

AGENDA: TEN THEOLOGICAL THESES ON COVID-19 IN AFRICA

DATE: MAY 14 2019, VIRTUAL MEETING

Proposed Resolution:

The Executive Committee adopts the document ... “Ten Theological Thesis on Covid-19 in Africa” as revised in the light of recommendations and amendments given in meeting, and authorizes the General Secretary to distribute it to member churches and globally”

Rationale and Explanations:

Covid-19 has presented many theological challenges to the churches. There has been a wide range of interpretations, predictions, pronouncements by individual Christians and churches which at the end may lead to confusion. But AACC has no doctrinal unanimity. But it provides a broad platform for exchange, as we seek to “facilitate ecumenical theological conversations towards common witness of the faith at continental level” (AACC Strategy, page 7). The mission of AACC is fulfilled through:

- Mobilize members to faithfully live the message of God’s love;
- Nurturing a common understanding of the faith;
- Interpreting and responding to challenges to human dignity; and,
- Acting prophetically in word, life and services for healing (Strategy, page 6).

We believe Covid-19 presents AACC an opportunity and duty to contribute to the theological discussions going on in the continent, obviously with no claim to finality.

The theses have been developed by AACC staff, under the coordination of the TIELD, and in collegial consultation with staff of WCC who are from Africa. We hope these theses have a solid biblical foundation, take seriously the actual situation in Africa, but have universal validity which we must present as a contribution to global ecumenical discourse. They are ten just for symbolism.

We request the Executive Committee to discuss, amend, recommend and finally adopt the document as amended, to be the official theological position of AACC.

TEN THEOLOGICAL THESES ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Preamble

Theology is God-talk. How we speak about God in relation to every aspect of life determines whether or not we live and act according to our faith. The integrity and relevance of our faith therefore rests on how we speak about God in every situation. In these difficult times of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have a task to provide theological reflections to guide the thinking and actions of the church and its members. We begin by acknowledging that God lets both bad and good things to happen in the world.

On 11 March 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 which had originated from Wuhan, China only 3 months earlier, a pandemic. Within three months the disease reached pandemic status, and by 30 April 3,267,184 cases and 229,971 deaths were reported. The disease spreads through respiratory aerosols. With neither treatment nor vaccination available, control measures are hinging on respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and travel restrictions. The most extreme intervention called “lockdown” is being adopted in many countries whereby most gatherings are banned and people asked to stay indoors for extended periods – with severe socio-economic consequences like loss of employment, collapse of businesses, and general loss of livelihood. Practices around major rites of passage like baptism, and particularly funerals are challenged.

Since its outbreak in December 2019, the world is battling COVID-19. Nothing has brought the world together in fight against a common enemy more than COVID-19. COVID-19 and its impact is unprecedented in our living memory and has thus attracted conspiracy theories, speculations and diverse theological interpretations. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) proposes the following ten theological theses on the pandemic to assist the churches as they continue to reflect and act:

Thesis 1: EVERY INTERPRETATION OF THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF COVID-19 IS GUESSWORK.

‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

In times of distress and confusion like this, it is natural that human beings ask the origin and purpose of the calamity. Theologians also give possible interpretations and explanations, most of time using biblical texts as proof. In the time of COVID-19, there are many teachers, preachers, and ministers giving different theological explanations on the origin, and even the purpose of the pandemic. Through the media and social networks, COVID-19 has been interpreted theologically in different ways: e.g. as a sign of end times, as God’s judgement of the world for all kinds of sins (e.g. sexuality, or destruction of the environment and for precipitating climate change, etc.). The biblical evidence and Christian historical experience proves that indeed, every attempt to give

such an explanation remains a speculation, even when backed by biblical quotations or proof-texts. We cannot claim to be able to know God fully through such events. Many explanations in the past have been proven wrong. While it is good to try to understand theologically such events, nobody should and could claim absolute correctness. Let us take every explanation and interpretation as a matter of debate and further consideration.

