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## Living Out the Accra Confession

### Organising the Struggle: An Interconnected Theological Education of Solidarity

*“We must recognize the interconnection between the local and the global. There is no local reality which is not impacted by and shaped by the global world order. There is no global reality that is not constructed through and by local communities and resources.”*

- Chris Ferguson<sup>1</sup>

Ferguson’s focus on the interconnected Church demands of the individual the need to situate themselves in the global Church, and to become conscious of the lens through which we perceive the world around us, this demands of us all a need to ask the question “where do we speak from?” For those of us in this West this question brings about a confessional reckoning with narratives of power, privilege and persecution. As we are forced to acknowledge that we speak in a context of complex power relations that demand an understanding of history, place and society, where we are met with the realities of the atrocities of empire, of racism, and of xenophobia. As to be interconnected equates to an entangled mess if we are not honest about where in the Communion we ‘speak from’. This requires asking critical questions about the mission of the church whilst acknowledging that our missional history has been rooted in the complexities of the legacies of war, slavery and occupation. It requires acknowledging the context of today, one of global inequality, where we are capable of drowning out the cries of the poor, the plight of the refugees and those who suffer the most from climate change. Because, as we witness the truth of the ACCRA confession further played out in the midst of a global pandemic, where the greed of Capitalism has created vaccine warfare and exacerbated existing inequalities, we must be conscious of our own complicity within this system. As neoliberal capitalism is the true virus of inequality, a system that violates and exploits the bodies of the poor, survives through consumption, greed and destruction, and manipulates the spread of a global pandemic to fill the pockets of the wealthiest, we must therefore find a vaccine against it. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, have confessed to these truths in Accra, but in confessing, there is a need to recognise that we are part of an interconnected struggle. This requires putting progress before Church politics, and calls for a pedagogy of solidarity in global missiology and theological education. As education is the weapon of confession. It is what puts a confession into action, as the greatest challenge remains achieving a global consciousness for the struggle of the oppressed. Therefore, Ferguson’s call to “take account of each other in common identity, reinforcing our sense of connectedness,”<sup>2</sup> will only be achieved through a theology of global struggle and solidarity that is rooted in an interconnected theological education that begins with struggle. This paper will therefore argue that Ferguson’s commitment to interconnected mission that is rooted in the Accra confession’s call for justice offers a challenge to theological education as it presents a global theological pedagogy of solidarity, however the continued struggle remains one of ‘getting organised’. To be organised in the struggle for the oppressed demands an education of praxis and discipleship if we are to achieve liberation.

In recognising the need for solidarity in the struggle for justice, the WCRC under the leadership of Ferguson, has created democratic spaces of education, where pedagogical and epistemological efforts have been made in order for women and men to engage together in the struggle for liberation for the oppressed. Such spaces of thought have nourished love and hope, but this hope must be politicised through organised resistance if it is bring about change. To quote Ana Maria Araujo Freire, “hope is a revolutionary transformed, either through knowledge or through radical ethics, but it loses strength, brilliance, and political clarity without fraternal love.”<sup>3</sup> The notion of fraternal love resonates with Ferguson’s call for interconnected mission and speaks to collective efforts that seek transformation. Such love demands a fraternal honesty where we are willing and able to

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Ferguson, “World Communion of Reformed Churches Hosts ‘Discerning, Confessing and Witnessing in an Age of COVID-19 and Beyond,’” Presbyterian News Service (December 30, 2020)

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/stated-clerk-other-reformed-leaders-join-in-covid-19-discernment-process/>  
<sup>2</sup> “Reformed Churches Leader: Communion Is a Gift and a Task,” The United Reformed Church (2016)  
<https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/2085-reformed-churches-leader.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ana Maria Araujo Freire, “Foreword” in Peter McLaren, *More Praise for Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), xvi.

challenge those to whom we are in communion with, about the powers and privileges they hold. It also requires offering one another the support in the struggle for liberation. Noting that in the fight to bring about God's kin-dom of justice, the injustices of the world can be overwhelming, to the extent that as individuals we can feel helpless. It for this reason that solidarity is so vital in the call for transformation, and why education can be the tool through which those involved in the struggle can 'get organised' and offer the means through which our interconnected hope for transformation can be realised. Such an education would "employ knowledge and transformation as weapons to change the world."<sup>4</sup> This paper will therefore focus on Ferguson's call for interconnected solidarity in mission that is central to living out the Accra confession, in doing so, I will address the need for an interconnected theological education and then look to Luke 5:1-11, where Jesus organises the struggle – by calling on his disciples, and in the process presents a pedagogy of solidarity. Noting that discipleship is not simply about following, it is about 'getting organised' in the revolution of God's kin-dom.

