

Pentecost message from the WCC presidents 2020

12 May 2020

Waves of despair, tongues of fire:

A Pentecost message from the WCC Presidents

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. (Acts 2:2-4)

Last month, Pentecost Island was among those islands in Vanuatu, in the Southeast Pacific, that were most pummeled by Cyclone Harold, a Category 5 hurricane with winds of 165 mph and “king tides” of 20 feet and more. Devastating and lethal, the cyclone ripped roofs away, leveled structures, flooded communities, and took lives.

When the fierce storm hit her island home, Moana, owner of a beach resort, woke in fear for her life and her property. For two hours, she stood facing the winds and waves, imploring God to save herself and her property. Fortunately, when the storm had passed, Moana was still standing and her buildings were still intact.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the advent of the Spirit is portrayed in similarly dramatic and consequential ways. The earliest followers of Jesus, hiding in fear, were shaken, and then emboldened, by the mighty presence of God, allowing them to overcome even barriers of language and culture to preach the saving message of Jesus’ resurrection. The church was born in tumult yet emerged from the chaos with a potent, indeed life-changing, message relevant to all cultures and contexts.

As at the first Pentecost, so it must be again today.

Now, as we write, a silent, invisible, yet even more lethal natural force has landed. The novel coronavirus has upended the whole world, instilling terror and chaos, causing millions to fall ill and hundreds of thousands to die. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on economies, upset families and community life, eluded the most sophisticated systems of global and local healthcare, tested the mettle and efficacy of governance, and caused outbreaks of hunger.

Yet this Pentecost, across the centuries and around the world, we Christians are linked

to each other and to those earliest disciples to proclaim, as they boldly did, that the God of Life is with us still. The Spirit of God lifts our hearts in prayer and longing. The Spirit instills in us courage to face grief and suffering. The Spirit enflames our hearts with love to serve those who suffer and are excluded from society's systems of care. The Spirit illumines our minds to engage in and support intense scientific research for treatments and vaccines. The Spirit enables us to confront and surmount this virus with generous cooperation, with our best medical and pastoral care, and, above all, with loving kindness toward all God's children.

The Spirit of God, too, is pan-demos. It touches all people and crosses all barriers, yet in a way that spells life, not death. This Pentecost, we pray, may wrestling with this pandemic unleash the Spirit's energies in the whole people of God and renew, not just the church, but the face of the earth.

The presidents of the World Council of Churches:

- Rev. Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
- Rev. Prof. Dr Sang Chang, Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea
- Archbishop em Anders Wejryd, Church of Sweden
- Rev. Gloria Nohemy Ulloa Alvarado, Presbyterian Church in Colombia
- Bishop Mark MacDonald, Anglican Church of Canada
- Rev. Dr Mele'ana Puloka, Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga
- H.B. John X, Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East
- H.H. Karekin II, the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians