

## STANDING TOGETHER IN A WORLD DIVIDED

We write as participants in an international ecumenical convocation gathered together by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and hosted by the Church of Christ in Thailand, November 1-5, 2019, in Bangkok. The convocation attempted to respond to the divisions that pose high existential threats to the world's survival. We take as title for this public statement the name of the consultation, "Standing Together in a World Divided."

We came from multiple countries and church organizations acutely aware that the community of nations has rarely been so divided and so poorly led. The would-be emperors of today's empires fan the flames of racial and ethnic division and compete for economic domination while ignoring rising protests demanding democracy, free expression, and human rights, and downplaying the accelerating effects of climate change. As Christians who listen with God to the cries of caged children and drowning migrants, we are called first to lament and confess our varied degrees of complicity in an unjust world of disorder. The image of Christian Koinonia that welcomes diversity is a key ecumenical vision of a community at peace which is threatened by increasing levels of economic disparity, racial injustice, and xenophobic nationalism.

We shared our experiences of pains and joys, resilience and transformation. We recognize and confess our complicity with this "scandalous world" and the pain it brings to so many. The proclamation of Jesus calls us to transformation (*metanoia*) and places our confidence in God's kingdom (Mark 1:15). Jesus' walking with the crucified of this world leads to repentance and concrete restorative actions.

Grave suffering and brave protest for freedom and social justice around the globe compel us to radical engagement at various levels. We draw on the short papers and presentations we have shared at this gathering, which will be made available as annexures for further study and public discussion in our churches around the world. Without claiming official standing as a body, we believe our churches must stand together to meet this time of testing. Therefore, we encourage urgent and informed action by the councils of churches, communions, denominations, and congregations in which we all participate. We pray this statement can strengthen our solidarity in struggles for justice and peace, and guide us in re-imagining new efforts of mission, witness, and global cooperation that no church or country can do alone. Standing together, may we hear 'what the Spirit says to the churches!'

### Part I: Lament and the Suffering of God's creation

We hear the groaning of creation and the blood of sisters and brothers crying out from the earth. We see the causes of this suffering in:

- *Environmental crisis* based on treating nature as a storehouse for human consumption and addiction to unsustainable economic growth; this unchecked commodification accelerates climate change which threatens the whole creation, intensifies natural disasters and displaces entire communities.
- *Failure of unregulated markets* which highlights short-term incentives, worsen the climate crisis, and vastly increase inequality in and among nations;

- *A world divided by broken treaties* without global political governance strong enough to counteract the excessive power of economic and political actors to protect vulnerable peoples and the earth;
- *A United Nations severely hampered* by the individual veto held by World War II victors, blocked from raising standards of mutual accountability among nations, captured by corporate interests, *itself needing deep-seated reshaping* to meet unprecedented global political, economic, and environmental challenges;
- *A Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in need of greater application to social and economic life, supported by effective prosecution and adjudication of international law;
- *International economic organizations* in need of greater re-direction toward sustainability and the common good and against privatization, austerity, and illegitimate debt;
- Global politics increasingly *dominated by empires* acknowledged and unacknowledged, USA, Russia, China; spurring arms competition, intensifying surveillance, and cyber-warfare to disrupt elections and bully neighbor and client states; and
- *Over-militarized states* neglecting real solutions, entrenching borders, wasting resources, mistreating refugees, and creating terrorism through un-ending proxy wars;

**The processes noted above lead to crises of authentic representation and human dignity:**

- The rise of *authoritarian populist “strongmen”* preaching false religions of national idolatry, twisting patriotism into ethno-nationalism, racism and resentment, and waging wars on women, LGBTQ and minority communities;
- The consequent ‘*sacralization*’ of politics and demonization of opponents, perverting the language and symbols of faith to legitimize politics of violence, patriarchy and exclusion;
- Toleration of *stark, state religious favoritism*, as in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran, and of overt dispossession of religiously-identified minorities, such as Rohingya, Kashmiri Muslims, Uyghurs, and West Papuan Christians; a scapegoating of minorities of all kinds feeding deep inter-religious resentments;
- Virulent *aggression against women’s rights*, the normalization--even institutionalization of misogyny, asserting control over women’s reproductive rights and their bodies;
- *Structural corruption* increased by vast income and wealth disparities, flooding campaigns with hidden money, manipulating wealth division with deliberate lies, ensnaring media with capital, and de facto bribery to reiterate these lies;
- *Organized financial opportunism*: speculative and vulture funds, tax haven industry - allowing the rich and their corporations to evade tax obligations; enabling illicit financial flows and expanding criminal industries, including trafficking of women and children;
- Economic powers are left to grow to monopoly concentration, dominating labor, trade, and technology policy without effective regulation, playing even major

countries against each-other, and reviving neo-colonial patterns with smaller countries.

The sum of these factors puts the mere existence of most of the population at risk. It is not a “common” crisis but an “extraordinary” one, demanding us to recognize it, confess that we fall short of being a moral conscience of the states and that in many cases we have become their accomplice.

## **Part II: Confessing Both Sin and Faith:**

- God’s Grace and the work of the Holy Spirit provide hope and awaken conscience in the face of all obstacles. God raises up prophets within and beyond the Church, even as the church must strive to live out the holistic spirituality of John 10:10.

Within our gathering of 30 or so people we recognized different levels of historical involvement by our peoples and nations in the inequities we experience and ecological debt we carry. And for some of us, the racism and white supremacy on display at the highest levels of government are all too recognizable as elements in long histories of domination and abusive privilege.

