

“What does the Lord require of you?” (Micah 6:8)

Transformative Ecumenism: *Christian Participation in a Changing and Crisis-Ridden World*

This invitation to action is in response to the urgent crises that confront the world today. It is informed by a series of conversations on these challenges among some concerned individuals engaged in ecumenical reflection and action in different parts of the world. Sponsored by the Korean Institute for the Future of Ecumenism, these consultations in Pocheon, Korea (2013), Manila, Philippines (2014), Moshi, Tanzania (2016), and Tokyo, Japan (2018), were inspired by the ongoing struggles for justice in many parts of the world, the emerging alternatives to dominant discourses and visions, and the realization that Christians need to be part of these creative processes of change. This attempt by the International Reference Group on Transformative Ecumenism is motivated by a deep conviction concerning the need for a new articulation of ecumenism. This elaboration is a work in progress. It is open to new insights and perspectives toward a more holistic understanding.

The rationale

This attempt to reimagine ecumenism is made both in response to the unsustainability of the current global dynamics and in eagerness to nurture new opportunities for transformative Christian presence. The increasing diversity, complexity, and global nature of contemporary Christian presence indicate the need for new strategies to inspire faith-based transformative responses that resonate with people’s yearnings for justice and life. While building on the contributions of the past, this step forward is toward a troubling of the waters and a listening to the wind by those daring to ask uncomfortable questions in faithfulness to God’s call and in anticipation of a new ecumenical future.

The modern ecumenical movement was certainly a sensitive response of the churches in Europe and North America to the realities of division and strife in the twentieth century, though much of which was inspired by the imperialist aspirations of western Christendom in partnership with its political and economic allies. Student and youth organizations, such as the World Student Christian Federation and the Young Men’s Christian Association, who were restless over the inability of the institutional expressions of the church to respond to the most pressing issues facing the church and society of their time, played a key role in shaping the initial formations of the ecumenical movement. However, its pursuance of Christian unity was driven mostly by the overarching vision of global evangelization. The legacy of this early ecumenism is therefore somewhat mixed. It often replicated rather than critiqued some of the chauvinistic assumptions of its larger social context. But its theological vision nevertheless gave birth to a variety of concrete expressions of Christian witness in many places around the world. In contrast to the sordid legacy of churches’ complicity with colonization, crusades, genocides, slave trade, racism, and the plundering of the earth’s creatures and resources on the one hand, and amidst a variety

of ecclesial expressions on the other, it presented a vision of *oikoumene*: an alternative Christian vision of the world that inspired many expressions of unity in faith, witness, and service.

However, many of these ecumenical expressions that found their niche during the early part of the twentieth century do not seem relevant in the changed circumstances of the twenty-first century. They continue to draw on traditional or western Christian theological doctrines and on religio-cultural and economic systems, which are rooted in the legacies of imperialism, colonization, patriarchy, and racism. Consequently, conciliar models of church unity bereft of the gospel of justice announced by Jesus have been their preoccupation. Furthermore, with excessive clerical presence and perspectives, predominance of ecclesiastical concerns and constraints, and institutional approaches and demands, these fail to inspire and involve people and communities, especially the younger generation. Consequently, ecumenism remains an overwhelmingly academic concept, associated mostly with church unity efforts, pursued by church bureaucrats, and sponsored by predictable organizations. The concomitant institutional dynamics, obligations, and limitations have seriously diminished their capacity to motivate collective, people-based actions for change. The current major organizational expressions also seem to suffer from a dearth of prophetic, intellectual, and moral substance that is necessary to resonate with people's aspirations for the fullness of life. Their failure has come to mean the failure of the ecumenical vocation itself.

The twenty-first-century world is more complex and multipolar than the past one and as such demands new ways of thinking and acting. Today's world boasts ever-changing permutations of powers, a contentious dynamic between a dominant global culture and multitudinous local cultures, complex systems of knowledge and practice, multiple sources of information and forms of communication, and new patterns of relationships, each with its own dynamic. Despite this heterogeneity, certain common trends stand out as pervasive to all aspects of life everywhere. These include the global embrace of the ideology of market capitalism and the consequent new tolerance for systemic injustice; the logic of violence and war; the war economies; the culture of fear and hatred of the other; the technological revolution, often referred to as the "Fourth Industrial Revolution," which along with artificial intelligence has limitless capacities to influence all aspects of human relationships; the recalcitrant attitudes towards climate crisis; and the role of religion as a source of hatred, division, and violence. Meanwhile, the current pandemic too has exposed certain stark realities of our generation—the ugly chasm of inequality both among and within nations and the continued assertion of power by the privileged for the privileged despite the common experience of vulnerability of all to a microbial whose threat might have forged new forms of communitarian solidarity. The Covid-19 pandemic in a world in the grip of market economy is "apocalyptic" in the biblical sense and has unveiled the death-dealing reality of this current world order while also provoking the uprising of people and of all creation crying out for a new heaven and a new earth.

