

**Together in Hope Amidst the Pandemic:
*Exploring Partnership, Mission and Public Theology***

Deenabandhu Manchala

In just over ten months, a dangerous microbial has turned and continues to turn the world upside down, killing nearly 1.25 million people and infecting over 50 million in 213 countries. Covid-19 is devastating lives and families, tumbling down economies, and wreaking havoc on all fronts in the lives of all alike – wealthy and impoverished, powerful and disempowered, and privileged and deprived. No one seems to know when all this would end. But when it does, after all the losses and new patterns of life, the post-Covid-19 world is sure to be different from the one slipping away.

When the pandemic struck early this year, many of us thought that the pandemic would compel us - human beings, to introspect, recognize our shared vulnerability, abandon our obsessive pursuits for domination and destruction, and make changes to the way we organize our political and economic life and social dynamics. Nothing of that has happened. If at all it did, it has only been on the fringes. On the other hand, we have only seen and heard certain detrimental trends and habits continue, and in fact, even escalating further.

Contrasts, Challenges and Opportunities

Let me mention few such challenges in order for us to understand the decisiveness of this moment for new theological exploration.

First is the unabashed assertions of power and privilege amidst sharp systemic inequalities and human deprivations. The pandemic has exposed that the so-called market economy lacks the capacity to protect and sustain people in the face of a disaster. Besides healthcare remaining inaccessible, the poor - the working classes and migrant labourers who are its economic engines, were treated as liabilities. Ironically, though there have never been strict global measures such as the current lockdowns to protect the poor from diseases and the viruses of endless poverty, hunger and homelessness,¹ they were forced to play their part to protect all, especially as the pandemic threatened the invulnerability of the privileged. The priorities of most governments seem to suggest that some must remain poor and the earth plundered so

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¹ As per, <https://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>, almost half the world- over three billion people-live on less than \$2.50 a day, and at least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day. Furthermore, infectious diseases continue to harm the poor across the world. Every year there are 350–500 million cases of malaria, with 1 million fatalities. Some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation. Almost two in three people lacking access to clean water survive on less than \$2 a day, with one in three living on less than \$1 a day. More than 660 million people without sanitation live on less than \$2 a day, and more than 385 million on less than \$1 a day.

that their markets and economies thrive.² This aggressive assertion of privilege was present again in the debates on whether or not to lift the lockdowns. When it became clear that the majority of the victims in the US were the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions, and African Americans and Hispanics, some argued that their rights, lifestyle and wealth need not be sacrificed for the sake of others.³ These bald-faced actions represent the prevalent culture of privileging the powerful and economic growth at any cost, implying that the world is only for those who are wealthy, powerful, productive, well-nourished, and able-bodied, and those others have no rights or reason to live.

The second is the phenomena of authoritarian regimes, rightwing political ideologies, majoritarian politics and post-truth populism making many democracies dysfunctional in many parts of the world. The values of justice, equity and common good are replaced by greed, domination and cruelty. The pandemic has not stopped; in fact, has seen an increase of torture and incarceration of human rights activists and political opponents, repressive measures to silence dissent and people's movements, and new labour laws that would give unbridled freedom to business houses to exploit the vulnerable people. Meanwhile, some hegemonic forces, with strength drawn from the dominant versions of religion, culture and nationalism are on the rise, holding together the gains of the market economy within their borders of control. This increasing connivance between economic powers and authoritarian regimes indicates that the earth and the lives of many will continue to be violated.

The third is the shocking reality of religion – the so-called sacred, has turned lethal as never before. Religious resources, identities, institutions and communities are increasingly becoming sources of hatred and division, rejection and exclusion, aggression and arrogance. The pandemic has turned out to be an opportunity to accelerate the processes of exclusion and victimization of religious and ethnic minorities. White evangelicalism, Zionism, Islamic radicalism, militant Buddhism and Hindutva, a supremacist ideology in my country India, and others have become allies of dominant versions of nationalism and patriotism.

