

Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth

Report of the taskforce to the 24th general council¹

In 1995, a Southern African regional consultation on the theme “Reformed faith and economic justice” met in Kitwe and called upon WARC “to consider our submission that a *status confessionis* be declared in the light of the African theological experience”. In response, the 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997) called for a committed process of recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction. So WARC set up a programme on covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth and together with its global ecumenical partners, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and regional ecumenical organizations, organized a series of regional consultations that would work on the process of recognition and education. This led to the south-south gathering of 27 member churches in Buenos Aires (2003), which took a “Faith stance on the global crisis of life”, and to the south-north gathering of 26 member churches in London Colney (2004), “The time has come”. The point of confession had been reached.

23rd general council

(Debrecen 1997)

Break the chains of injustice

Seoul/Bangkok 1999

Asia (also interfaith)

Message to churches of the north and south

Budapest 2001

Central/eastern Europe

Serve God, not Mammon!

Fiji 2001

The Pacific

The island of hope

Soesterberg 2002

Western Europe

Economy in the service of life

Buenos Aires 2003

Latin America

Enough is enough

Stony Point 2004

North America

Just trade in the service of an economy of life

Cape Town 2001

WARC

The theological basis of covenanting for justice

Buenos Aires 2003

South-south member churches (WARC)

Faith stance

London Colney 2004

South-north member churches (WARC)

Faith stance

24th general council

(Accra 2004)

That All may have Life in Fullness

About 80 member churches have also been part of the covenanting for justice programme and eight of them have made a declaration or statement. In 1998, the Presbyterian Church of Korea said “We must repent... of thinking wrongly that faith and matters of economy are separate. We have not taught the need for a faithful economic ethic... The Korean church must now take an active role in reforming the world economic order into a just structure...” In 2000, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Portugal affirmed life, committing itself “to resist actively, to contribute to the change of the world’s economic order and to participate in the search for a just economy...The excessive neoliberal behaviours are sin.” In 2001, the Waldensian Evangelical Church expressed its “deepest aversion to economic injustice and political violence”; at the same time recognizing that its members “are co-responsible for this situation as citizens of one of the richest countries of the world..” In 2003, the Reformed Churches in Argentina affirmed their “faith in Jesus, who has already overcome the project that infringes the will of God” and committed themselves “to proclaim, to work and to live for the life that God intends for all”.

The global civil resistance that started from Seattle in 1999 also helped the churches to recognize the seriousness of the problem and they have begun to cooperate with global civil movements in order to build an alternative model of economy.

What we have recognized

The economic situation

Over the last seven years many changes have occurred on the global economic scene. The Bangkok consultation of 1999 took place during the so-called Asian crisis, which hit those Asian countries that had liberalized their economies in response to the recommendations of the international agencies. The heart of their letter to the churches of the north says:

We listened to the stories of farmers, women, indigenous peoples, fisher folk, the urban poor and slum dwellers (about) the casualization of cheap labour, feminization of poverty, the increase in child labour and trafficking of children, and ecological destruction in Thailand, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. We are struck by the commonality of the consequences of debt and the globalization of the economy on our societies... based on neoliberalism.

The Budapest conference took place in 2001 after the countries of central and eastern Europe had been hit by the rapidity and harshness of the transformation process from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one:

In 1989 about 14 million people in the former communist bloc lived on less than four dollars a day. By the mid-nineties that number had risen to 147 million people. At the same time... there has developed... excessive

wealth for a small minority... Where communism had relied on unrestricted state planning, politicians and leaders now embraced the unrestrained market mechanism as the path to a better future... This neoliberal “shock therapy”, requiring a shrinking role for the state, simply disabled existing social provisions for ordinary women and men... Economic globalization in its present form threatens values such as justice, charity, peace and sobriety that are rooted in Christian traditions. It replaces them with the values of unrestrained consumerism and the increasing commercialization of society.

The south-south conference took place in 2003 in Buenos Aires. Twenty-five years ago 9% of the population of Argentina were poor and 50% middle class. Now, as a result of faithfully following the prescription of the international monetary organizations, 59% are poor and the middle class has shrunk dramatically. Together with the representatives of the churches of Africa and Asia, they reported the growing harshness of the structural adjustment of their economies and the growing imperial domination of the financial markets. And so they spoke of a

dramatic convergence of the crises for countries of the south... Creation is in crisis... We are conscious of the new signs of the times: the unparalleled integration of economic globalization and global geopolitics... We are clearly living in a new stage of capitalism, which combines all forms of power and affects all dimensions of life... It is also new in its far-reaching and all-encompassing strategy of domination where the global financial market is empire and god... Through neoliberal globalization, the economy, designed to sustain life and the wellbeing of all, has become a totalitarian faith system of wealth accumulation for the few, endangering life as a whole on our planet... We are united in our rejection of this model.