### **Addressing the Interconnected Theological Education**

Under the leadership of Chris Ferguson the WCRC has been living out the Accra Confession through critical readings of scripture and the development of creative resources for congregations, focusing on justice issues including "caste, climate change, gender and sexuality, human trafficking, immigration and migration, the New International Financial and Economic Architecture, racism, and the theology of enough."<sup>5</sup> This work has had a significant impact on the global church and yet there remains a lacuna in theological education, within Europe in particular, for the narratives of the global oppressed and theologies of liberation. As for the most part theological education in Europe remains Eurocentric and the norms of colonial Christianity remain ingrained in the academy. Social structures such as classism, racism, patriarchy and sexism are reproduced in the classroom and the academy as a whole and theological curricula remains dominated by Eurocentric theologies – where the voices of the colonized are missing. Consequently, the Accra confession, that as Hewitt notes, "emerged in response to the challenges faced through the experience of global economic injustice and ecological destruction,"<sup>6</sup> becomes only a footnote in the formation of the European church and her ministry in its theological and missiological endeavours. This is important because "theological education has the potential to be the seedbed for the renewal of churches, their ministries, mission, and commitment to Christian unity."<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that Namsoon Kang called for "a transformative theological education that seriously takes up and challenges the issues of 'power and knowledge,'"<sup>8</sup> this is needed more than ever as the economic injustices and global inequalities outlined in Accra become even more apparent in the context of a global pandemic. Ferguson's argument therefore, that the local affects the global, is visible as is how interconnected we are as humans, as the greed of the wealthiest nations leaves the poorest fighting a pandemic without vaccines or the resources for survival. An interconnected theological education must acknowledge such realities, and prevent the homogenization of theological thought, whilst enabling the diverse contexts of theology apparent in World Christianity to speak truth to power.

This means calling on theological education institutes in the West to address the form of Christianity that has been used throughout the history of the Church to at times deny the 'Jesus of history', the Jesus that as Anthony Reddie argues, "comes to us as the radical ethnic other living as he did as a Galilean Jew".<sup>9</sup> In doing so, theological education could challenge the aspects of history and the contemporary church and her mission where Jesus "becomes a symbolic Englishman who reaffirms empire, colonialism and British superiority."<sup>10</sup> As this is how white supremacy operates in theological education and why an interconnected theological education requires a decolonising of theology and missiology. As students must be free from the homogenous theologies of the

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<sup>4</sup> See, Leonardo Boff, (1997), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Pillay, "The Accra Confession as a response to empire", *HTS Theological Studies* (2018): 6.

<sup>6</sup> See, Roderick Hewitt, "The Missiological Implications of the Accra Confession" available online: <http://wrcr.ch/accra>

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Werner et al. "Introduction" in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Regional Surveys, Ecumenical Trends* eds. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), xxv.

<sup>8</sup> Namsoon Kang, "From Colonial to Postcolonial Theological Education: Envisioning Postcolonial Theological Education, Dilemmas and Possibilities", in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Regional Surveys, Ecumenical Trends* eds. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

ruling elites in order to encounter and contemplate Christ as the radical rebel who engages in the lived struggles of the oppressed. An interconnected theological education would focus on the institutes in the West in particular, in order to call on them to situate themselves in the context of World Christianity, and ask themselves 'where they speak from' in order to address the unjust dynamics of power. It would call for a decolonising of the curricula. As decolonising involves addressing the history of colonialism whilst acknowledging embedded colonial norms, where whiteness and patriarchy continue to oppress the colonized, and challenges cultures of dehumanisation by giving focus to the indigenous theology and theologies of liberation born out of struggles and resistance. Producing a theological education that challenges notions of mission imposed from a position of privilege, power and possession, would enable a systemic means by which the injustices outlined in the Accra confession could be addressed and the means by which the struggle for change could be greater realised. Ferguson's commitment to theologies of the marginalised and indigenous theologies of struggle further offer the tools for decolonising. This is why it will be vital to organise the struggle for change as a collective, and our Scriptures exemplify how this is to be done.

