

**Acting for Tomorrow**  
**70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Council of Churches**  
**November 20, 2014**  
**Jennifer Henry**

The esteemed Campbell Seminar described the time we find ourselves in this way:

“Unevenly but decisively, the long sojourn of the Christian religion as the established cultus of the western world has almost spent itself. Although pockets of Christendom persist, and the temptation to religious hegemony and triumphalism is perennial, the processes of Christian disestablishment seem likely to continue through the present century and beyond.”<sup>1</sup>

How definitive you want to assert this is debateable, and it could have been said with some smaller words (I blame Brueggemann). However, any look into the future must acknowledge that Christianity is no longer the superhighway of the Western world but may increasingly be found on more marginal, rocky, and sometimes even, hidden paths. In practical terms we see this in demographic membership challenges of churches, growing secularization or at least the growing movement of “secular but not religious”, a crisis in resources, understandable tendency towards focusing on survival, and a sense of powerlessness. The Holy Spirit will continue to enliven Christianity; centrality, convention, and established power cannot be assumed.

For those of committed to ecumenical social justice, these trends might be alarming or bleak. They are certainly disorienting. And yet I am intensely and profoundly hopeful for the future of the ecumenical movement, for our strengthened commitment to transformation, for a new boldness in witness to the gospel. It may be in this very process of “dis-imperialization” or what the Campbell seminar calls the “process of disestablishment,” that might renew that fire, passion, and boldness of the early church—the Jesus movement from which we came.

Where does my hope come from?

**The possibility of an increased clarity about injustice.** There is something about power and privilege. It can make your eyes blurry. It can fill your ears so you are less likely to hear with clarity and crispness the depth or breadth of injustice. Things seem okay. Even if you have suspicions that for some they are profoundly not, it seems okay.

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell Seminar. “Hope from Old Sources for a New Century: A Consensus Paper.” Walter Brueggemann, ed. *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001, p.14-15.

We work with partners around the globe who live day to day human rights challenges, people in places like Colombia, DRC, South Sudan, where work for peace, for economic justice, for ecological integrity, can mean risking your life. I am always surprised by their intense hopefulness, their incredible persistence towards abundant life for all, and their commitment to the hopes and dreams of others. What I have come to understand is that unlike those of us in safer and more settled places, they do not have the privilege of despair, the privilege of apathy.

My hope is that as we begin to slip the bounds of established power associated with Christendom, we might feel more intensely that persistent need for justice, we might see the challenges more clearly, we might be a little closer to understanding what oppressed people have always experienced when they raised their voices. I hope, I believe, this could make us stronger witness.

There is nothing passé about faithful action for justice; it remains our biblical mandate. And there is nothing new about the way in which it necessarily brings us into tension with the principalities and powers of the world. Perhaps today, there is more explicit critique of our attempts at justice-making, perhaps even greater consequences for speaking, but that doesn't negate our responsibility, as people of faith, to collaborate with God in acts not only of compassion but of liberation—acts which require necessary engagement with the systems and structures of our world, however uncomfortable that may become.

I am hopeful because I see the passion for justice continue, with the possibility of increased clarity. I see it in young people who burn for climate justice, who are determined to find right relations with Indigenous peoples. I see it in our Elders, who won't let go and teach generations to come about bold witness to the gospel. I see it in communities, churches who will not accept an unwelcoming stance for this nation, some going as far as to risk offering sanctuary to refugees...and in so many more.

**I am hopeful for greater clarity, persistence, boldness, in what is an enduring call: “to do justice.”**

**I am hopeful for new possibilities of reconciled relationship...**

In KAIROS right now, dynamic young Indigenous people are offering to give leadership in our movement. I am so honoured that they are choosing to walk with us, proud to facilitate our Blanket Exercise. When a young Indigenous woman stands up in a large gathering of Indigenous activists and community groups and introduces herself as a KAIROS Blanket Exercise facilitator, that might seem small, but it reflects a huge shift in relationship. It reflects

a hope that we as church may have begun to shed our paternalist ways, our temptations towards religious superiority, and begun to offer ourselves as true partners.

At KAIROS and our precursor coalitions we have long worked for Indigenous peoples, been in solidarity with Indigenous struggles--even as the crucible of residential schools began to convict us in truth--and yet true reconciled relationship means something more. It means to work not for but with--a process that in KAIROS we call resetting the relationship. It's a renewed recognition that God is in the "inbetween"—in our relationships of kindness, of truth of justice. Decentred, disestablished, there are new possibilities to be with, to be in true partnership...and this is intensely hopeful.

