



VIEWPOINTS

LOWERING THE MASKS: MISSION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

new hope

*blaming the victim
blaming groups of people who are unwell*

*empire eating the lives of God's people away
disease eating away the lives of God's people
what do we have to say?*

*God's silence is perplexing
disease a mystery to be solved*

*requiring intervention of a Divine presence
where is God in the messy complications
of pandemic and propensity to oppress the poor*

*safety of the world
arbitrarily rendered*

*refusals to support the lives and living of the masses
masks pushed aside as illegitimate response
competing needs interrupting the possibilities of healing*

*where to lay blame as the suffering increases
where to find answers that include a Gospel of grace
where to place our hope in these days of death
when graveyards are walking into the seas*

*a scramble for good live
destruction of abundant living*

*fighting for attention from a God co-opted
culpable religion supporting gods of capitalism
oppression named god*

*the earth begs rest in an unforeseeable future
where empire is toppled*

*nation states grapple with diminishing resources
the opportunity to heal the masses
confused with the search for a cure*

*the competition identifies a price at the end
a capitalist need for empire*

*to once again
exhibit dominance
increase revenue at the price of those in need
teetering on the margins*

*competition that defies the cry for help
blaming those who are impacted by disease*

*here in a race for millions at stake
the world becomes smaller
the earth a prison turning graveyard*

*borders become prison walls
boundaries mark graveyards*

*visions needed to tear down these walls
vision for healing a world diagnosed
with apathy and uncompassionate malaise*

*learning escapes the masses
signs point to need for change*

*systems begging for alternatives
where is the liberation of God promised
in a state of life where capitalism still prospers*

*the silence drives us into deeper necro-politics
the margins refuse the return to normal*

*emerging are new ways for living this life
emerging is the fight for new life*

*life for the poor
life for the unwell
life for the un-dead*

*new life
new hope
new freedoms*

*KGAT
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PANDEMIC REALITIES



The COVID-19 health pandemic continues to linger and with it the related uncertainties of eradication or full healing from the sickness, grief, and suffering inflicted globally upon humanity. For the past two and a half years, the world has been gripped with the ravages of the illness and with it the amplification of the cries for justice from the margins of our societies. In the midst of death, pain and suffering, those who are among the most vulnerable have been adversely affected by the challenges of living through this global health crisis.

As the lockdowns, masks mandates and social isolation necessary to reduce exposure to the virus persisted, the poor became poorer. Women and children were further displaced in the quest for equity and access.

Unemployment increased and with it the cost of living. One survey indicated poor urban household may have fared the worst, with the pandemic increasing inequities in urban areas.

(<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-poverty-and-inequality-evidence-phone-surveys>).



Health disparities are on the rise and equal access to health care continues to be a problem for many. The cries for vaccine equity joined the

tears and cries for equity in many other areas. With some schools moving to internet-based learning during the pandemic, access to technology and internet proved challenging for many whose education was interrupted in the process. Access to mobile phones, Wi-Fi, computers and tablets are not the same for all. These are but a few of the global realities.

While the pandemic exacerbated the living conditions for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40), the challenges of the pandemic also pointed a spotlight on the pre-pandemic injustices and experiences of vulnerable populations, many of whom were rendered invisible in our communities. Jesus said: “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew 26:11).



The poor are more than those who lack sufficient money to live and provide for their basic needs. There are layers of poverty which are generational and situational. Living in poverty affects body, mind and spirit. Being poor is also intersectional. Poverty intersects with a myriad of other social challenges: racial injustice, gender inequality, all forms of discrimination, climate injustice, economy of life, and much more.

The pandemic highlighted the seismic fault lines of injustice which are present and often masked among us. These injustices were rendered invisible and in some ways even normalized among us, as a part of our social structures, causing them to be overlooked. This normalizing of poverty and inequities is a reading of Jesus’ words in a way that lacks compassion and concern.

There is nothing normal about the brokenness, pain and suffering evident in the world. There is nothing normal about the presence of the poor and the pandemics of poverty and hunger. There is nothing normal about the wounding and heartbreak experienced from living lives which are deprived of human rights, dignity and respect. There is nothing normal in not exhibiting love, care, and compassion which we are called to offer as Christians bringing a gospel of love, hope and peace to the world. There is nothing normal in watching sea waters rise, glaciers melt, watching food deserts grow in communities, and water run to a trickle as droughts prevail.

There is hope ahead for a post-pandemic world where COVID-19 no longer dominates our news, a world where all are vaccinated and healthy. This post-pandemic world will see a lowering of the masks from our faces and gatherings will lose the fear of contagion. The lowering of the masks will render our faces visible, and we will be present once again as we were in the past.

As we lower the masks from our faces, the call to the church in this moment is for a new normal, an orientation to mission that calls us to lower the masks covering injustices, a call for us to be intentional in service and mission with those on the margins. The call to mission in a post-pandemic world lies before us, how will we walk this journey together?

A Call to a New Normal



The 2020 CWM eDARE (Discernment and Radical Engagement) conference convened mere months after the start of the pandemic under the theme “daring God-talk: what is normal?” The conference provided the opportunity for theologians to ponder the theme in the context of a world that was in the early throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the early wrestling with the desire to “return to normal”.

As a poet and theologian, I was asked to reflect on the thought provoking and inspiring presentations and provide a poetic response. Across the presentations and discussions of the conference, there was the challenge to what it means to be “normal” and to the expressed desire by billions to “return to normal” as quickly as possible, as individuals and communities tired of restrictive COVID-19 protocols and mandates. *“Doing Theology in the New Normal: Global Perspectives”* captured some of the resulting challenges and opportunities to the church as the theologians



witnessed the adversities in their communities due to the pandemic.

