



Liberation Questions: For What and for Whom Are We Decolonising?

Opening Address, DARE 2023, 13-15 September, Bangkok, Thailand

Introduction

Dear Friends,

Welcome to Bangkok, where the DARE Global Forum was initially held from 29th May to 1st June 2017, engaging the theme, “Church in the Context of Empire”. I was honoured to deliver one of the Keynotes during its inaugural.

Thank you for participating in this journey of progressive and subversive theologians towards collective **“Discernment And Radical Engagement”** on various critical issues that are pertinent to our contemporary world.

My particular appreciation goes to Sudipta, who was the architect of this cutting-edge programme of the CWM. Many thanks to Graham, Ebin, Chris and other colleagues who have been working hard to make all the arrangements for this important event.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about countless challenges, setbacks, pains, sorrows, and moments of despair. Although the pandemic has ended, we cannot ignore the growing number of crises, such as military conflicts, climate change, and social, political, and economic inequalities. Due to the ongoing economic recession and skyrocketing inflation, the poor and marginalised are being pushed to the brink of survival. Such crises create divisions and destabilise communities to dominate and rule over the poor and oppressed for the benefit of a few.

On the other hand, a new world order is radically reshaping. The global empires are dividing the world and dictating to nations and peoples to be in compliance with their rule of empire and forcing them to take their own side of interests. There is competition for militarisation due to insecurity and division. While there

is the fear of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine, in Europe, the US is planning to bring them back right in front of China after 42 years of withdrawal from South Korea.

Division, fundamentalism, violence, and discrimination are all on the increase everywhere in the world. The darker and more violent side of human nature is being manifested overwhelmingly without any shame. Greed for power and wealth, violence and resentment are competing to search for victims. For many people, the accumulation of wealth is the only way to protect lives and satisfy the desire for power. They dare to call it an economic liberation! History is moving backwards in our times. The empires are being fuelled by the resurgence of neo-Cold War structures, the revival of racism and fascism, and global imperial dictatorship. Aren't we living in a world that resembles times like the 1970s or 80s? Is this really the world we aspire to live today?

No hopes, but full of despairs. Cynicism is replacing the hope in Christ and the promise of the New Heavens and Earth in today's world. The "survival of the fittest" is becoming the only rule, which is functional at the moment in the jungle, like that of the *Squid Game*. The world believes in violence, division, and exploitation. However, as people of faith, we believe in reconciliation instead of division, justice instead of inequality and transformation instead of *status quo*. How can we spread this news that the power of God's justice and peace is far superior to the power of money? How can we witness to God's life-affirming mission of liberation through our conference?

It is in this context, that we have gathered for the 2023 DARE Global forum here in Bangkok again, after its inauguration in 2017, with the theme "Liberation Questions and Quests".

Why Bangkok?

Meeting in Bangkok reminds me of a lesson we learned from history. 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the Bangkok World Mission Conference. I think the Bangkok Conference became a hallmark of the history of the mission. In the midst of a deep crisis of the Vietnamese War, neo-imperialism, military dictatorships and cold-war rivalries everywhere, I remember the following inputs towards Bangkok, among many others:

- Theology - Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, CEP, Lima, 1971.
- Education - Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, São Paulo, 1970.
- Church - WCC Department on Studies in Evangelism, *The Church for Others and the Church for the World*, Geneva, 1967.
- Mission – Shoki Coe, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)*, Bromley, 1972.

The Bangkok conference became famous for its holistic approach to the theme ‘Salvation Today’, encompassing its spiritual as well as socio-political aspects, without giving priority to one over the other. It acknowledged the need for contextual theologies and the recognition of cultural identity as shaping the voice of those answering and following Christ. The delegates wrestled with the context of exploitation and injustice, also in relation to churches. In order to enable local churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific to set their own priorities in witness, the proposal was made of a temporary ‘moratorium’ of sending money and missionaries from the North. An alternative proposal for more justice in mission relations was seen in transforming the Paris Mission Society into a Community of Churches in Mission (CEVAA) and the London Missionary Society into the Council for World Mission (CWM).

Shall we write another history of a theology and mission of liberation in Bangkok? *Kairos* is an ancient Greek word meaning the right or opportune

moment. *Kairos* is the time of divine intervention in the life of God's people and history. The root of the "crisis" is *Kairos* too. God will meet and answer us in our deepest crisis. Therefore, we need to make this conference a kairotic moment, a moment of the re-envisioning theological movement, so that we can transform the current crisis into an opportune movement to "Rise to Life" together! In order to do so, we need to "Stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16).

Liberation Today

The world that God created and re-created is marked by life and liberation for all, including the planet Earth. God's call for people to action can be heard in the voices of struggling communities and of the Earth. The witness and struggle of communities in this world are expressed in the lived realities and faith of those who are confined to the margins of existence. Their struggle for liberation is infinitely complex as they move against forces which dehumanise them from the outside and work against those oppressive values which they have been forced to imitate and embody. The Spirit of God has the power to rejuvenate and sustain the movement that goes from situations of death to new life in Christ. The gospel of the Reign of God challenges the world that keeps the *status quo* of the hopeless situation.

