

Jooseop Keum

TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

FAITH, LOVE, AND HOPE AFTER EMPIRE

15th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture

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Published by: Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry (CUIM) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

Distributed by:

CUIM

PO Box 1986

Indianapolis, Indiana, 46206

United States of America

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Dallas, Texas

2019

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“After” Empire

How can we describe the time and context in which we are living today? Metropolitan Geevarghese Mor Coorilos claims: “There are ‘new King Herods,’ a new imperial age and numerous ‘little empires’ being formed in the orbit of the ‘mega-empire’ and working in hegemonic ways. In India, for example, an unholy alliance of religious fundamentalism, caste mentality and the ideology of neo-liberalism is creating a fascist empire.”¹ Division, fundamentalism, violence and discrimination are all on the increase everywhere in the world. I would like to call it the return of racism of the 1960s and even fascism of the 1930s. Empires are no longer sustainable in a traditional way. Therefore, they are taking extremist measures to survive in the era of “after empire.”

In our socio-political cultures the darker side of human nature is overwhelming and without any shame. Greed of power, money, sex, violence, and claims of jealousy are competing to search for victims. “It thrives on fear, chauvinism, discrimination and not always subliminal notions of ethnic, racial and moral superiority.”² The top leadership of the “global empires” and “little empires” are openly

1 Metropolitan Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, Moderator’s Address, World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Commission Meeting at General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 12-17 January 2017.

2 Observer Editorial, *The Observer*, 22 January 2017. Recited, Kenneth R. Ross, “Brexit, Trump and Christ’s Call to Discipleship,” *IRM* 106.2, p. 370.

creating the politics of fear based on discriminating and bullying the other, particularly the weak, the minorities, the stranger, and the poor. Perhaps, the current rise of fascism all over the world is disqualified even to be called an empire in all aspects. Therefore, I call it the “ruins” after empire.

However, we cannot blame only political leaders for the entire responsibility of the corruption of leadership. A group of younger theologians who gathered together as an International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism reflected as follows:

The ecumenical movement is in crisis—a deep crisis painfully felt everywhere. It is a crisis brought by a prophetic bankruptcy in terms of the movement, an intellectual bankruptcy in terms of the ecumenical spirit and vision, and a moral bankruptcy in terms of the leadership. The ecumenical movement is no longer strongly rooted in the people and it does not speak a prophetic voice which echoes in the realities of people’s struggles for life. The ecumenical movement no longer produces a new and heart-beating vision for the church and the world that are deeply divided and wounded. The ecumenical leadership has suffered from bureaucratic and business-oriented mindedness that lacks the sense of calling and devotion.³

It is painful to listen to the criticisms of younger theologians. But there is a proverb in Korea, “A good medicine is bitter.” I think we still have hope because there are young people who have not given up the ecumenical movement and the role of the global church. Therefore in this paper, I will try to answer to the challenges raised by the younger theologians with the concept of “transformative discipleship,” and seeking an alternative form of leadership for the future of global Christianity.

³ <http://www.miraeforum.org/20>

Rediscovery of *Faith* at the Margins

Mr. Michel Camdessus, the former director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a meeting with Catholic leaders in Brussels that the market is spontaneous, self-governed, and self-regulated, which provides its members the best chances to fulfil their goals, and thus that the market in its essence is the best empirical explanation of utopia. Whether we agree with him or not, we are very curious to know: where did he get such a deep-seated faith in the market? Do we, as Christian leaders today, proclaim such a bold utopian faith of what we believe in?

The incarnation of Jesus took place among the people at the margins. At the time of the birth of Jesus, people who gathered around him were people outside of the power structure. They were people without any political power, nor religious authority: women, children, and the poor people like the shepherds. People who welcomed Jesus were those outside of the social hierarchy. These people were not allowed to enter the temple. Jesus was not born in a palace, but a manger, a ragged cowshed, an open and unprotected place. The birth of Jesus was astonishing, threatening news for those decision makers. They never expected that God would be revealed among the lowly people. The angel announced the message, “Peace among you” among marginalized people. The incarnation of God happened outside of power, money, and religion. God chose the “margin”—the people on the underside of history—to inaugurate His Kingdom. God was and is encountered

among the powerless and in unexpected locations and not only among the privileged and powerful.⁴

