

BRINGING GOOD NEWS OF LIGHT AND HOPE TO THE MASSES IN THESE CHANGING TIMES

Our annual theme, “bringing good news of light and hope to the masses in these changing times” is a response to our shared experience of the global pandemic. If our previous EY theme, “bringing the Good News to the masses” was emphatic about what the Good News is to the poor as seen through their lenses and expectations, the UCCP annual theme for EY2021-2022 expounds on the same (the Good News) as seen through the eyes of a pandemic-stricken world.

While the first half of the now one-year-old quarantining of our communities was affirmative of the reality of our navigating the same sea during this pandemic, the second half of the year may have everyone realizing that a few are actually on luxury liners, some are in a relatively safer boat, and most are clinging to life on exposed and overloaded rickety boats. It is to the most vulnerable during this pandemic that we bring the light and hope of our faith even as we seek to draw everyone into this common ministry.

Our theme keeps itself close to the heart of Jesus’s mission of bringing the Good News to the most vulnerable and materially poor.

It must have been resolved by now, from our previous EY themes, that:

- > the social situation where the *oikos* (household) of God is divided between the many who are materially poor and the few who are materially rich is a primary data in our biblical tradition’s understanding of a sinful situation (Lk 16: 19-31); and that this material situation is a spiritual situation and well within the domain of our spiritual and pastoral concern (Mt 25: 31-46);
- > our acts of mercy (giving food to the hungry) is at once an act of piety, and that our ministry among the materially poor (Lk 4: 18-19) expresses our fidelity to what the bible teaches as wholistic living of the faith and integral evangelization (where the gospel of God’s reign is seen as inclusive of our living and witnessing for justice and peace).
- > the “full and abundant life” (Jn 10:10) is to be inaugurated in both personal change and social “re-birth” or the institution of social/inter-human and ecological justice (Jer. 31: 31-34; 2 Cor. 3:3)

Proceeding from the above, our EY2021-2022 theme specifically points to some characterizations of that Good News as “light” and “hope.”

Light and Hope in the Biblical Tradition.

The word “light,” used in the literal sense, is mentioned in the Bible countless times. Used metaphorically, “light” meant, among others:

- > Hope amid despair (Gen 1:3)
- > protection and guidance (Ex 14:20, Ps 27:1)

- Witness, guide, wisdom (Jn 8:12, 12:35-37; Ps 119:130)
- National emancipation and freedom (Isa 9:2)
- The advent of the Messiah (Mt 4:16)
- Following Jesus the Christ (Jn 8:12)
- Life-witness, good works (Mt 5:16)

The word "hope," in the context of the hopes of the people of God in the Bible, generally means among others:

- “To cherish the desire for [the reign of God or the coming of God] with anticipation.”
- That there is something better to look forward to; and that the present state of things is not final yet.
- That there is order beyond the chaotic present (in the accounts of creation)
- That there is something more desirable than the City of Ur (in the story Abraham and Sarah)
- That there is a land flowing with milk and honey for those who are in bondage (in the case of the exodus people)
- That the law of God will no longer be written in tablets but in the hearts of everyone (Jer 31:33); when human life takes precedence over law (Mk 2:27)

The prophetic understanding of “hope” is also said in many words and metaphors. Examples are as follows:

- The hope that everyone beneath the vine and fig tree shall live in peace and unafraid (Micah 4:4)
- The hope that the dry bones in the valley of death shall live again (Ez 37:4-14)
- The hope that swords would soon turn to plowshares (Isa 2:4)
- The hope that the people shall dream dreams and the young will see visions and prophesy (Joel 2:28)
- The hope that light shall dawn upon them who dwell in darkness (Isa 9:2)

- The hope that justice will roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24)

The Gospels and Pastoral Epistles expositions on “hope” are:

- emphatic on spiritual rebirth (Jn 3:1-21)
- social rebirth, “reign of God and its righteousness” (Mk 1:15, Mt 6:33)
- and transformations in the wider reality of God’s household/*oikoumene* “beyond Judah and Samaria” (Mt 28:16-20)

Using scriptural lines, “bringing hope” in the Gospels also means bringing the news that:

- God will save his people
- The kingdom of God is at hand
- Those in bondage will be released
- The poor, oppressed, and marginalized will be relieved
- The sick and afflicted will be healed and restored
- Those in debt will be released and can begin anew (jubilee)
- The land/earth will take its rest
- The proud and mighty will be dethroned
- The poor/masses will be lifted high
- “The temple rising in three days,” “the dead shall rise,” and God’s truth and justice triumph

Light and Hope in The UCCP Statement of Faith

The “light and hope” of our faith that speak to us during this time of pandemic are also discernible in the letters of The UCCP Statement of Faith.