- The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth at the hands of empire should warn all autocracies that God hears the cries of the victims and the voices of the oppressed. To all who worship power and privilege: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27).
- Justice must be central to our understanding of justification; a Christian politics or a Christian economics may not be fully possible – but a clear Christian witness is always possible.
- Our concentrations *of* wealth and our concentration *on* wealth have led industrialized societies to ignore the health of nature and its many warning signals, including the extinction of species, flows of climate refugees, and mounting dangers to human health. Christians and all concerned for a sustainable future must help nature recover ‘her’ regenerative powers and seek to align social arrangements with those capacities.
- Every church community is called to transformative mission guided by love of both neighbor and enemy, in responsible service and meaningful repentance and forgiveness, recognizing that real reconciliation and collective security require costly grace, historical memory, and concrete and sustained practices of restorative and reparative justice.
- Christian faith provides a frame of reference for the critical evaluation of all institutions, with values that have long informed the shaping of laws and development of modern democracy. These values include the sanctity of human life, human equality and dignity; wisdom about personal and structural sin and evil; and ways to resist the temptations of power. None of our communities are immune from the dangers of hierarchy and exploitation, often visited first on women and girls of color by those seeking to ascend in class or caste position.
- The image of the whole inhabited world as God’s household, the *oikoumene*, the ‘World House’ in Martin Luther King’s adaptation, has helped enrich traditional

ideas of the polis in the West and ideas of God's holy dwelling space in the East. These and other images and models from scripture, discipleship, artistic expressions, and God's creation are among the resources of faith at this time.

- Each church has a responsibility to contribute moral imagination and the expertise of its members to serve diaconally the city or community in which it is called (Jer. 29:7). Similarly, today, together, the churches are called to help reimagine 'the World House' and encourage innovative and effective forms of transnational governance consistent with genuine respect for human rights, rule of law, and care for creation.

### **Part III: Repentance and the Call to Action: practices and forums for healing communities and political life**

We seek alternatives to existing structures and power relations. Yet any new direction, for both the church and the world of insulation and exclusion, is set by repentance: "reign of God is near, repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15), a *metanoia*, that—in Romans 12: 1-2, is a *metamorphosis*, a change in orientation and in the form of our being. Any change of direction toward solidarity re-draws the boundaries of the churches as much as it challenges the artificial borders of unsustainable states. How much study is necessary for our advocacy, how much planning if the road ahead may be short? However important it is to discern the signs of the times, we also need to give present help to the ones who have fallen among thieves on the side of the road.

We have thus come to understand that our shepherding and our service, or '*diakonia*,' entail a thorough commitment to justice and peace. We thus encourage our churches in all their expressions to be open to the Spirit's initiative and be transformed and empowered as agents of change. From congregations to national councils and study committees, this means creating forums for changing the public debate and developing programs for engagement and advocacy. We thus provide several examples of forums for discussion of the political dimension of the church's '*diakonia*' that may help those with eyes to see and ears to hear the call to action.

Experience more of the fullness of human community

- Socialize our members to the global dimension of issues; promote grassroots exchanges; promote exchanges with sister churches to learn from each other: best practices, networks of resistance and solidarity; relationship of human rights to sustainability;
- Draw on anti-racism training to resist ethno-nationalism and derogation of people of other heritages as well as immigrants and asylum-seekers. Promote programs at all levels (congregation, Biblical and theological institutions, schools, youth groups, etc.) to foster inclusivity: learning about diversity to counteract the fear of the 'other' that can be exploited by false populism.
- Embrace diversity and enhance practices of pluralism, such as inter-religious dialogue and intercultural learning, or advocating for greater social and gender justice.

### Encouraging social creativity

- Practice resistance to authoritarianism and political oppression in all its forms: “we must obey God rather than humans” and consider how this is impacted by new forms and distortions of media and communication.
- Explore the need for new covenants based on a more communal understanding of rights and more care for the rights of communities;
- Promote sustainable, “green,” alternatives based on the best science, using the ‘precautionary principle’ and other means to ensure that risks of new technologies are known and shared as fairly as possible.

### Exploring new understandings of mission:

- Work to be part of a united, visionary, transnational and transcultural Church, resisting the abandonment or oppression of any people or region.
- Foster theological work and dialogue towards overcoming the ‘*sacralization*’ of politics, weaponization of religion, captivity to the prosperity gospel, trickle down incremental distribution and sectarian tribalism;
- Develop a comprehensive “theology of enough” in order to avoid over-consumptive gluttonous acquisitiveness;
- create forums for challenging, reimagining and re-ordering national priorities, including different voices, particularly voices from the World Church in the global South.
- work with ecumenical bodies and other communions to act as laboratories for developing genuine strategies for decolonization, peacebuilding, and international justice.
- Mission with overseas partners and with diasporic communities in the global North should include indigenous expressions of faith and communal engagement.

### **Prayer for Hope and Action**

In conclusion, we stand together and face not simply divisive issues, but choices of ultimate loyalty. The definition of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic body needs to be expanded and renewed; metaphors like “world house” may prove helpful in this task. Thus, we who pledge to build upon these words of lamentation and confession, with all their imperatives for justice, commit to be partners with all who seek to actualize the reconciling love of God in this world. And to You, Great God of creation, redemption, and the renewal of all things, may we be faithful disciples within your pilgrim covenant community through this time of testing. Amen.

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