This is a non-negotiable biblical truth and the core of Christian teaching. If we do not preach the truth any longer, it is neither Christianity, nor theology. Therefore, no one can understand the good news of Jesus Christ without incarnating it in the context of the margins. Studying theology only in a classroom, or table ecumenism is never enough. “Jesus introduced the option for the poor and marginalized because they are created in God’s own image too to celebrate fullness of life and yet are denied the promise of justice and peace through the imposition of unjust structures, cultures and traditions.”⁵

In Jesus’ time, there were four different groups of Jewish traditions or restoration movements. They competed with each other, claiming that only their leadership knew the truth, the way of salvation. They each claimed they were the only hope for the restoration of Israel.

The Sadducees gave up any religious position and conviction, such as the resurrection doctrine, just so long as they could retain secular political power.

The Pharisees had no concerns about political oppression and the hardness of ordinary people’s lives so long as they could maintain their ecclesiastical power, through the control of the Jewish temple. They did not care what happened outside the temple: they even betrayed their people and joined hands with the Roman Empire to maintain power.

4 Wati Longchar, “Mission from the Margins: Power and Powerless”, Keynote, WCC-CWME Latin American Consultation on “Together towards Life” and the World Mission Conference, 30th April - 04 May, 2017, Rosario, Argentina, p.1.

5 Wati Longchar, *Ibid.*, p.2.

The Essenes believed that there was no hope in the world. So they retreated to the desert. They withdrew into the spiritual realm, leaving the reality and hardness of people's daily lives behind them.

Lastly, *the Zealots* attempted to reclaim the sovereignty of Israel by force, arms, struggle, and terrorism. They believed that all other choices had disappeared. They were liberation fighters.

And what was Jesus doing? He did not identify with any of them. He was washing the feet of his disciples as a farewell ceremony. Rather he chose to die in the cross. In fact he did identify with one group, *the marginalised*. Through his cross, Jesus is bringing the kingdom of God to these people where they are. They did not need to climb ecclesiastical, social, and political ladders to find the Kingdom. Jesus built and builds a community based on love and service. He provides a new dignity and identity to the marginalised as the people of God through washing their feet. He encourages them to see a new horizon of mission. The new community goes beyond the immediate group, beyond the ethnic community and so on. A new world of dignity is there for all who will recognise where dignity is sourced. Where do we then identify as church of Jesus Christ?

The new World Council of Churches (WCC) mission statement, "Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," suggests the concept of "mission from the margins" as a new direction of mission:

Mission from the margins seeks to counteract injustices in life, church, and mission. It seeks to be an alternative missional movement against the perception that mission can only be done by the powerful to the powerless, by the rich to the poor, or by the privileged to the marginalized. Such approaches can contribute to oppression and marginalization... Living on the margins, however,

can provide its own lessons. People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions, often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles; people in positions of privilege have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions.⁶

“Together towards Life” went on further, “Marginalized people have God-given gifts that are under-utilized because of disempowerment, and denial of access to opportunities and/or justice. Through struggles in and for life, marginalized people are reservoirs of the active hope, collective resistance, and perseverance that are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God.”⁷ I believe this is the beginning of the renewal of authentic leadership. Leadership without being among the people at the margins is a leader who has no people to lead. The Christendom model of western Christianity which has existed as a form of state religion has been associated for a long time with power. It is difficult to imagine how to carry out the mission of the church without institution and resources. However, we ought to remember that the way of Jesus is the only way to save the people, the church, and the ecumenical movement.

Power of *Love* to Defeat Politics of Fear

⁶ Jooseop Keum ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013, pp.15-16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

In the context of a world full of injustice and inequality which destroy the life of the marginalised, justice is the divine way to affirm and safeguard life. Faith without justice at the margins is a faith of Mr. Camdessus, who believes in Jesus, but, at the same time, believes that the unlimited accumulation of wealth can save humanity and creation. What sort of faith do we have in the ecumenical movement today?