As the world treads into an uncertain future, more such harsh realities may become frequent. Disastrous economic recession, massive unemployment, political and social unrest, hunger related crimes, and crude forms of exploitation, including increased human trafficking, besides

² To illustrate, it is said that a mere 5 percent of the money invested on weapons would be adequate enough to protect the world's 7 billion population against some common deadly diseases.² The global military spending in 2019 represented 2.2 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), which equates to approximately USD 249 per person.² In contrast, spending on healthcare in low income countries remained at \$41 per person in 2018.²

³ <https://www.salon.com/2020/03/27/trumps-death-cult-finally-says-it-time-to-kill-the-useless-eaters-for-capitalism/>. "An Indiana congressman said ...that letting more Americans die from [the novel coronavirus](#) is the "lesser of two evils" compared with the economy cratering due to social distancing measures". <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/14/politics/trey-hollingsworth-coronavirus/index.html>

more frequent environmental disasters⁴, are being predicted in many parts of the world.⁵ Another worse pandemic may still not be potent enough to purge our societies of these ruthless pursuits. Arundhati Roy, a public intellectual from India, deplors: “In very much the same way as the coronavirus has entered human bodies and amplified existing illnesses, it has entered countries and societies and amplified their structural infirmities and illnesses.”⁶

However, there have also been some distinct signs of hope. One is the spontaneous expressions of compassion and human solidarity amidst the pandemic in many parts of the world, with many collectives - some big but mostly small, reaching out to the people in need. Two is the increasing occurrence of people’s resistance, both big and small, in many parts of the worlds, responding to the challenges of systemic injustice and violation of lives and rights. Black Lives Matter, Thursdays in Black, Environmental movements, Human rights movements, BDS movement in solidarity with the Palestine, Dalit movements in South Asia, many other movements against political repression and injustice, and interfaith initiatives for justice, are but a few to mention.

As someone said, there seems to be a ‘contagion of resistance against injustice and abuse worldwide’. These indicate that people are coming together in solidarity and to fight against injustice and abusive powers, and for human rights and dignity. These actions also assert their conviction that what is considered normal should not be the new normal. These are indeed signs of hope to imagine a new world of justice, dignity and life for all.

A moment of reckoning

The world is indeed at crossroads, indicating a sharp moral divide. There are those who, no matter what the pandemic has done and can do, continue their pursuits for power and wealth, and there are others- the resistance movements and alternative voices that insist and aspire that the old order must go if the earth and its people must have a future. Likewise, there are those who continue to perpetuate their monopoly with their ideologies, policies and belief systems, and there are also those who dream of a new world guided by the values of justice, equity and dignity for all.

In a world dominated by networks of dominant powers, we see these small, amorphous and spontaneous expressions of people in solidarity in resistance and hope in many parts of the world. These expressions are inspired by a deep sense of mutuality and interdependence and commitment for the values of justice, dignity and peace for all. These are partnerships for life and justice. People’s movements, civil society organizations, service organizations, activists,

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-53415298>

⁵ “Developing countries are facing an unprecedented collective threat to human life, social cohesion and economic devastation. Massive economic losses will be incurred...as the epidemic takes hold, leading to social disruption, violence and security issues.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/coronavirus-tackle-climate-crisis-and-poverty-with-zeal-of-covid-19-fight-scientists-urge?>

⁶ <https://progressive.international/wire/2020-05-02-arundhati-roy-our-task-is-to-disable-the-engine/en>

academics, and students come together into these partnerships, even as these are not necessarily inspired or accompanied by faith resources or social ideologies. These may not be perfect and organized enough to sustain but these are growing and these are the only alternative we have.

It, therefore, seems a decisive moment, also one of reckoning for churches, in fact for all faith communities, to discern their role in shaping the emerging world. Would they allow themselves to be preoccupied with issues of survival, continuity, and the patronage of the powerful and wealthy? Or would they choose to be with the restless others who are clamoring for a new world? What then would be their distinct contribution to these partnerships in solidarity and hope?