Thesis 2: WE SHOULD TEST EVERY CLAIM OF PROPHECY

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” 1Cor 14:29

It is times of crisis like the current COVID-19 that false prophets and religious charlatans exploit to terrorise believers with a propagation of fear. Since the appearance of the COVID-19, some prophecies and preaching of the word of God have taken different and confusing directions in explaining biblically what the pandemic is and its origin. Several claim to be prophets who have received visions and signs; they do not want to be questioned or doubted, lest one quench the Spirit. Because of the risk associated with those who claim to speak in the Name of God, expecting people to say only “Amen”, the Bible cautions us and advises us to be vigilant and not to accept anything simply because someone claims to be a prophet. Even though some professing to have the Spirit of Christ are to be believed, yet not everyone; and though the Spirit is not to be quenched, nor prophesying to be despised, yet care should be taken to what is heard and received. We are called to test every spirit and every prophecy should be weighed. We read: ***‘Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.’ (1 John 4: 1)***. Testing of the spirits, spiritual light, knowledge, judgment, experience, and divine guidance are necessary, which should be done without fear of questioning God. All diligent believers and humble inquirers, are capable of making judgment of persons and doctrines, whether what they say is from the Spirit of God or not, for the Spirit of God never speaks contrary to God’s word.

Thesis 3: WE DISCOURAGE APOCALYPTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PANDEMIC

‘But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’ (Mark 13: 32).

This pandemic is not the first in history. There have been many, more devastating plagues and events than this one. Each time there is a temptation to interpret such events, including the dawning of the new millennium in the year 2000, which were interpreted apocalyptically. And we know those interpretations were false, because the world goes on and Jesus has not come yet. Jesus prohibited his disciples from predicting the exact time of his return. They should rather continue with their work as if Jesus is not coming, since he will come at the time when least expected. Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 5: 2, ***‘For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.’*** As Christians we should wait for the Parousia not as a threat for punishment and judgement, but more joyfully with hope of eternal redemption. Most

likely the world will not end with Covid-19; we should rather be planning for how to continue with our life and service of the Lord and preaching the message of hope for the future.

Thesis 4: EVEN IN SUFFERING AND DEATH, WE KNOW GOD PROMISES TO BE WITH US.

‘I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world’ (John 16: 33).

Jesus has never promised life without suffering for different reasons. Death is part of life, with the pain and distress it always brings. While on his way to the cross, Jesus tells his disciples to have peace. But that peace is in spite of persecution they will face. He says he has overcome, conquered the world while precisely on his way to Golgotha. Therefore, any theology which promises life without pain, illness, death is not according to Christ. Even with prayer and fasting as we do during this pandemic, there is no guarantee it will go away immediately. The challenge is how to have peace, and be assured of God’s presence and care, even when we are suffering, even to death, due to this pandemic. Our theology must take seriously the fact that even with COVID-19, even when many people die and some are healed, the presence of Emmanuel, God with us, is assured. We may rather be praying for God’s grace, to be able to “drink from the cup” if necessary without losing our faith. Our peace and message is like Paul, saying: ***“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38-39).*** Even in death, we have a promise of resurrection, since: ***“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’.” (1 Cor. 15:54)***

Thesis 5: COVID-19 IS A WAKE UP CALL FOR THE CHURCH

‘Therefore he says: Awake you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’ See that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Ephesians 5: 14-17).

COVID-19 has caused fear and anxiety. All economic, financial and health systems in literally every society have been affected. The church and society have been challenged to rethink the way we live, we cooperate, and to evaluate our responsibilities in the world. The churches’ calling to practical diaconia has been rekindled. We have come to applaud and appreciate the gift of knowledge as scientists are working hard to find a cure and vaccine. We value more and more health professional workers who risk their lives to save others. Africa has seen a resurgence of traditional resources for healing and care. We are more aware of connectedness and interdependence of the world than before. The role of faith has also been uplifted, with the notion of dependence on God being laid bare as we find ourselves helpless. **Our help comes from the Lord (Ps. 121: 1-2).**

Thesis 6: COVID-19 IS A REMINDER TO THE CHURCH OF CALLING TO BE IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR AND THE VULNERABLE

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:40)

COVID-19 has impacted people differently. In nations, cities and villages where the church is present, it is reminded to take seriously its call to be in solidarity with the most vulnerable. The poor, the homeless, the unemployed, refugees, displaced people suffer more than those whose economic and social situation enable them to fend for themselves better. With the lockdowns we hear about a dramatic increase in gender based violence against women and children. People with disability are not cared for properly. And those who have recovered from the disease face stigma in their own communities. Churches in Africa, in the spirit of Ubuntu, are called to remember Jesus saying that the way we serve him is through serving those in our midst who need extra attention in different ways. And we thank God that many churches are doing so.