<https://www.cwmission.org/book-launch-doing-theology-in-the-new-normal-global-perspectives/>



The quest for normal was expressed in the desire to see the lockdowns and curfews lifted, to experience the freedom of coming and going without the burden of mask mandates and physical distancing, and the longing to travel and socialize without the threat of succumbing to the growing reality of severe illness or death if one caught the virus. And, as the doors of the church remained closed in many places, there was the desire to re-open the doors of the church to worship, fellowship and care for the community.

The return to normal had other implications. Returning to normal also held the challenge of returning to “the way things used to be” which was not positive for many. Social problems were not solved, or resolved, instead they were heightened. There was the need to interrogate the desire for this return to normal. If normal was poverty, hunger, sickness, drought, famine, unemployment, under-employment, sexual violence, discrimination, rising sea waters, food deserts, forced migration and human trafficking, why would anyone advocate for a return to normal?

What expectations do we need to set to see changes reflecting a new normal where every one has all they needed to live with respect and dignity, and with full economy of life? What goals do we need to add to our vision for a just world for all? What are our hopes as we contemplate mission in a post-pandemic world? These are questions yet before the church and the world as a post-pandemic world and the accompanying challenges of injustice begin to emerge yet again before us.

The desire for a post-pandemic world must be confrontational with the pre-pandemic world in which we lived. The missional imperative and

commitment to ensuring hope and change for all was already committed to strategies of negating poverty and colonialism. The commitment to social justice and the good news of the gospel in the movements for social change involved the presence of churches at work in their communities. The church is at work and present with the marginalized in the quest for justice. This too is a part of mission which calls us to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

A Renewed Call to Mission



There is a growing list of disparities present in our local and global communities and with that list are the opportunities for being active participants with God in ensuring all are safe and cared for. The call for the twenty-first century is not a new call, it is a renewed call to mission - mission that brings us into contact with the pain and suffering of the world as we bring the healing and compassion of God’s love to the world.

The poem “*new hope*” was one of the poetic responses to the presentations during eDARE 2020. Re-imagining mission has been explored for many years in the church. Emerging from these explorations were the on-going need to decolonize the church, to confront and dismantle systems of oppression, including patriarchy, and the priority of centering mission from the margins which put at center those who were vulnerable and what Jesus called “the least of these”.

“Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18-31) to further God’s mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish” (Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism,

https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf, p.5).

Our orientation in mission is neither “to nor from” the margins. Instead, there is a movement towards inclusion and mutuality built on the foundation of God’s love which points us to mission together as the church - mission “with.” It is God’s love present with us that is transformative for those who are most vulnerable and those who are privileged. A renewed call to mission is rooted in love of God and love of neighbor which promotes respect and nurtures advocacy and justice. This quest for mutuality in mission with the value given to the participation of those identified as the margins brings the church to reconciliation and unity in the vision for mission in this twenty-first century.

Added to mission with the margins is the need to include creation care as a part of mission. “Mission with creation at its heart is already a positive movement in our churches through campaigns for eco-justice and more sustainable lifestyles and the development of spiritualities that are respectful of the earth. However, we have sometimes forgotten that the whole of creation is included in the reconciled unity towards which we are all called (2 Cor. 5:18-19) (Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf, p.10).

The challenges being faced by the marginalized are coupled with the injustices toward all of creation. The abuse of the land has contributed to the food deserts around us and the lack of sustainability for many communities. These days of COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the world around us in a different way.

Our truth telling brought us to naming racism as a pandemic, a global crisis which required our attention. The crisis facing women was also identified as being of pandemic proportions as we watched yet again women in society losing jobs and wages, facing discrimination and violence and determined that change was long overdue. Now it is time for us to name the climate crisis and ecological injustice as being of pandemic proportion. A renewed call to mission has to include caring for all of creation and is mission beyond people that includes care for all creation.

Post-Pandemic Possibilities



Where do we go from here? We are still a world in crisis. Post-pandemic possibilities requires looking at the places of crisis and the opportunities for the church to be present in providing solutions. New hope awaits us, hope that invites us to name the truths and unmask the coverings which continue to perpetuate crises which are unsustainable.

Sustainability should be a goal in mission. Simply put, “sustainability is a societal goal that broadly aims for humans to safely co-exist on planet Earth over a long time”

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability>).

Our desire to change the world is a desire to achieve sustainability in the world for all. We want economic, social, human and environmental sustainability, a large task which requires a wholistic approach that centers on all of creation.

The masks are lowering from our faces as new technology and protocols emerge to attend to the illness and spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic. As these masks are lowering from our faces, there is relief that perhaps the pandemic is over, and we have nothing to worry about anymore. We know that is untrue, as we continue to watch new variants being named and see numbers surging in our communities and realize there are other pandemics facing us.

The masks we have worn to cover our noses and mouths to protect ourselves from the spreading COVID-19 virus are representative in many ways of the masks we have worn across our faces to protect us from seeing and being disturbed by the social pandemics which have been present among us.

A lowering and removing of our COVID-19 face masks must be accompanied by the lowering of the masks which prevent us from being active participants in care for all of creation. This removing of the masks is necessary for us to be the church present and at work in ministry and mission with the world. The church in mission has a role to play in achieving the sustainable development goals set forth by the global community to ensure that sustainability of all life is achieved. The church in mission is present with the poor making sure they have what they need and is present ensuring the healing of all who are not well.

The church in mission is present in communities caring for each other from the abundance of God’s gift given to us through Jesus Christ. We are the church together doing what we can where we are, impacting the world and providing for a world where justice is visible for all. Post-pandemic possibilities rest in a renewed call to mission that is with all of God’s people, caring and attending to all of God’s creation. We can create a new normal together, and see a new heaven and a new earth, where God is truly making “everything new” Revelation 21:5.

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