Perhaps that same possibility—for reconciled relationships, or even new relationships of kindness--may also be present in inter-faith dynamics in new ways. As we are more able to see ourselves in the plurality of religious faith, we invite a loving kindness between faiths that may not have been as deeply known.

**I am hopeful for the possibilities of reconciled relationships –relationships of kindness.**

**I am hopeful for a new sense of humility...**

This week, Naty Atz Sunc, a Mayan woman from Guatemala, will join prominent Canadians like Shelagh Rogers, Stephen Lewis, Joe Clark in a gathering of the honorary witnesses of the truth and reconciliation commission process. She, from her experience from the Guatemala civil war, as an Indigenous person who saw her mother and sister killed in front of her, brings her solidarity and her experience of persistent struggle for justice to our own Canadian struggle with human rights.

I was with her in Vancouver when she gave testimony. Walking with her through the crowd at this Truth and Reconciliation National Event was like walking with a rock star. We would take two steps and one of the survivors would come up to her, grab her hands and say something like: "you are my sister, my sister from the South." Language didn't seem to matter. They saw in her presence an honouring of their own struggles and realities, and a hope for a different future. She brought her clarity of witness into our human rights crisis. She stood with us in our pain, and complicity....

Years ago we would have seen ourselves as the one bringing solidarity to Naty. And we did, and we still do, as communities in Guatemala face human rights violations and ecological degradation related to the operation of Canadian mining companies. We must not stop, but what is different is a much clearer sense that we too need their solidarity--that of the people

of South, that of marginalized communities—a recognition, in humility, that we are broken without it.

We understand more clearly that our advocacy is less to speak for marginalized people and communities, however good a place that instinct comes from. But rather, in humility, to empower and magnify the voices of those most affected by justice struggles. It is our job to facilitate their presence at tables and fora of power, as we did last May by bringing eight Indigenous women from all over the globe to the UN Permanent forum on Indigenous Rights. Yes, we have expertise, and still perhaps some privileged place, but our job is not just to use power, but to shift power and we do that by humbly supporting those most marginalized. I believe that in the voice of those made marginal by our structures and systems of power, we can hear Christ, and decentring our churches, can accompany this Christ we have discovered in our midst.

**In so far as we are learning this kind of humility, I am tremendously hopeful...**

As Das Sydney said yesterday, KAIROS mandate is to be a faithful ecumenical response to Micah 6:8.

I have a sense that the writer of Micah would have “rocked” the Twitterverse. Micah 6:8 is only 9 characters over the twitter limit (with no short cuts): #Micah.

I believe that even in the brevity—“do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God”—is all we need to know. Micah succinctly and eloquently summarizes a principle tenet of Scripture—a concept at the very heart of our tradition—that active engagement with the oppressed people of this world, the pursuit of justice for the marginalized, is not optional but a requirement of faithfulness. “Faith and witness” and “justice and peace” are not two but one. What makes us holy in the eyes of God is when we “loose the fetters of injustice.” What makes us whole is when justice and holiness are as one breath.

I root my hope in Micah’s call:

that tomorrow we might be “do justice” even more strongly, with our eyes cleared of established power that has at times clouded our view;

that tomorrow we might “love kindness”, finding one another in reconciled relationships that have not been fully possible until we began to decentre ourselves, began to free ourselves from temptations of religious superiority;

and that tomorrow we might “walk humbly with our God”, recognizing *our need* in solidarity as well as our strength, enabling, supporting, magnifying those most affected by injustice, whose voices are the ones that should be heard.

The early Jesus movement did not embrace established power. Christ himself was crucified for us, and for his refusal to align with empire. The time we are in may offer us a *kairos* moment. We have choices: to retreat inside our still quite massive structures in a kind of fierce survival or to take new risks for the sake of the gospel, hearing perhaps with ears less full of imperial noise the deep calls for justice of peoples and the earth. We no longer have to uphold and legitimize the empire that has legitimized us, but can discern our prophetic consciousness anew.

Today and tomorrow we are needed in the deep call to restore ecological integrity, to bridge the Lazarus like chasm between rich and poor, to repair the betrayal of First Peoples, to renounce of wars of revenge, to hold to account the dignity and rights violated in the pursuit of profit. We need to name injustice, join with others to find new just and sustainable ways forward. We must act not only in charity, but to change structures, systems and policies that extinguish lives, that quench abundant life. We must make constructive new proposals and enter into imaginative and deep policy engagement, supporting that work with sustained public action. We must be held to account by those at the margins, those oppressed by the world, who God knows by name. We must walk the paths of justice—together if we can—with scripture burning within us.

Our partner Father Rex Reyes from the Philippines once asked us whether at this juncture in Christian life we want to be monuments or movements of life and faith for all? I hope, I believe, we know the answer.