### **Jesus 'gets organised' in the struggle**

As Jesus was teaching the crowds to hear God's message, he saw the boats of two fishermen, and "got into the boat that belonged to Simon and asked him to row it out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sat down in the boat to teach the crowd (Luke 5:1-3)." The narrative of Jesus choosing his disciples begins in Luke 5 with Jesus teaching the crowds to hear God's message, we know that the message of God is not a neutral message, it is one of hope and transformation for the oppressed, and the crowd gathered before Jesus to hear this message of resistance against the status quo. Jesus used education as the tool for transformation, but he realised that in order for God's message to be heard by all people, he would have to 'get organised', and utilise the tools of communication in the context he was in, in this case, the boats. Today it is our classrooms, journals, media, social media, textbooks, gatherings, churches and congregations. The social resistance organiser, Saul Alinsky, argues that, "as an organiser I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be – it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system."<sup>11</sup> Jesus as God incarnate worked within the system in order to change it, and he called on the marginalised masses, where the struggle was situated in order for his message to be heard and for the resistance movement to begin. Jesus could have called on the Pharisees, the religious elites, to share God's message, but instead he called on the working class fishermen to be the teachers of the Word of God. The Roman contemporary of the early Church, Celsus, in his anti-Christian rhetoric, described those who followed Jesus as "the dregs of the people" this included the fishermen, the very people who Christ would call on to educate others.<sup>12</sup> Jesus organised with an awareness of the social conditions of the people and the educators were those who knew the struggles of the people, and "with magic and parables, healing and shared meals, he and his fellow agitators bring an utterly subversive message."<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that Kautsky maintains that, "Jesus was not merely a rebel, he was also the representative and champion, perhaps the founder, of an organization that survived him and kept growing stronger and more powerful."<sup>14</sup>

Jesus then demanded of Simon to row the boat into uncertain waters and cast out the net (Luke 5:4). Living out the Accra confession means not shying away from the political or public spaces, as the ease of preaching and teaching resistance in echo chambers with our comrades in faith can be tempting, but as Jesus' disciples we are called on to be uncomfortable in our mission. Therefore, we must cast our net into murky waters, educate those who may not like the message, and galvanise the support of the multitudes who struggle. Each time we cast our net we engage in a process of dialogue, where we become conscious of those who struggle for liberation. The revolutionary implications of such teaching will be realised as those caught in the net "know that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup> The Accra confession is an example of what can be achieved when the collective gather and "deliberate on urgent issues facing God's

<sup>11</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xix

<sup>12</sup> See, Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity*, 415.

<sup>15</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*

world”<sup>16</sup> and Jesus’ process of communal organisation speaks directly to what it means to live out the Accra confession, and central to the process is education, welfare, communication and resistance, with a message that is ultimately about liberation. In ‘getting organised’, the disciples take a risk, and in doing so catch “so many fish that their nets began ripping apart. Then they signalled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them... (Luke 5:5-7).” This is what it means to work in collaboration and in ‘getting organised’ Jesus consciously called on those who would communicate the message to the masses. It matters who we call upon to cast out the nets, just as Jesus chose the men who were not the religious elites or those searching for power, there is a need to resist those who live by the principles of the colonial church as oppose to the church of resistance. Alinsky uses the example of “the priest who wants to be a bishop and bootlicks and politicks his way up, justifying it with the rationale, ‘After I get to be bishop I’ll use my office for Christian reformation’... Unfortunately, one changes in many ways on the road to the bishopric...and then one says, ‘I’ll wait until I’m a cardinal and then I can be more effective...and so it goes on.”<sup>17</sup> For Alinsky, this is “where men speak of moral principles but act on power principles,” these are not the people who are willing to leave everything to walk in the path of Christ (Luke 5:11).