- When we start understanding that the earth is God’s and all that dwell therein; that the earth no longer belongs to temporal sovereigns and empires but entrusted to all of God’s children and everyone in the earth community
- When we confess that Jesus is no longer simply one who sits on a throne in heaven but one who came down, lived with the poor and vulnerable and gave his life that the least may live.

- When we start affirming that the Spirit of God is creatively and powerfully at work in history and creation, empowering people to challenge the powers and principalities (sinful structures) that are wreaking havoc on the life of people and the planet.

In the Sixth Article of the UCCP Statement of Faith, Christian hope also means:

- That life is more powerful than death (that life-giving culture is more powerful than the culture of death) (it is this faith-statement that makes us oppose the “Kill-Kill-Kill” policy and the Anti-Terror Law)
- That there is life beyond death (that there is a world better than the present) (that the militarist “national security state” paradigm is not our future)
- That all creation will be made new (that change is possible)

Hope and Light as Bad News. As experienced by the UCCP and other ecclesial communities, preaching the light and hope of our faith may sometimes earn the ire of those

- who think that the doctrine of national security is much more important than human lives and human rights
- who believe that power and authority can be maintained through propaganda and state terrorism
- who possessed much and who live in luxury amid extreme want
- who worship power and privilege
- who thrive and prosper on the ignorance, apathy, indifference, and silence of [the “silenced”] many.
- Who preached the ultimacy of the present

Some Theological Notes on “Light & Hope,” the Christian Social Vision, and Christian Witness during the Pandemic :

The Light and Hope of Our Faith and the Regime of the New Normal

- “Light and hope” is about presenting what the vision of the faith is regarding the future or future events
- This “future” is called many names such as the “reign of God” or when the righteousness of God is realized in our lives in this history and beyond
- This “future” is also understood as the experience of the “full” and “abundant life” - when everyone is “living in peace and unafraid beneath their fig tree” (the social vision of the faith includes material well-being for all)

- When the lion and the lamb are living harmoniously with each other and swords have been turned into plowshares. (The social vision of the faith includes the resolution of wars and conflicts through peace talks)
- "Light and hope" is about a future that is being lived in the here and now. What we hoped for begins now. This is basically what "light" or "enlightenment" means. You are enlightened when you live what you hope for in the present. You cannot illuminate the path for others if you have not seen the vision yourself, and are committed to living this future in the present. (The social vision of the faith prompts us to do something in the present. This is what we mean by our being "entrusted with Christ's ministry." In the tradition of Christ's ministry, we need to live and act out the truth our future hope in the here-and-now)
- The future is the full and abundant life in God's kingdom and it is here and now, inaugurated in the very life and ministry of Jesus Christ. We celebrate this inauguration of the future with hope every time we gather to be nourished by the Word and the sacraments in our worship. It is just a matter of translating our worship in our work or our praise into praxis.
- During this pandemic, to be "light and hope" means that we can share with people what our hopes, aspirations, and vision of the post-pandemic world are; and how these can be seen in our words and deeds. Are our neighbors and communities seeing these vision, hope, and aspirations in our lives and witnesses as Christians and as a Church?
- The Christian and the Church must be able to distinguish between the "new normal" discourse outside of the Church and the social vision of the Church. The Church may either redefine the popular vision of the "new normal" or invent a new one that rhymes with the Scriptural vision of the post-"forty-days-and-forty-nights" (quarantine) world.
- How qualitatively different is the "new normal" from the "old normal"? Does the regime of the new normal pursue radical changes that correct the structural wrongs, and their moral superstructures that have aggravated the pandemic-ignited crises? Or is the new normal a simple rehashing of the ways of the old normal? Is the "light and hope" of our faith confined within the temporal imagination of the new normal? Or are we pointing to something qualitatively different? Are we showing enough signs in our life and witness as Christian and as a Church that points to a reality beyond the new normal?
- The "light and hope" of our faith points to an alternative reality that we need to live and witness to in our present cocooning. Our quarantining may be causing us untold harm but the "forty days and forty nights" in our scriptural tradition were also about our physico-spiritual regeneration and conversion, and social metamorphoses. Can our experience of the quarantine during this pandemic become our own "forty-day and forty-night"/"forty-year" moment -- a moment of illumination and empowerment by the light and hope of our faith?