
World Council of Churches' Model of God's Mission and *Diakonia* in the Signs of the Times: From a Global South Response

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A diaconal congregation represents missional church by pursuing a way of congregational life and discipleship in light of God's universal reign or God's mission, which is fulfilled in Christ's *diakonia* of reconciliation through the Holy Spirit. It upholds congregational mission in engagement with public and global issues, which are imbued with the signs of times on behalf of God's shalom, justice, and the integrity of life. This perspective implies a shift from patronizing interventions to catalytic accompaniment.¹ Given the World Council of Churches' (WCC) model of God's mission and prophetic *diakonia*, this article contextualizes such ecumenical meaning in the postcolonial context of World Christianity.

Economic-ecological challenge and global civil society

One of the signs of the times is the economic-ecological realm of our planetary life, which has been colonized and continues to be vitiated by economic globalization under the dictate of Empire. The economic times in a global sense is driven by a system of Empire in the current phase of late capitalism, which entails a process of the colonization of our lifeworld, degrading human life and the webs of life in creation. This global reality is a challenging issue to our endeavor to become faithful to the mission of the Triune God, that is, the Creator of life, the Redeemer of life, and the Spirit as life-giver. An alternative movement for global civil society finds its voice in some Asian countries in a semi-peripheral or economically developing context. This movement emphasizes social praxis grounded upon anamnesis and solidarity with innocent victims, for instance, comfort women during the Japanese colonial time. It also supports environmental politics and politics of the recognition of the others, challenging the global system steered by politics of the privileged, neoliberal economic principle, and representation through the global communication system of mass media.

Postcolonial paradigm

In areas of the Global South, for instance, China, South Korea,

1. *Theological Perspectives on Diakonia in the Twenty-First Century*, in Colombo, Sri Lanka (June 2–6, 2012), WCC.

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India, and Africa, a postcolonial theory and post-developmental alternative has come to the fore, offering a countervailing force to the idea of the Western model of modernity and global capitalism. In a generic sense, post colonialism may be another term for identifying the globalization of cultures and histories with the structural violence of Western modernity, such that the colonial aftermath does not put an end to the previous colonial or neo-colonial reality of Orientalism.² It is visible in power relations in politics, economic relations, and representation of the previously colonized literature and religions. This postcolonial inquiry seeks to debunk a logic of possessive individualism as adhesion to the politics of neo-colonization and neo-racism and upholds a theology of planetary life. This entails a comprehensive critique of the Western notion of modernity and developmental projects for the sake of an alternative or integral trans-modernity. A new interpretation of world religions within the context of the Axial Age, seen in light of a theology of God's *oikonomia*, marks a paradigm shift in refining the postcolonial shape of anamnestic rationality and solidarity ethics within a comparative, religious framework.³

Voices from World Christianity

A Global South perspective can be seen in terms of the theory of World Christianity, which conceptualizes God's mission as translation or inculturation. The translatability of Scripture into different languages and the indigenous naming of God in differ-

2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

3. Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money: Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

ent contexts serves as a watershed for recognizing and promoting evangelization and inculturation for reconciliation and recognition of the other in the post-western Christianity. A notion of interpolation differentiates the Western misrepresentation from indigenous people's own re-presentation of their discourse, tradition, history, and culture. The idea of a palimpsest was simply a piece of manuscript on which the previous entry had been replaced by another. Missionaries originally overwrote their version of the Gospel under their cultural, linguistic biases.

Such historical missionary representation and authority continues to resurge in the form of religious and patriarchal domination and the fanaticism of crusade in previously colonized countries; it excludes people with different orientations and emphasizes infallibility of biblical inerrancy in a mechanist-deterministic sense. However, evangelization, bringing the good news to all, must be undertaken in the Global South in accordance with God's grace of justification, reconciliation, and righteousness. This perspective also sharply challenges a patriarchal, dominant, social structure and institutions beholden to colonized cultures, which are in support of structural violence, gender inequality, and injustice to employees in underprovided conditions, namely to the poor, women, and children.

A World Christianity perspective maintains that God's living discourse in Jesus Christ for all people is to be seen in light of God's universal-particular reign, in which God's multiple acts of speech become significant throughout all the ages in their plural horizons as driven by the universal-particular horizon of the Holy Spirit. In the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, the Spirit's action underlines the conversion of Cornelius to the Christian Gospel that transforms the apostolic church toward the Gentiles. It is certain that God works through the church, but God also works through the Holy Spirit in places where the church does not yet exist (Acts 14:17). The Spirit's accompaniment of God's Word is characteristic of church mission in bearing witness to the Spirit always ahead of us.

God's *oikonomia* and *diakonia*

Given this World Christianity perspective, God's mission can be represented in terms of God's *oikos* in Christ's *diakonia* of reconciliation, which shapes missional church and diaconal congregations for a theology of planetary life in an ecological and emancipatory framework. A congregation in the Global South becomes a community of a new hermeneutics, translating and communicating the contextual and inclusive horizon of the biblical story within an indigenous and emancipatory frame of reference. Such an endeavor reveals a new form of self-theologizing construction and marks a challenge to the Western dominant theology-power system.

An interpretive imagination for unfolding the Gospel in recognition of the other does not merely engage with cultural integrity, but also respects an indigenous, emancipatory view of the reality of the web of life and an economic-planetary lifestyle of symbiosis and collaboration. Given this, interreligious engage-

ment marks a promising field, especially from the standpoint of *diakonia* in connection with economic justice. For instance, Buddhist contributions to economic justice, local economic integrity, advocacy of a sustainable web of ecology, and ethical compassion for those economically weak and all sentient beings marks an important field for which congregational *diakonia* must assume a prophetic form. I appreciate that the WCC and Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are taking initiatives to support this paradigm shift by engaging structural greed and the dominant system in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.⁴

Global South epistemology

Global South epistemology, seen in light of World Christianity, critiques an elitist notion of mission as the White Man's Burden. In a biography of Rudyard Kipling, we read about the imperial mission to the world to "Take Up the White Man's Burden" for the colonization of the Philippines. To overcome the structure of the legitimation of hegemony under Empire, a new biblical exegesis, focusing on the Old Testament and the apocalyptic writings in the New Testament, needs to be explored in accordance with the God of life, which is in contrast to the reality of powers and principalities. A postcolonial reorientation of God's mission and congregational *diakonia* is informed and performed in ways of interpolation, archeological analysis of knowledge-power interplay, palimpsest, and a new form of re-presentation. Coupled with interpolation and palimpsest, a strategy of archeology aims to uncover what has been foreclosed, forgotten, and subjugated under the dictate of dominant Western scholarship, ecclesial authoritative structure, and a dominant form of theology. This archeological strategy is driven by anamnestic reason grounded in the subversive memory of Jesus on the cross, that is, theology in the flesh.

Jesus' *diakonia* in deep solidarity

A notion of *diakonia* grounded in a theology in the flesh is comprehended in connection with Jesus' manifesto at the beginning of the Galilean ministry for the kingdom of God (Luke 4:18–19). The good news is announced as a preferential option for the poor and captives, healing for the blind, and liberating the oppressed. This view cannot be adequately understood without connection to the prophetic legacy of Isaiah (Is 61:1). In the context of the Hebrew Bible, God's grace of righteousness summons us to uphold corresponding praxis, because faith in the God of the Torah is active and effective in love and service of our fellow humans as well as care for other creatures. God's mission and Christian faith in the context of Torah is connected with the economy of God. God's righteousness (Is 24:16) articulates God as the One who does steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on earth (Jer 9:24; Ps 15:1–2).

Torah includes God's economy and grace, because it is guidance for a life of righteousness and equality in God's household,

4. Martin L. Sinaga, ed., *A Common Word: Buddhists and Christians Engage Structural Greed* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012).

favoring the weaker members of society based on the ethos of the exodus, including the mixed crowd. (Exod 22:21–24; Deut 24:17–18). In the Exodus story (Exod 12:37–38), we notice that Israel is an open community including the whole group of a mixed multitude who were temporal or long-term sojourners and foreigners, living among Israel (*ereb rab: minjung*)—not limited to Abraham's descendants. Foreigners are expected and allowed to come to the temple to worship (1 Kgs 8:42–43).

Likewise, Jesus as a deacon of the circumcised (Rom 15:8) continues to embody God's economy in deep solidarity with public sinners and tax collectors (*ochlos-minjung*) and by his identification with the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and prisoners—thereby “one of the least of these who are members of my family” (Matt 25:40). Jesus in Matt 23:1–2 encourages his disciples and the crowds (*ochlos*) to learn this emancipatory dimension of the Torah, even from the scribes and the Pharisees sitting on Moses' seat, while denouncing their hypocritical maneuvers. Our preferential option for the poor can be embodied in a trustworthy option for the Gospel of Jesus in deep solidarity with the poor and all living creatures in suffering.

Social *diakonia* in the Torah-Gospel connection

The Torah-Gospel correlation helps us to develop a planetary theology based on God's shalom and justice for leading diaconal congregations to social engagement for the fullness of life. God is the One who provides for life arrangements, which enhance the integrity of life in contrast to the rule of Empire. God's *oikos* becomes a conceptual tool in the church's practice of *diakonia* in dealing with how God's economy and life arrangements take root in our planetary context. In *diakonia* constituted by God's household, God's mission is biblically and topologically grounded on Jesus' narration of remembrance, which is connected with the place of fragile, vulnerable, and victimized people. This reinforces the practice of freedom for justice and undergirds solidarity with others on behalf of the global project of emancipation.⁵

Diakonia—in orientation toward God's *topos* of life—critiques the contest between the Empire and the barbarism of neo-colonialism in acceleration neo-racism and hyper-casino capitalism, threatening the poor and all planetary life. The question, “Can the subaltern speak?” needs to be addressed, so that God may speak to the church through the face of the subaltern. It offers a post-developmental notion for mission, *diakonia*, and evangelization as our public witness, dialogue, and recognition. Congregational *diakonia* is driven toward God's *topos*, which encourages the community of faith to challenge all “placeless” movement: the dominion of global capital accumulation and to deny geographical military intervention. This perspective is clearly seen in the public endeavor of the National Council of Churches

in South Korea, supporting diaconal congregations for the peace movement and advocating for the change from an armistice to a peace treaty. Such public witness is consistent with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, advocating for disarmament to decrease the threat of nuclear crisis.⁶

Creation as emancipation

A biblical notion of creation is structured with an emancipatory and planetary-ecological character. The Genesis story reflects God's act of emancipation that the Israelites experienced during the Babylonian captivity. This story also points to God's historical-eschatological act of resurrection in the life and death of Jesus. God's Sabbath is a way of giving freedom and rest to humanity and all living creatures, including the land. God calls us to serve as created co-workers for God's mission of emancipation and *diakonia* of reconciliation in accordance with God's *oikos* and Sabbath. Congregational life is called to participate in the renewal of our life arrangements, supporting God's ongoing creation in history and the planetary realm. We pray in faith, love, and hope for God's final consummation, an integral emancipation, that will reveal a comprehensive renewal of creation: God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). The greatness of *diakonia* is expressed through our participation as the servants at the Lord's Table in eschatological fulfillment (Luke 22:28–30).

Diakonia as blessing to the other

Congregational *diakonia* is a response to the signs of times as seen in Abraham's life journey. I appreciate Abraham as a prototype of *diakonia* in which the identity of the Triune God is the advocate for Hagar and Ishmael. The blessing of Abraham through Melchizedek is a surprising, even appalling story to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Abraham's faith journey is characterized as a blessing to others, which is differentiated from the story of the Greek hero, Odysseus. Odysseus is good at survival and profits by deceiving and sacrificing others for the sake of self-interest, self-preservation, and dominion. However, God's mission and *diakonia* in Abraham's life shapes a radically different story from that of Odysseus and his historical followers.

This God is the God of the universal covenant with Noah, including the generations to come and all the webs of life. God's mission in Abraham and Noah is fulfilled in the reconciliation of Christ as the deacon of all flesh, upon whom the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is promised. Such perspective becomes foundational for diaconal congregations in the Global South for the sake of the God of life in terms of participation, compassion, and solidarity in response to the contemporary signs of the times.

5. Craig L. Nesson, Paul S. Chung, and Ulrich Duchrow, *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity with Others in a Global Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

6. Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK). Asia Region Member Church Delegates Meeting, Bangkok, Thailand 19–21 March 2013.