### **Towards a Pedagogy of Solidarity**

Paulo Freire argued that everyone holds part of the truth, stating “I believe that those who are weak are those who think they possess the truth, and are thus intolerant; those who are strong are those who say: ‘Perhaps I have part of the truth, but I don’t have the whole truth. You have part of the truth. Let’s seek it together’” (Freire & Faundez, 1989, 20). Ferguson’s leadership of the WCRC has created an environment in which the truths of many have been able to be gathered and heard in order to address the systemic injustices that marginalise and oppress. The challenge now will be to organise the voices and cast out the nets into the institutes that develop the next generations of religious leaders, in order to call on students in theological education to be engaged in the lives of the poor, inclusive of contexts of community activism and social movements of liberation. As in agreement with McLaren, “students need to move beyond simply knowing about critical, multicultural practice. They must also move toward an embodied and corporeal understanding of such practice and an effective investment in such practice at the level of everyday life such that they are able to deflect the invasive power of capital...and put ideology-critique at its centre of gravity.”<sup>18</sup> In acknowledging our interconnectedness as human beings today, we are called on to be in solidarity with those to whom we are connected and who struggle. Our theological education must then enable the space for communal protest and activism in order to be in true solidarity with such struggle and work towards transformation. It must be radical if it is to be prophetic, it must not be afraid to confront, to listen, and to see the world unveiled.

Under Ferguson’s leadership, the WCRC has taken up the challenge of the Accra confession, to be rebellious and prophetic in order to expose the inadequacies of the systems that subjugate. Thereby presenting a model of dialogue in mission that calls on those with power to be true witnesses and to be conscious of the roots of oppression, the systems that subjugate and our role in such systems. In doing so, it has presented a missional model of solidarity that offers the template on which to build a pedagogy of solidarity. As mission in solidarity requires a theology shaped by dialogue, this is not a dialoguing of Pharisees in a room talking, but one of solidarity, that promotes an understanding of self and other. Such a dialoguing requires an acknowledgment of the churches embedded ‘Whiteness’, its role in Empire, and demands an interrogation of our theological learning processes and pedagogies that are too often dominated by Eurocentrism. As theological education as with mission has the potential to dehumanise if it is not rooted in lived experience and the struggles of the marginalised, it must then help in the process of understanding and experiencing the interconnections of these different realities and experiences. A pedagogy of solidarity in theological education would enable the space for the messy and complex, if it is truthful to the lives of the oppressed as it born out of the lived experiences of struggle. Such pedagogy is practical because it requires relocating and contemplating God in spaces of oppression, and must therefore be liberative because it requires knowing the suffering of the oppressed and acting in the here and now for transformation from their brokenness. A pedagogy of solidarity cultivates in students the desire to seek to radically transform the world, and not fear getting lost in the uncertainty of what

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<sup>16</sup> See, Jerry Pillay, “The Accra Confession as a response to empire”, *HTS Theological Studies* (2018): 1-6.

<sup>17</sup> See, Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe, in Peter McLaren, *More Praise for Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, xii.

that may mean. So that students may enter into the reality of those to the Church is called to take the side of, in order to know the truths of their suffering better, so that they can help to transform the system that suppresses.

### Conclusion

Christianity is a radical faith, its Scriptures speak of resistance and revolution, and its disciples are called on to be countercultural, to use the resources available to them, cast their nets into the unknown, work within the systems in order to change them and to educate with a transformative message of freedom from earthly empires. Such a faith requires a radical theological education that is rooted in the lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalised. Just as Paul's letter to the Christians of Corinth notes that "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the World's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so that mankind can do no boasting before God" (1 Corinth 1:27). The WCRC must build on the legacy of a leadership that took the side of the marginalised and allow the words of the 'weak' to 'shame' the institutions of that oppress. It must help organise through education so that as interconnected beings we can situate ourselves in the contexts of the most marginalised. Not as a means of self-serving charitable acts, but, in order to truly listen to the cries of oppression, and in outrage, let such narratives shape our theological understanding of mission today and enable us to address our own complicity in systems and structures of oppression.