Partnership in solidarity and hope

The moment in time prompts us to reclaim partnership both as a principle and a process for theological reflection. Partnership is not a mere means towards an end. It is formative to Christian self-understanding as it defines one's sense of being in relation with people and all of God's creation. It is a conscious spiritual choice, an attitude that celebrates and lives out God's intention for the sanctity and integrity of life both at personal and social levels.

The biblical story is about God's partnership with creation, about God's constant intrusion into human affairs to hold us accountable for our failings as well as to encourage us to be partners to sustain and celebrate life. God's incarnation in Christ too is a concrete expression of God's partnership with the world. Jesus' life, message and ministry testify to his struggle against life-denying and destructive partnerships between the religious and political powers of his time.

In contrast, he partnered with the marginalized and the outcasts to assert the distinctness of God's justice as one restores right relationships by transforming both the victim and the aggressor. God's justice is the basis for God's covenant with humanity and all forms of life. It seeks transformation of relationships at all levels – inter-personal and structural. When there is justice, there is peace and life for all (Isa. 65:17-25).

Therefore, creating, nurturing and participating in partnerships for life is a moral and spiritual vocation. As such, partnership for justice and life is not only the means towards an end but also the end result - the eschatological fulfillment of God's grand plan of salvation through reconciliation (Eph.1:10).

Such an understanding could point toward new signposts for church, mission, theology and diakonia. Let me suggest a few possibilities to assist this exploration.

Reimagining the church

The physical church, in all diverse identities and expressions, has been on hold during the current lockdowns. It is likely to remain virtual for long. Many are now able to have worship

experience from the comforts of their homes. But there are also some others, who are convinced that they could still be church, despite lockdowns and restrictions, through their presence and actions in solidarity with those in need. In fact, there have always been some who understood themselves as church through their vocations of public engagement, even if they did not align themselves with any visible ecclesial community.

Whatever identities and expressions the empirical church takes, what ultimately matters for its credibility is how honestly it responds to the imperatives of the faith that calls it into being. The church is real in places and at moments when it witnesses to the reign of God through its presence and actions. As a WCC's study document: *Nature and Mission of the Church*, asserts, "The Church can never be fully and unequivocally grasped only in its visible appearance. Therefore, the visible organizational structures of the Church must always be seen and judged, for good or ill, in the light of God's gifts of salvation in Christ."⁷ The church's primary calling is to be a transformed and transforming community (Mt.5.13, 14). It is an alternative that has the mandate to propose alternatives to the fallen structures of human relationships. Another WCC Study, *Ecclesiology and Ethics* asserts that the church not only has an ethic, but is an ethic, with its actions constantly validating its affirmations. "Such an understanding also implies that the church is called to be a moral community embodying within itself and living out the values that affirm life in all its fullness to all people"⁸.

The moment in time seems to suggest an ecclesial reimagination, perhaps church as a community of partners with God rather than a mere community of believers. This implies that its life and witness find expression in partnerships. These partnerships are not exclusive, but are open and inclusive of all those who strive for the reign of God. This sense of partnership shaping its life and actions, would help it from being a mere religious community among many other. It also implies that the church cannot be an institution or a power structure with protocols and practices that only echo the moral aberrations of our time. In sum, the church needs to find its self-identity as an event of the manifestation of God's grace, its self-understanding as organic expression of God's plan of grand reconciliation of the whole creation, and its form as a movement than an institution.

Vulnerability as a way to live out "sentness"

This moment also seems to prompt a new understanding of mission. 'Mission' has always been grasped through its implied meaning of being 'sent' or 'commissioned' to accomplish a 'task'. Churches in different contexts of time and space understood and responded to this 'sentness' as per the influences of the prevailing socio-cultural dynamics and geo-political ideologies.