Thesis 7: WE UNDERSTAND BETTER WHAT “ABUNDANT LIFE” MEANS

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

It is common to associate “abundant life” promised by Jesus with material things. Wealth and wellbeing are presented as the ultimate result of our faith and being a fulfilment of the promise of Jesus. Endless pursuit of wealth leads to corruption of our leaders, as a result of greed and selfishness, to always want more. The outbreak of COVID-19 has taught humanity that those things that we seek most are after all not that valuable. We have recognized that most of what we own is actually never needed, as we have been under restrictions of lockdowns where we neither needed them nor were we able to use them. It is a call particularly to our leaders to focus on what matters most in our life together as we face mutual vulnerability, through investments in social services, particularly healthcare systems which in Africa are in very precarious states. Just as Paul taught in 1 Timothy 6:7-8, **“For we brought nothing into the world, so we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”** And abundant life is possible only when it is for all, not just for a few privileged ones.

Thesis 8: PHYSICAL DISTANCING CALLS FOR CONTEXTUALISATION OF THEOLOGY OF OUR LIVING TOGETHER AS CHURCH.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Matthew 18:20)

The restrictions of physical gatherings have presented a church with a rare challenge and opportunity to interrogate what it means to meet as a congregation. In many countries church services in physical structures have been banned, and where they are still allowed are under severe restrictions on physical contact. We are challenged theologically on how to understand the presence of Jesus among us as promised, especially when we

cannot celebrate sacraments in the same physical space together. At the same time, we have found a rare opportunity to embrace possibilities to practice social gathering virtually, through sharing of sermons via electronic media, live streaming of services, prayer chains around the world, offering via mobile money services, etc. At the same time, it is also an opportunity to rethink of the home as a place of worship for the family. We wait to see how this new phenomenon will affect our life together as congregations after the pandemic, because one cannot hug a computer or phone.

Thesis 9: WE NEED TO RETHINK THE FUNERAL AND MOURNING PRACTICES

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” John 11:33.

Jesus attending a funeral demonstrates the significance of supporting the bereaved families to convey a message of hope and assurance of life after death. Physical distancing due to COVID-19 makes many Christians wonder how to fulfil their duty to **“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,”** (Romans 12:15) and remain consistent with the government protocols of fighting the pandemic to protect all from being infected or infecting others. For Africans, a funeral is a very significant emotional, social, spiritual, public event and a part of closure. Attendance at a funeral is therefore expected of relatives and friends, including those in other villages, towns and abroad. Social distancing poses a challenge to cultural and spiritual practice of a decent burial, while, ironically helping to rethink the irrelevance of the increasing commercialization and ostentation of funeral across Africa. We need to find a new theological narrative to accommodate the needs of those who are mourning and those who miss the event.

Thesis 10: WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO FULFIL THEIR DUTY OF ENSURING WELFARE TO ALL

“For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.” (1 Peter 2: 13-14).

Governments have a duty to protect citizens from contamination of the COVID-19 and ensure treatment, care and safety for the sick, their families and the welfare for all people. It is for that reason the Bible says governments are appointed by God and should be respected and obeyed (Romans 13). Churches are following and supporting government protocols to counter the transmission of the virus, even when such protocols restrict the usual ways of exercising their faith. But there are governments who fulfil their duty and those who are corrupted, or careless or oppressive. The church has a prophetic duty to remind and ensure that state upholds justice and fairness as it implements drastic measures to counter the infection of COVID-19. Advocacy for the vulnerable to live a life in dignity, condemnation of brutality against the people, and calling out abuses and corrupt practices should not be seen as acts of disloyalty and disobedience, but a prophetic role of the church.