

Renewing our churches, responding to spiritual needs

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Africa – a context of encounter and a point of departure

From east and west, north and south, we are coming to encounter each other on African soil, this continent that has witnessed great destruction of life, but is also shaped by the dance and the songs of life. We come to confront the threats and challenges to life, to weave together our stories and struggles, to celebrate life in resisting the powers that destroy it, to be Easter people in a Calvary world.

Within the Reformed and United family we see a growing spiritual hunger. Our traditions offer us a relational spirituality, based on a living, active faith in God the compassionate creator, Jesus Christ our fellow-sufferer and risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit our comforter and guide. It is a spirituality rooted in the power of life revealed in creation, where world and humanity reflect God's goodness, love and passion for life. It is a holistic spirituality, because spirituality is the totality of our existence. It connects our ways of living and our modes of thinking, our teaching and our praxis. It helps us to discern the will and the way of God who is at work in our conflicted and contradictory world, of violence and nonviolence, humanization and dehumanization, justice and injustice, war and peace.

Learning from Easter stories

Mary Magdalene (Mt 28.1-10)

On the day of resurrection, Jesus appears before his female disciples. To Mary Magdalene he delivers a resurrection greeting, "Peace be with you". Peace is the message of the resurrection – the message of life. Easter points us towards an open road on which the women, with the power of resurrection, carry the message of life. The resurrection unveils the silence and the pain of women and liberates them to be messengers of life who speak out to other followers. The resurrection shows that the option God makes is the option for life. Our spirituality speaks out for peace, justice and life.

The upper room (Lk 24.36-48)

Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room in a house in Jerusalem, full of silence and uncertainty after the cross. He challenges their doubts. Again he greets them with "Peace be with you." In the encounter of Jesus and his followers, the Easter greeting is realized in two simple yet powerful moments. In the first, Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. This is I, myself, touch me." In the second, Jesus asks, "Do you have something to eat?"

The resurrected one opens himself to personal encounter and human touch. He bears in his body the marks of the struggle against the power of death. But this is no body of death. It is a body of life – Easter life. It brings with it the celebration of life that reconciles the violent memories of the cross and the transforming future of the open road.

The risen Christ is hungry. He asks for food. How personal! How simple! What a realistic story! Yet Easter has a communal aspect. Jesus has a meal in the presence of his disciples. Eating together is the moment of peace, of *shalom* according to Jewish tradition. Easter is embodied in the encounter of Jesus and his disciples in personal and communal ways.

The open road is the space where our way of being human really determines our way of being the church. The church of the open road is the church of the resurrected body, a living community that says “yes” to life and “no” to death. It is a community (*koinonia*) that has within it the shared power to liberate, to transform, and to celebrate life. It is a community that disturbs the sources and structures of injustice. It is a community where the stories and the struggles of life sustain a spirit of transformation in the church and society as a whole.

A bird song

This poem reflects my encounter in many places with the victims of violence and injustice. In November 2001, I visited the United States as one of the World Council of Churches’ “living letters”. I wrote the poem immediately afterwards. It reflects my struggle with the sense of emptiness while standing at “ground zero” in New York City and with the meaning of nonviolence and nonexistence in a world of violence, where so often the interpretation of justice legitimizes violence against poor and marginalized peoples.

At the dawn of a new day, I fly.

Reaching out to the brightest blue of the sky.

Embracing the spirit of the earth.

Dancing with the wind blowing the scents of the trees, flowers, and grasses.

Singing the song of children interwoven with the smile of their mothers’ womb.

I fly and share the unending longing for an ending journey of the ocean.

My journey has brought me to the splashing encounter of the river entering the womb of the sea.

I have heard the river telling the great pain and suffering mirrored on its way to the everlasting water.

I have seen the body of women being broken into pieces by the sharpest edge of the violent powers.

I fly and fly... marching with the wind.

It takes me up and up to the bluest sky I have ever seen.
I smell the scent of blue... so blue... so fresh.
My wings move with passion.
My whole body dances the erotic shapes it learned from the trees of my forest.

I dance as my mouth sings the song of adoration.
The day of blue... so blue... so bright.
My soul flies with silence... silence my soul.
But... the blue, the same blue blurred... the brightness darkened.
Tick...tock...tick...tock.

Silence my soul.
The wind comes with tears.
Tick... tock... tick... tock.
The sound of the clock... clock of death!

“Come here my daughter”... my mother calls me with tears.
Weep with me... sing the song of lamentation.
My beloved children have gone.
They have entered the sky.

My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?
They all have gone to the sky.
They fly... fly... but never return to my womb.
They have met their creator up on the sky...
They fly ... up and up, enter the emptiness of the sky.
The emptiness now is so blue but so sad.
The blue of emptiness.

Silence my soul. Touch the tears of mother earth.

I fly... where is my refuge?
Where is my tree of comfort?
Earth shakes. My body is shaken.
I fly down and down.
I smell the beloved ones.
I smell the scent of death.

Empty. The sanctuary of death.
Be still my soul
Scream my soul
At the ground of emptiness.