Since Debrecen, WARC and its member churches have been working hard to recognize the economic crisis and the destruction of the environment. It has been easier for the victims to see this than it has for the beneficiaries. Much education has taken place and many people have learned more about the way the financial world is organized and the planet is endangered.

New signs of the times

Since the 1997 Debrecen call, the signs of the times have become more alarming and the situation is much worse. The world has witnessed the increasing and intensifying suffering of people; one example would be the pandemic of HIV/Aids, especially in Africa. The world order has provoked hunger, poverty, economic breakdown and financial crises. Economic crises in Asia and Latin America have brought about unwitnessed suffering and the disintegration of

people's lives. The Caribbean, because of its small populations and the fragile nature of its economies and ecosystems, has experienced job losses, grinding poverty, an unprecedented rise in crime and violence, ecological degradation and the rise of HIV/Aids. In the Pacific island nations, economic and ecological problems are tightly interconnected. Global warming endangers the low-lying islands, nuclear testing contaminates the sea, the land, the people, and all living creatures, and mining increases deforestation and destroys the rain forests.

There is a dramatic convergence between the sufferings and cries of the people and the irreversible destruction and degradation of the ecology of the earth. There have emerged remarkable new signs in the process of the unparalleled integration of economic globalization and global geopolitics.

- The world has become monopolar and dominated by the empire.
- The world is experiencing a global military strategic integration, as demonstrated by the US "war on terror". There is growing militarism, as war has become the primary means of securing the global market.
- The unilateral domination of the empire in global politics is witnessed to by the paralysis of the UN.
- Violent conflict between religious groups is provoked at every level and then used for geostrategic purposes by the empire.

Our faith community is called to act urgently because the whole of creation is groaning and the sufferings of people are intensifying. This leads us to root ourselves firmly in our biblical and Reformed base as we respond to this challenge.

What we have learned: God's economy

Reformed theology of the economy

Reformed theological teaching says that every economic activity builds on the gifts of God. Therefore material goods are the instruments of God's grace in the service of life. Money becomes mammon when it is used to victimize God's people and the earth. Human economic activity needs regulation because human beings are greedy. When defined by God's covenant, the economy is life-enhancing and life-centred for the people of God, all living creatures, and the whole earth (Genesis 9). When illumined by the grace of God, the economy of the covenant is an "economy of community" in which love and justice form the spiritual basis.

- Whereas today's neoliberal economy is exclusive, God's economy is inclusive.
- Whereas the neoliberal economy is an exploitative economy of the poor, God's economy is a protective economy in favour of the poor.
- Whereas in the neoliberal economy the flow of wealth is from the poor to the rich, in God's economy it goes from the rich to the poor.

- Whereas in the neoliberal economy the poor are invisible, in God's economy the vulnerable are before everyone's eyes.
- Whereas the neoliberal economy is based on greed and profit-making, God's economy is based on community and mutual support.
- Whereas the neoliberal economy is based on limitless competition, God's economy is an economy of cooperation.

The preferential option for the poor

The World Commission on Environment and Development's report, *Our Common Future*,² captures the essential feature to which the Bible calls us in one phrase: "Overriding priority is to the essential needs of the world's poor." This provides the criteria for any economic and social action, whether by individuals, communities or institutions, churches, public authorities or enterprises.

Priority

If someone or something has priority, it comes first. If the essential needs of the poor have priority, they must be served before any other needs. This rules out any action or policy that first enriches the rich, even if it claims to improve the lot of the poor later. For instance, this rules out the "trickle-down" policies so dear to neoliberals. *Overriding* priority simply underlines the urgency. The priority must be exercised, there can be no arguments for delay.

The poor

The poor includes the deprived, those who have been denied the means of subsistence, the means to protect themselves. The poor are the orphans, the widows and the strangers, to whom the Bible constantly recalls our responsibilities. They are the weak, the ones without property and resources; the vulnerable, those to whom Jesus addressed his message of liberation (Lk 4.18-19, Mt 25.34-45); those who are denied the fullness of life. The poor may be individuals, but they may equally well be families, communities, countries or cultures. For example, indigenous peoples should be protected from the attempts by transnational corporations to appropriate their knowledge and culture for private profit.