One of the key themes of the pneumatological approach in mission is the Spirit's mission of hospitality together with charisma, dynamism, healing, diversity, and transformation. A fruit of mission spirituality is love and shalom—"go in peace." God's shalom provokes a radical hospitality overcoming hostility. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have decided to stick with love, hate is too great a burden to bear." God's shalom introduces the mission of a transforming hospitality of justice. Justice is not only a standard that rejects the evil of hostility and hatred towards refugees and migrants, but it is also the power to transform hatred and hostility into hospitality. God's hospitality is unconditional and eschatological. It is not God's mission merely to extend an invitation to the guests and treat them nicely. Rather, it is a matter of ontological mission, of being together as one family in God's shalom—a missional vision of unity.⁸

In a world context of the rise of racism and fascism, one of the key goals of the mission should be to reflect on how do we understand and give expression to the "power of God's love" to defeat of the culture of the politics of fear. Are we presenting God's love as good only for another world because some of us do not want to risk losing the benefits and privileges that various forms of structurally embedded injustice bestow on us? If so, are we not

⁸ Jooseop Keum, "Together in God's Mission: The Prospects for Ecumenical Missiology," in Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi and Roderick R. Hewitt, *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission*, Oxford: Regnum and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016, p. 570.

limiting the power of God's love by seeking to witness in ways that are safe and comfortable, limiting it to the realm of the purely personal, granted to or accessed on certain terms and conditions, and limiting it as one that numbs and soothes rather than as one that heals and transforms?

We do not believe that the power of God's love is inferior to the powers of death, and we affirm that the power of the Risen Lord subjugates the powers of death, even as the rest of the world embraces or remains indifferent to the powers of death in God's beloved world. How then can we witness to God's love in ways that our witness nurtures, protects, and enhances life, while confronting and transforming the denial of God's gift of life? Nurturing just relationships is a concrete expression of God's love in society.

If the proclamation and living out God's love is the essence and the way of affirming the Christian faith, how do these express themselves in ways we organize and administer our institutions and organizations? What does leadership mean when we are called to be driven by values and patterns that are different from the ways of the hegemonic powers? Jesus said the ultimate purpose of leadership is "to serve and not to be served" (Mark 10: 43, 45).

Mission is witnessing to the kingdom of God, not expanding one's own dominion. However, since the rise of the Constantine model of mission, the distinction between the two became vague with the result that Christian mission came to be regarded as simply the expansion of Christendom, and the image of Christian mission became highly militant in nature, particularly through the influences of the Crusades and colonialism. This militant and triumphalistic image of mission is becoming more and more a hindrance to world mission in the post-colonial and post-modern

world. Karl Barth already declared in 1935 that this Christendom paradigm of mission was at an end.⁹ How then can we transform our image of mission from “winners” and “conquerors” to “mission in love and humility”?¹⁰

In 1982, the WCC Central Committee approved the historic document, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* under the leadership of Emilio Castro, Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) director by that time, later WCC general secretary. Together with other important ecumenical missiological declarations, the document affirms that our ecumenical practice of mission has to be a “Mission in Christ’s Way:”

The self-emptying of the servant who lived among the people, sharing in their hopes and sufferings, giving his life on the cross for all humanity—this was Christ’s way of proclaiming the good news, and as disciples we are summoned to follow the same way.”¹¹

This *kenotic* understanding of mission is not merely talking about our mission methods, but is the very nature and essence of our discipleship. Jesus became our Christ not through power or money but through his kenosis (Phil. 2:7). We believe in God who “made himself nothing” (ἐκένωσε, ekénōse). Therefore, we, the disciples who have been sent by Christ, have to follow His footsteps by witnessing His humility and our humbleness in the performance of our leadership. Kenotic leadership is a concrete expression of our discipleship. Jesus defeated the Pharisees, the Sadducees, King Harrod and even the Roman Empire by the power of love on

9 Karl Barth, “Das Evangelium in der Gegenwart,” *Theologische Existenz heute*, No. 25, 1935, 33.

10 See, Willem Saayman, Klippiess Kritzingers eds, *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch’s Work Considered*, New York, Orbis, 1996.

11 *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, WCC Central Committee, 1982, §4.

the Cross, not on top of the tower of the temple or the royal throne. Mission is the overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God.

It is time to question ourselves as Christians. Are we true disciples of the gospel? In my view, this question is more important than any other missiological discourse in today's context. It is not a matter of numbers or resources. It is the quality of discipleship that will prove decisive. It is time for the issues of authentic discipleship to be given priority attention in ecumenical missiology, given today's context where faith in mammon is threatening the credibility of the gospel. Do we believe that the power of love can transform the world of hatred and injustice?