At the sanctuary of death... the sacred place,
my wings are wet of the tears of death.
The earth cries.
The sky cries.
The world creates the rain of tears.

At the ground of emptiness, I listen to the cry of the living and the dead in the country of the immigrants woven into the tears of the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Rwanda, Bosnia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and in all other places.

At the sanctuary of death, I listen to the choir of lamentation.

As the sun sets I fly, but where to go? How to fly? Whom to talk to? Whom to dance with?

Silence my soul... the dead are praying.
Praying for the peace of the living.

Be still my soul... the living are praying.
Sad, anger, anxious, hatred ... why... why?
Peace, justice, revenge, punishment... why... why?

I fly... wondering for tomorrow.

I have seen enough, my Maker!

I am just a bird and only know a song of blue that I will never see any more.

I am just a bird, my Creator!

Only know a way to meet you, to sense your presence in the blue of your emptiness... in the blood of your womb.

I am just a bird wanting to sing a new song for another new day... a song for peace and justice.

An African woman

This is the story of an African family struggling with the destructive power of HIV/Aids. This family suffered, not only because their son died from Aids, but also because of the stigma attached to such a death by the community in which they live. The transforming change happened at the funeral. The local pastor preached a sermon that did not mention the cause of death. The mother stood up, touched the coffin, and spoke out. "Tell them," she said, "because this is not a shame for us!"

The risk that this African mother takes springs from the decisive faith understanding and praxis that liberates not only her and her family, but the whole community. Her courage discloses the fear and anxiety and the power of

oppressive social, cultural and religious practices and teachings that create a culture of silence, muzzling its victims.

Spirituality for life

These stories are intertwined through the power of life that they present. The story of *Mary Magdalene* shows the power of speaking out, a power that is exercised on the road opened by the risen Christ. The story of *the upper room* points towards a spirituality of life that is holistic, personal as well as communal, earthed in the daily struggle for peace and justice. The story of *a song bird* speaks of the connection between death and life; the memory of the past, the vision of the future and, the struggle for the present. The story of *an African woman* shows resistance to a culture of silence that prevents victims from telling their story, and reminds us of the pain and suffering endured by women for the sake of tradition, religion, community and family. It shows a shift from victim to survivor and even to agent of change. The shift is seen in the choice to speak out rather than stay silent. It is a powerful option for life.

From a culture of silence to a culture of transformation

Violence against women and children, in society or in the church, also shows the power of the culture of silence that prevents victims from speaking out about their victimization. It is a culture rooted in, as well as justified by, much religious teaching. It constructs social and cultural definitions of women and children that are inherently discriminatory.

Renewal in our churches must start by overcoming the culture of silence within and without that destroys the lives of victims, be they women, children, people with different abilities, or indigenous peoples, and continues the violence against humanity and the creation. There are, of course, different experiences and understandings of silence in our Christian traditions. In a world dominated by speech, silence can also be transformative – as, for example, in the story of Rizpah (2 Sam 21.8-14), who sought justice for her sons. How can churches that are used to the spoken word also make space for silence where we can listen for God's word as well as God's acts in this world? How can silence also be seen as a symbol of resistance?

A church in renewal becomes a community of life. It becomes a community of the risen body of Christ that celebrates life and resists the destructive power of violence and death. It becomes a community that is inclusive and open to difference. It becomes a community that recognizes the authentic identity of every member and finds its shape in the celebration of the life of all. It becomes a community where the memories of victims and perpetrators of violence can be reconciled through justice and truth. It becomes a community earthed in our daily life, where we struggle as well as contemplate, where we speak out as well as create spaces for silence, and where we encounter God both in action

and in contemplation. In such a community a culture of transformation can develop, deeply rooted in a life-centred spirituality.

Renewal begins when we make room for God and others, for silence as well as spoken words, and when we can see clearly the visible and invisible powers that destroy life. Renewal begins when we open our eyes and hearts to see a child dying because of malnutrition, a tree cut down because of human greed, the tears of women in many parts of the world because of war, violence and injustice.

Renewal begins when we clap our hands together with our African sisters and brothers to celebrate the power of life, the power of Easter, that is reflected in the land and the sky of Africa. As we embrace the world in this Spirit-filled way, we move more deeply into our inner being. We hear in our clapping the echo of God's hands, clapping the rhythm of a transformation that begins with the resurrection of a crucified Christ. God is with us, clapping hands in the dance of change where together we can sing the Easter song, the song of peace and justice.

Questions

Gather a group of people together asking each one to bring a symbol that, for them, represents the meaning of life. Begin the discussion with two questions:

1. What is the source of silence in a specific context of violence that you encounter in your daily life?
2. Is the overcoming of silence part of the overcoming of violence? Why? How?

Continue the discussion with each member of the group presenting her or his symbol and relating it to a third question:

3. What kind of Easter story, either from the Bible or your daily life setting, represents renewal in your church and community?

As each person tells their story, each one puts their symbol in the centre of the group, creating a shape that shows the group's understanding of the spirituality of life.