Be that as it may, by and large, these assertions and expressions of mission have always been centered around human agency and the related dynamics of life. However, we are now faced

⁷ *Nature and Mission of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper No.198, Geneva, WCC, #45. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-nature-and-mission-of-the-church-a-stage-on-the-way-to-a-common-statement?searchterm=Nature+>

⁸ Thomas F. Best & Martin Robra, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 1997, p. 47.

with the pandemic – an invisible virus that comes from outside the human domain. The challenge now is to reimagine mission and the commission to be engaged in mission in a situation where all – the aggressor and the aggressed, and the powerful and the disempowered, are all in its grip with fear, losses and uncertainties, as their common experience.

However, both the pandemic and its consequences do not spare human complicity. The pandemic comes as a result of prolonged and willful destruction of our eco-system. Leading scientists hold that it was almost always human behavior that caused diseases to spill over into humans.⁹ Along with it, the complicity of the combination of political and economic ideologies and certain anthropocentric religious doctrines must also be acknowledged. These have consistently created, sustained and legitimized breaches - breaches in human consciousness of life, and in damaging their capacities to view life in its interconnectedness.

The point here is that we are in need of healing and restoration of ourselves as human beings and human community, and that is possible only through a new consciousness of the interconnectedness of life. Such a consciousness is perhaps possible through the contemporary common experience of vulnerability. Dominant cultures, religious traditions and ideologies have always draped superiority, invincibility and invulnerability as symbols of success and fulfillment. The consequences have been disastrous to the earth and its people. The pandemic is prompting all to admit: “No one is safe until all of us are safe”, and that we all need one another. This common awareness of vulnerability can inspire collective transformation. Vulnerability needs to be embraced not as a sign of weakness as we have always been told but as of strength. It enables one to be human, to see oneself in relation to the other. Jesus tells the rich ruler to ‘go and sell all he had in order to enter God’s reign.’ (Matt. 19: 21) He seems to tell him that as long as his identity and attitudes are shaped by feelings of invulnerability that come with power and wealth, he would never recognize the need of or respect the other, and consequently miss the opportunity to find his self-worth in being human, in other words, to embrace God’s presence in his ‘here and now’. This common experience of vulnerability seems to prompt us to recognize the value of mutuality and interdependence as one that reconnects us with one another. Therefore, in contrast to the ‘sent’ dimension of mission by powers and regimes, the vulnerable earth and its vulnerable people seem to indicate ‘sentness’ as a pilgrimage toward collective transformation that makes the ‘lion give up its aggressive pursuits so that the lamb feels safe’.

Mission, then, is not an exclusive religious project, but a vocation of protecting and nurturing the interconnected web of life, and its interdependent dynamics. With focus on the sanctity and integrity of life as the purpose of God’s mission, a WCC Mission Statement *Together Towards Life*, asserts the need: “to recognize God’s mission in a cosmic sense and to affirm all

⁹ Leading scientists also said that the Covid-19 outbreak was a “clear warning shot”, given that far more deadly diseases existed in wildlife, and that today’s civilization was “playing with fire”. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/coronavirus-nature-is-sending-us-a-message-says-un-environment-chief>

life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God's web of life."¹⁰ What we perhaps need now is 'a trans-religious missiology, a missiology that vibes with the Spirit - the Spirit of life, freedom, justice and truth, one that Jesus spoke of as being endowed with in the synagogue in Nazareth'.¹¹

Embracing new understandings

What does all this mean to theology? How do theological vocation and education equip the church to be part of these alternative voices and networks of resistance and hope?

The pandemic has exposed the prevalent attitudes of utter disregard for the sanctity of life, sustained through the cultures of discrimination, exploitation, destruction and of legitimization of the greed for power and wealth. An honest introspection of our faith resources, attitudes and practices, would reveal the influence of these trends on much of our faith affirmations and actions, and our narrow views of life, God, and the world. To elaborate, the individualistic, anthropocentric understanding of salvation, pursuits of peace and prosperity, church-centered piety, option for convenient forms of service, and proselytizing in the name of evangelization, etc., are a few obvious examples that expose this truncated view of life and the place assigned to God within it. In a context of contrasts between powers that cause breaches, and another that is rising to heed the groans of the creation, these weigh more in favor of the former.