CWM, as a community of transforming disciples, dare to let God's justice and peace shine brightly in the world. As we have already started to implement, the ongoing CWM's Strategic Plan for 2020-2029 is titled *Rise to Life, Confessing Witness to Life-flourishing Communities*. In fulfilling the missional agenda for the strategy period, CWM has been in the process of engaging with the member churches and ecumenical partners to participate in the liberating mission of God and creating life-flourishing communities. "Life-flourishing" is the key motif for the mission and discipleship of the CWM. Through it, CWM aims to challenge

the oppressive and life-denying systems and confess witness to life-flourishing creation, society and economy. CWM does this work through several programmes and consultations by partnering with various ecumenical organisations. Early this year, we organised a programme on Theological Education with the theme, “Life Affirming Theological Education in Mission” in the Philippines. On the other hand, The Onesimus Project (TOP) of CWM is yet another space for decolonising theological education and promoting liberation from all forms of racial injustices and structures of enslavement embedded in the social, political, and economic systems of our societies. Most recently, we have launched Transformative Ecumenism, bringing various ecumenical, missional, theological, and social organisations together. By mentioning these, I would like to reiterate the CWM’s commitment towards a collective struggle against oppressive structures and aim to achieve liberation for all.

Transformative Ecumenism

I would also like to draw your attention to the “Transformative Ecumenism Movement,” which was recently launched on 19 August 2023 in Nairobi Kenya by CWM and AACC. Around 60 people, including church leaders – lay and clergy, women and youth—theologians, Christian social activists, and representatives of civil society organisations from twenty-seven countries in Africa and the world gathered in Nairobi to reflect further on the meaning and implications of Transformative Ecumenism. As an attempt to reimagine ecumenism in response to the palpable fragility characterising the contemporary global landscape, Transformative Ecumenism proposes new ways of understanding and living out ecumenism in the 21st century.

As we gathered together in Transformative Ecumenism, we committed ourselves to:

- **Advocate** for justice and dignity for all of God's creation, asserting that these are pivotal for the realisation of the promise of abundant life for all.
- **Decolonise, liberate, and restore** the oppressed *oikumene* of the past and present empires, recognising the urgent need to move away from Eurocentric attitudes and responses to the diversity and complexity of the present world order.
- **Dismantle** hierarchies within communities and churches in the manner of Jesus our Lord, who asserted his ministry as one that 'serves rather than lords over' and aligned with the victims of hierarchies.
- **Engage** with young people by embracing their innovative and alternative visions of the world and opening spaces for their leadership and participation.
- **Ensure** the active involvement of women in all aspects of church ministry and leadership. We assert that the church is called to be and to effect just and inclusive communities.
- **Collaborate** with individuals and communities of all faiths and ideologies to work toward a future that enables the flourishing of life for all.

We asserted that theological education must be in the service of the transformation of the world rather than the ritual and institutional edifices of the church. We committed ourselves to working with our theological institutions to formulate curricula that align with the core concerns of the communities.

As part of such commitment, the DARE Global Forum is the theological backbone of the life-liberating movement. As the DARE brings progressive theologians, church leaders and social activists into a discerning and creative

space, it plays a prominent role in interacting with faith and life, offering vital critique to the socio-economic and political issues of the day, and translating academic work into intellectual activism.

DARE to Speak of a Liberation Theology

When I left WCC in August 2018, I asked my colleagues from Latin America a question. “Do you believe in the Theology of Liberation?” After a long silence, he said, “No.” And he went on to say, “I am sorry, Jooseop, I cannot accompany you as I do not believe in structural sin and liberation.” “I am a German living in Brazil... I wrote the book purely for my academic interest.” But I was able to hear his silent weeping and apologised for my rude question.

Friends, fellow theologians, and comrades, the liberation theology questions us, “Where are you doing your theology? For what and whom are we decolonising?” It is a kairotic moment for us to DARE to proclaim a liberation theology to defeat the life-threatening forces and ideologies.

People will know by the instinct of their hearts who we are and what theology we are talking about. People will know by the instinct of their hearts whether we really believe in the vision of the new heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit is creating many new hopes with people at the margins. Our mission is to reveal this hope from the margins to the world. In a world in which injustice and violence seem almost insuperable, where hatred and racism seem to thrive, and where suffering is so widespread and terrifying, our theological discipleship is costly. Our mission is witnessing to a liberating gospel.

As we gather here and radically engage with one another and bring various inputs, I wish that this DARE forum may enable us to engage in various liberation questions that are pertinent to our communities today.

May the God of liberation be with us and guide us to engage ourselves in spirit-filled conversations.