to the centre but also to challenge those systems and people who tend to remain at the centre by keeping people on the margins. This has implications for our churches, mission bodies and ecumenical institutions too.

Let me conclude with a story, originally told by a bishop friend of mine. This is about a poor Dalit worker who used to travel by train to get to his work place in India. Trains in India have different classes of travel such as ordinary compartment, second class, first class and different classes of air conditioned coaches. This man, being a poor Dalit worker could only afford to travel by the ordinary coach. He had to stand in long queues every day to purchase his ticket and walk to the end of the platform as the ordinary coaches are normally placed as last coaches. By the time he would purchase his ticket and run towards the end of the platform to catch the train, the train would have left. He would miss the train on many days. Out of frustration, he once decided to lodge a complaint with the then Railway Minister. And this is what he wrote in his letter, "Hereafter there should not be any last compartment on Indian trains. If you still want a last coach, make sure that it is at the very front of the train". Joke apart, the message here is loud and clear, and that is that there is a determination in what the poor Dalit worker is saying here. It was a declaration that he was not willing to be the last and the least anymore and that he wanted to be part of the mainstream society. The impoverished and the disenfranchised clamour for a "**turned upside down world**", and this is the clamour of God too. This is turning the world upside down. And this is precisely what mission as Transforming discipleship is all about, **turning the unjust world upside down**; margins taking over agency of mission.

As the story indicates, the marginalized people are already involved in struggles to turn the unjust world upside down and Transforming Discipleship here is about following Jesus Christ who is present with them in their acts of resistance to injustice and oppression.

It is not enough to say that empires will fall. Like the early church did, we need to announce its fall as if it has already fallen.

Arundhati Roy would put it this way:

"Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it...The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling; their versions of history, their wars, their weapons, their versions of inevitability". And may I add, "their versions of mission and evangelism".

Therefore, it is also not enough to say that another world is possible. Our mission is to announce its arrival as if it has already been ushered in. Our mission is to **turn the world upside down**. Nothing less will do.

We hope that our collective prayers and reflections around the theme of "Transforming Discipleship" will lead us into a Spirit-led pilgrimage of justice and peace.

With these words, may I once again welcome you all warmly to this historic mission conference. I hope our time together here would truly be a meaningful experience.