In order to recover from this distorted view of life, we must perhaps re-anchor our understanding of and our relationship with God in the affirmation of God as the creator of life. Vast, diverse and beautiful, the creation, in all its intricate interconnectedness and interdependence is God's self-expression and of God's wisdom and generosity. Any breach, therefore, is a breach that affects all – the whole creation itself, and hence contrary to God's will. Therefore, knowing and affirming God is to live with this consciousness of life (Psalm 19).

"*Oikoumene*", a Greek word, and as a theological concept, suggests a meaning that holds the whole inhabited world as one household, asserting that we live and relate with one another as interdependent beings within the earthly home given to us by God. It is anchored in the consciousness of our common life and the inherent value of every human being and the earth. It is an alternative vision of the world that emerges out of a spirituality that views life in its interconnectedness.¹²

¹⁰ *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* -with a practical guide, ed. Jooseop Keum, Geneva, WCC, 2013, #4. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/publications/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes>

¹¹ Deenabandhu Manchala, "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship: Reflections from the Vantage Points of the Marginalized People", *International Review of Mission*, 106.2 (405) December 2017, p.211.

¹² Unfortunately, 'ecumenism' is used mostly in reference to church or Christian unity. Some also erroneously use this term to mark a distinction between 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical', implying that the former is an approach to respond to the call of the gospel in social spheres, whereas being 'evangelical' is a response to the command: "Go and make disciples of all nations". (Matt 28:19).

The task for theology today is to help faith seek that reconnection, to reconnect with one another and the earth. The expanse and the interconnectedness of life that the creation holds together is the space in which the good news of God's reign comes alive. The good news of God's reign is truly good, not only when it is good only for a few or only for human beings but for the whole creation. Therefore, Jesus calls the powerful and the privileged, not to demand and accrue, not to occupy the space that belongs to others, not to consume more than necessary, and not to deprive others by destroying possibilities for life. Thus, Jesus' message of God's reign is good news as it transforms the powerful and the privileged, and kindles hopes and possibilities for the poor.

Theologies of life as allies of partnerships in resistance and hope

This points to the need of an assessment of the relevance and usefulness of our confessional theologies, traditions and belief systems. Much of these took shape in predominantly western, Christian, politically and economically powerful contexts, nurturing complicity with or neutrality toward powers that accrue, dominate and destroy. But the world that we live is diverse and multi-religious, one that stares at us to take a stand on justice and truth.

Alternatively, theologies of life – those that arise from the contemporary struggles of people for justice and dignity, and against oppression and discrimination could help reclaim a wholistic view of life that enables more responsible expressions of faith. Joerg Reiger advocates: "Theology that develops resistance to the powers of exclusion may help to develop new models that prove useful in restructuring not only the process of theological reflection but also the church and, ultimately, even society at large".¹³ The relevance and credibility of churches' witness today seems to depend on their ability to re-anchor themselves in these theologies and systems of knowledge arising out of multi-religious contexts and in contexts of people's struggles for life, justice and dignity.¹⁴

Such a reimagination of faith seems necessary not only as one that helps to cope, but also to effect changes, and not just in individual perceptions and attitudes but in concrete historical realities. Faith, then, is an energy field of active hope. It denounces greed and selfishness, heals and restores the crushed, nurtures attitudes of care toward the earth, and builds networks for life so that the networks of evil may have no future. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said: 'You are the salt and the light of the world' (Mt 5:13,14), indicating a distinct role of transformation for those who wanted to follow him?