God's call is to give priority to *the world's* poor, who should enjoy their life in equality and dignity. Who is my neighbour? (Lk 10.29-37) Jesus drives us beyond the boundaries of race, gender, caste, class and nationality. My neighbour may be anywhere. So this has implications for the migration and refugee policies of so many rich countries.

Essential needs

The poor are the primary actors in God's economy. It is for them to define their needs. It is not for anyone else to answer in their place. We can, however,

be sure that they include humanity, dignity and the autonomy with which God has endowed every person, every community and every culture (eg Deut 24.10). Whatever is done to enable the poor to meet their needs should bear this dignity in mind. High among these needs is security. Each day they need to find today's food, as the Lord's prayer reminds us ("Give us *this day* our daily bread"). Any economic policy that imposes risks on the poor calls this injunction into question. For example, there is opposition to the policies of the World Trade Organization, which put the food security of poor communities at risk; or one of the arguments against genetically modified seeds is that they may endanger the crops of poor farmers.

That some can be confined to an economy of mere survival or even death is an affront to the overflowing abundance, the fullness of life, that God promises to all.

The wholeness of creation

God is the giver of all life. We recognize God's joy in the totality of creation and God's blessing of all that is created (Psalm 104). God's covenant invites all beings into a relationship in which all creation participates in common living. God's covenant for life extends to all creation and beyond the present to the future (Gen 9.8-11). An economy that does not recognize this principle is an economy of sin against God's creation.

We have broken the covenant. We continue to abuse nature through the indiscriminate exploitation of God-given natural resources such as water, land and air. Millions of people are deprived of the life-giving resources of land and water because they are appropriated for profit. Waters are polluted, thereby killing the very source of life for all. Indigenous peoples' cultures and spirituality that are closely linked to the earth are destroyed, taking away the basis of their identity and survival. Women's life-giving roles are threatened. We need to recognize that God's economy means interdependence for the mutual benefit of all creation. This is well expressed in *ubuntu* (I am because we are – we are because I am), an African concept of interrelatedness between all creation including God and *sang saeng* (living together), a Korean concept of conviviality and interdependence.

An economy of life would release the earth to replenish all life. We are called to protect and not to destroy the life-giving power of the earth. God's covenant must be reaffirmed in order for us to be faithful and obedient as people of God.

An orchard of blossoming economies:

An alternative vision of God's economy

It is often suggested that there is no alternative to the neoliberal economy. This is not true, as can be shown by thinking of the economy as either a tunnel or a fruit tree. The tunnel represents the present process of globalization. All

people and all economies are expected to go through the tunnel of growing productivity and competitiveness in the global market if they wish to reach the light at the end – a high standard of consumption for everyone. However not all traffic is welcome in the tunnel. The least efficient, least productive elements such as the unemployed and those countries not willing to adapt or modernize get in the way. The fastest vehicles have their own privileged lane. Finally, everyone must accept the stress, pollution and noise in the tunnel. The traffic has priority over the environment.

A tree is quite different from a tunnel. A healthy tree is full of life and its growth is quite different from the journey through the tunnel. Firstly, all the living cells of the tree participate. Secondly, the tree does not overburden its own environment: it enriches it. Lastly, it bears fruit, both to sustain its own life and to feed others. The activity of the cells is meaningful labour, the surroundings are the global environment and the fruits, the fulfilment of all basic needs. So how can a simple tree do what the most advanced type of tunnel economies cannot?

As soon as maturity is reached the tree refrains from further vertical growth and puts its energy and resources into making fruit. Its basic rule is blossoming not expansion. Even in the richest countries the law of endless market expansion is becoming a curse: stress is growing, environmental problems are uncontrollable, and everything is under the rule of the market, which continues to demand higher productivity and competitiveness.

But this could all change if the demand for an ever rising standard of living were abolished and new patterns of production, consumption and distribution were based on caring and sharing. The material wealth of the wealthy has grown enough. Their trees are now mature and should leave space for new trees to develop and blossom. Our alternative is an orchard of blossoming economies, each bearing its own kind of fruit. The time has come for radical change if total catastrophe is to be prevented and all creation to enjoy fullness of life.