Hope as Agent of Change

The Washington Post reported an article, "South Koreans to Americans: We'll teach you how to impeach a president" on the 19th of May 2017. Amid a massive corruption scandal, the Korean people power has shown its moral quality. During the seventeen weeks of the so-called "Saturday candle demonstrations," two and half millions people gathered one evening. In total, 17 million citizens participated in the demonstrations. It was more than one third of the whole population of South Korea. In spite of this massive crowd, there was neither a single arrest nor injury. I would say that the "candle revolution" was a victory of the moral quality of Korean citizens over the immoral corruption of the elites of the "little empire." The people never gave up "absolute peace" as the most powerful means of total resistance.

Meanwhile, we should not only focus on the non-violent nature of the candle revolution. The *madang*, created by the people in each of the seven days provided a new vision for Korean society. Music, drama... all means of creative cultures helped express the creativity and imagination of the people. The “democracy” in Greek combines the words, *dêmos* and *krátos*. It literally means “people power” or “people’s demonstration.” Koreans illustrated democracy in a most peaceful way, which was deeply rooted in the concept and tradition of “*daedong han madang*,” a people’s festival for greater unity.

In chapter 13 of the Book of Acts, there was a shift of the centre of gravity in mission from Jerusalem to Antioch. The Christians in Antioch elected five leaders for their mission and ministry. One of them, together with Paul and Barnabas, was Simeon from Niger. A new-born religious community in Antioch, now taking the name “Christian,” elected a black African slave as their leader. Under the Roman Empire, the prevailing power of that time, slaves were treated no better than livestock. The election of a slave as leader of the community was such a shock that it stirred up the whole society, ultimately the entire Greco-Roman world! There was neither discrimination nor exclusion from the good news of salvation. In this way, powerful witness to the values of the gospel of the kingdom of God was offered by the disciples. Indeed, the gospel was a sign of hope and transformation for those people who were living in a hopeless situation.

We believe that the gospel has a power to transform the world: personality, value, class, system and society. The gospel of the kingdom of God challenges the world that keeps the status quo of the hopeless situation. The world was not able to silence the small group of disciples. We, as servants of God, have a mission

to share the Good News to all humanity and creation which are longing for hope.¹²

People will know by the instinct of their hearts who we are and what theology we are talking about. People know by the instinct of their hearts whether we really believe in the vision of new heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit is creating many new hopes at the margins with people. Our mission as a theologian is to reveal this hope from the margins to the world like the church of Antioch, like the “candle revolution.”

Hope is resistance to a hopeless situation. Hope keeps open the horizon of the future and motivates action. The hope is good news to the poor and all who suffer.¹³ The bankruptcy of hope never existed in Jesus and his mission. Hope is an inescapable way of envisioning the future. “Where there is no vision the people perish”(Prov.29:18). Therefore, our mission as leaders is to proclaim the hope of, “God’s kingdom is coming, and already among us!” In the mist of agonies, despair and cries of life, it is our mission as global Christian leaders is to seek alternative values, ways of life and communities to actualize the kingdom of God on earth.

Called to Transforming Discipleship

12 Jooseop Keum, “Together in God’s Mission: The Prospects for Ecumenical Missiology,” in Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi and Roderick R. Hewitt, *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission*, Oxford: Regnum and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016, pp.567-8.

13 Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 246-7.

Steve Bevans insists that the mission of God is always a transforming mission. It is always a mission that calls women and men beyond themselves, transforms their sinfulness into righteousness, offers them a vision of God and the world beyond their imaginations, transforms slavery into freedom and injustice into justice. As Christians are called to participate in this *missio Dei*, they must be about transformation no less. Mission is not just about saving souls. It is about saving women's and men's bodies; it is about peace and justice; it is about education and health care; it is about the protection of all creation.¹⁴

In March 2018 the WCC CWME convened the 14th World Mission Conference in Arusha, Tanzania, to address the theme: "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship." The first part of the theme, with its reference to Galatians 5:25, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (KJV), was profound in its very simplicity. As we discerned together the signs of the times it is evident that despite the chaos of human disunity in which we live and witness today, there are many signs of the Holy Spirit giving life and creating hope. Africa, in particular, represents a site in which the Holy Spirit is breathing life into the church. Moving in the Spirit brings the notion of pilgrimage, of an on-going journey of all believers, led and guided by the Holy Spirit. This is a pilgrimage that is characterised by constant hope for a transformed world of justice and peace and a commitment to renewal in Christ. This theme offered a prophetic message amidst the complexities of today's world.