Nurturing solidarity in resistance and hope: Role of Diaconal organizations

It also seems an opportune moment for international Christian diaconal organizations to explore new possibilities and expressions of partnership. Their primary goal is to enable

¹³ Joerg Reiger, *God and the Excluded* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001) p.3

¹⁴ Deenabandhu Manchala, "Margins", *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New conceptions of Mission*, Ed. By Kenneth R.Ross, et.al, Oxford & Geneva, Regnum and WCC, 216, p. 318.

churches and communities in different contexts to be partners in mission. Against the backdrop of the moral demands of the time, the limitations and the faith imperatives, let me offer a few specific guidelines for further reflection. These are informed by my engagement with Global Ministries during the past six years. Some of these may resonate with experiences in other contexts.¹⁵

1. Facilitating partnerships: Although we claim that we are only facilitators of partnerships between churches in the US and those in the wider world, our work is largely in the mode of partnering on behalf of the churches in the US. Even if certain tasks, such as resource-sharing, institutional relationships, etc., may require such functions, we need to prioritize this role of being catalysts of partnerships at the level of people, perhaps through more engaging processes of sharing of experiences, faith resources, theological reflections, contextual challenges, etc.
2. Enabling mutuality: While seeking reports, news and updates from time to time, we don't normally share news from our constituent churches in the US. Most often our partners too do not bother to ask. This practice of seeking their news without sharing ours, not only reinforces patronizing models of partnership, but also the misperception that they are being asked with a view to offer funds. We can perhaps use the pandemic-induced awareness of our common vulnerability as an opportunity to make our partnerships mutually supportive.
3. Learning Together: The moment has also exposed that the realities of poverty amidst abundance, blatant discrimination of certain sections, violation of human rights, political repression, police brutality, climate injustice, etc. are not specific only to some contexts but are indeed global now. Enabling processes of mutual learning, therefore, could be another area of engagement for consideration.
4. Building Inclusive communities: The expression 'social distancing' has become a catch phrase today. Our world already has many such structurally and culturally instituted social distances. Churches, at this moment, need to strive more to nurture social relationships that are inclusive, and heal the breaches, and accompany initiatives that resist assertions of privilege, domination and discrimination. We could perhaps facilitate reflection among churches and people's movements engaged in struggles against racism, casteism, Zionism, Christian Zionism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, etc. across regions.
5. Nurturing partnerships for justice: Issues such as of migrants and refugees, forced migration, human trafficking, child labour, violence against women, different forms of discrimination, etc., inspire collaborations among a variety of stakeholders. Besides encouraging our partners to work with others, we also need to see ourselves also as

¹⁵ Global Ministries is a shared witness of United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US. It collaborates with over 300 partners – churches, organizations, institutions, and grassroots' movements in about 80 countries. It anchors its self-understanding as an instrument of God's mission that seeks and nurtures alternative communities by striving for justice and peace through critical presence, advocacy and mutually supportive partnerships. Community, justice, peace, presence and mutuality are the core values that influence all expressions of its work. Its approach is deliberately anchored in, and respectful of partnerships and its partners. www.globalministries.org

facilitators of partnership by creating spaces for such partnerships that are engaged in these struggles.

6. Training and capacity building: We must encourage and assist our partners in leadership development, local resource mobilization and self-reliance. Our partnership must enable them to be self-reliant someday. In the same spirit, we could assist them with training in areas such as resource mobilization, organizational management, leadership building, community development, advocacy, disaster mitigation, food security, community health, sustainable agriculture, anti-human trafficking, etc.

Let me end by asserting that churches have made positive differences in history when they saw themselves as movements and when they were with people which enabled them to read the signs of the times, and to understand the purpose of their being in those contexts, that made them creative and life-affirming forces. We, as churches, mission agencies and ecumenical organizations, need to be constantly on the move, discerning change, open to change and effecting change, in order that we may not only stay relevant but also play a creative part in shaping the world.

Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala is the Area Executive for Southern Asia in the Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and the Disciples Church (Christian Church), USA and works from Cleveland, Ohio, USA.