This, indeed, is a sign of hope. An increasing number of vibrant and progressive movements and initiatives of people in many parts of the world, are responding to the challenges of systemic injustice, the violation of lives and rights, climate change, and political repression. These testify to the emerging solidarity among people, irrespective of their differences, not only to resist the

schemes of the powerful and the privileged but also to propose alternatives. This moment presents itself as an opportunity for Christians and churches, who find themselves confronted with a choice they can reiterate past modes of compromise with worldly powers or they can attend to the new work of God springing up around them. Indeed, in a world overwhelmed by cultures of domination, destruction, and death, some Christian communities have already aligned themselves with the creative, life-affirming stream that promises hope, dignity, and peace.

Transformative Ecumenism: An Ongoing Exploration

The challenges of this moment in time require reimagining ecumenism as a new awareness of the interconnectedness of life, an alternative vision of the world, a movement of assembling partners for justice, and a passionate vocation that inspires creative changes toward a world that ensures life with justice and dignity for all. Such an understanding of ecumenism is transformative because it insists on the need to be transformed and to effect transformation as a way of participating in God's mission for the world.

Transformative ecumenism, therefore, is an expression of faith that is grounded in the mission of the triune God unfolding in the diversity, dynamism, and interconnectedness of the created order (Ps. 19:1). In its efforts to heal the brokenness of the world, it draws on Christ's presence in the experiences and visions of those pushed to the margins and on the Spirit's power expressed in the struggles against the forces of marginalization. This inspiration fuels actions and partnerships for justice and truth so that life in all its wholeness promised by God's reign is possible for all.

A New Consciousness of Life

Transformative ecumenism, through its affirmation of the created order as God's self-expression, asserts the dignity of every human being and the integrity of the creation. It announces that "the earth belongs to God" (Ps. 24:1) and invites all to be a part of God's dynamic of life. Pursued in the way of Jesus (Lk. 4:18–19), it is a spirituality that liberates the oppressed, upholds truth, nurtures peace rooted in justice, and inspires conditions for celebrating life. It challenges all homogenizing and monopolizing ideologies that destroy the "many-ness" of life in God's creation. It is lived out in every context of time and space to serve and equip one another for participation in God's mission.

A Vision of a New World

In contrast to the ideological orientations of that *oikoumene* rooted in empires past and present, transformative ecumenism rejects and confronts greed, domination, control, discrimination, and oppression in any form and on any level (Mt. 20:26; Mk. 10:43; Gal. 3:28). It invites people to strive for a world that is shaped and led by the values of love, justice, mutuality, and interdependence and by an organic bond with nature that ensures life for all. It thus calls all to be conscious of our common origins and vulnerability and to covenant together for mutual

responsibility. The imperative to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God” (Mic. 6:8) obliges us to go beyond cumbersome institutions, rigid structures, and imposed identities to be part of the new creation that God is birthing.

A Movement from Below

As an alternative vision of the future, transformative ecumenism inspires partnerships for justice and truth by anchoring itself in theological reflections and actions in solidarity with movements for justice, freedom, and dignity—especially for those on the margins and those in struggle against the forces of marginalization. It asserts that the transformation of society must begin not according to the plans and schemes of the powerful and the privileged but with the visions and aspirations of those who are yearning for life (Mt. 5:6, 10). In the context of life-threatening empires that impose homogenous belief systems and cultures, globalized economic orders, and narrow and oppressive political ideologies, transformative ecumenism sees itself as an expression of prophetic dissent in obedience to the God of life and truth.

A Vocation of Faith in Action

Finally, and most importantly, transformative ecumenism is a vocation of living out hope in action. It is a life of discipleship that joins God at work in situations of struggle for and celebration of life (Mt. 25:35–45). It resists systems, cultures, and practices that deny life, dignity, and justice to the marginalized; speaks truth to powers; and nurtures values and relationships that sustain and enhance life. This vocation of discipleship calls the church to be incarnational events that create and nurture life-flourishing communities in response to their call to be the signs of the coming reign of God.