The second part of the theme calls us to transforming discipleship. We are called to be disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, to whom we witness and whom we proclaim as we move in the Spirit. How we understand the phrase "transforming discipleship" carries three

¹⁴ Steve Bevans, "Transforming Discipleship: Missiological Reflections", *JRM* 105.1. p. 78

profoundly different and yet closely related meanings. We are called to live a life that transforms the very notion of discipleship as it is often understood. Such discipleship is one that is constantly transforming disciples as they open themselves up to Christ's influence in their lives and to the formation that takes place in the Christian Community. And such discipleship is one that is a commitment to transforming the world that is so full of injustice, pain, and suffering.

First, the very idea of discipleship needs to be transformed. Discipleship is often understood merely in the sense of being in a loving, friendly relationship with Jesus. While it is profoundly true, the discipleship that we intend to emphasize is the one that not only is a relationship, but also is actively engaged in continuing Jesus' mission in the world. To know Jesus is to follow him in what he did. It calls us to witness to Jesus and to the Kingdom that he preached, and, when appropriate, to proclaim Jesus' name and his gospel as well. It calls us to an evangelism that is done in Christ's way.

Second, we are called to be disciples constantly open to being transformed, individually and communally, in our following of Jesus. Discipleship commits us to embark on a spiritual journey that will constantly challenge us and shape us into people who reflect the Lord Jesus in our actions, words, and attitudes. Discipleship commits us to disciplines of prayer, practices that shape our character and hearts, and to the cultivation of habits that give us strength and courage to live lives of Christian witness.

Third, we are called to be disciples who are ourselves transforming, and as such we are privileged to join in the mission of the Triune God, working together towards life, living out the values of the Kingdom of God, and engaging in mission from the margins. In a

world in which injustice seems almost insuperable, where hatred and racism seem to thrive, where suffering is so widespread and terrifying, our discipleship is costly. It calls us to put a theology of the cross into practice. It calls us to spend our energy and even offer our lives for the transformation that the Kingdom promises.

What will it mean for us, as individuals and churches, to be transformed in the power of the Holy Spirit? What will it mean to join the Spirit in transforming and healing a broken world?

My colleague Deenabandhu Manchala answers this way.

The call to transforming discipleship, therefore, involves seeking partnerships, forging partnerships and in living out the call to be one with others in God's mission of transformation. One of the distinct ways in which churches have made positive differences in history is when they understood themselves as movements of people... It was their ability to read the signs of the times, and to understand the purpose of their being in those contexts, that made them creative, and life-affirming forces."¹⁵

This is an authentic definition of ecumenism and our missionary calling.

Concluding Remarks

The world is broken. Therefore, it is imperative for the ecumenical movement to boldly witness the unity in the Triune God and to live it out for the unity of humanity. The world is yearning for a Christian discipleship which reconciles the broken and troubled

¹⁵ Deenabandhu Manchala, "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship—Reflections from the vantage points of the marginalized people," Keynote speech, Commission World Mission and Evangelism, 13 January 2017, Atlanta, USA, p.10.

world. In order to do so, unity of the Church is not an optional agenda. In order that the church can be the light of the world, the role of Christian disciples are crucial. People see the vision of God's kingdom through us. Therefore, we ought to rediscover the simplicity, inclusivity, joy, kenosis, empathy, and "prophetic imagination" of our leadership. There is no other way to follow other than our Lord walked before us.

Let us embark on a pilgrimage of "go in peace" to the world after our worship service. This "mission" should be understood as the Liturgy after Liturgy as the Romanian Orthodox Church understands it. This understanding of mission is highly significant for the rejuvenation of the ecumenical movement. Indeed, it is a bold and prophetic proclamation of "Peace be with you" in the broken world.



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