Implementing alternatives in God's economy

In the present situation, when the dominant ideology claims there is no alternative, it is crucial to show that transition to another kind of economy is possible. God's economy, as witnessed to in the Bible, is not wishful thinking. The people of God in different contexts of oppressive and enslaving systems, since the empires of the ancient Near East, have implemented alternatives and have sought to tame those elements of the economy not in line with God's caring love for all creatures.

Fullness of life for all and the common good are the basic criteria of God's economy. Therefore, the local/regional community of families and persons living together in a given natural, cultural and social habitat are the basic unit

and reference point (Numbers) rather than the individual. There are forms of property that are socially just and ecologically careful. These would give all people access to the gifts of God, since God is the final owner of the earth.

Property, access and control may take various forms in the different cultural contexts of communities and peoples. We have to overcome the false notion that there can only be either a purely privatized or a centralized economy. The key perspective is developing an economic order from below so that the lives of people are secured. All legal, institutional and political structures from the local via the national up to the global level have to serve society so that all may live in harmony with each other and nature. The alternatives may include community, cooperative or public ownership as well as ownership for private use, all under ecological and social conditions decided by the community. Besides land there are other basic goods and services, which must be secured in similar ways, such as water, energy, health, education and transport. All people must have access to the abundance of creation, not only those who have purchasing power on the basis of property or contracted labour.

This provision of public goods and services needs to be regulated at different levels including the global with the participation of those affected. So churches should engage with civil movements trying to prevent the present attempts of the governments of rich countries to privatize all public services, in the context of the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations. They should also struggle to stop the privatization of intellectual property, for example, the patenting of seeds and pharmaceuticals (eg against HIV/Aids) and popular culture, in the context of the WTO's Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement (TRIPS).

Another key area is production and labour. Small- and medium-sized companies related to local/regional communities would have priority in an economy oriented to the needs of local people. Large and transnational industrial production units and corporations would require public control to ensure good working conditions, just wages, ecological standards and just taxation. Social and cultural rights should be applied universally, and this should include farmers, workers and migrant labour. This is possible if governments and all the actors in civil society cooperate rather than compete.

The present financial markets and the international monetary system are characterized by speculation, tax evasion and undemocratic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These institutions impose structural adjustment programmes on over-indebted countries, with one notable exception, the United States of America. It is not true that there is no alternative in this crucial field. Alternative proposals include a global central bank, international liquidity facilities, a structural fund (like the European Union Structural Funds) to share among richer and weaker regions, and a trade regime that would discipline the richer nations. The UN could be the democratic

framework, rather than the undemocratic International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which operate on the basis of “one dollar one vote”.³ The vision of an “orchard of blossoming economies” would be furthered by these proposals. The economic growth of poor countries needs to be enhanced, whereas the economic expansion of the richest countries cannot go on unhindered.

It is possible for the peoples of the world to change the present situation if they unite their forces. They can work for alternatives at the local/regional levels where they have direct access. At national, regional and global levels they can build alliances and movements to struggle for the political space to win control over the economy. Churches from the perspective of God’s inclusive and life-enhancing economy are called to join the struggles of the poor and be in solidarity with them in order that all may both live and live in harmony with creation.

Covenanting for justice in the economy and earth

We have recognized the signs of the times from Debreccen until now. Economic injustice and ecological destruction prevent the fullness of the life that God gives to all creation.

The covenant God made with all creation is at stake and therefore life is under serious threat. The neoliberal language of contracts, competition, privatization and the absolute freedom of the individual is not compatible with the concept of covenant.

God’s covenant affirms God’s promise over and against the powers of destruction and dominance of the empires (from Egypt to Babylon to Rome and on).

God initiates a covenant with people when their lives are in crisis. They become God’s partners. God’s covenant with Noah, his descendants and every living creature was made when the whole world was completely devastated by flood (Genesis 9). God’s covenant with Abraham was made when Abraham had neither descendants nor land. Jesus’ covenant was made when we had no salvation. Therefore the biblical covenant is a God-initiated process of normalizing an abnormal situation. God’s covenant is an act of liberation from untruth that leads into truth.

While the rules of the empire are exclusive and life in fullness reserved for the “few” and the “greatest”, God’s covenant is inclusive of the whole earth, God’s people and all living creatures (Genesis 9). What is more, in order to correct the exclusiveness that deprives people and living beings of life, God’s covenant begins by drawing into active partnership the most excluded, the poor, the vulnerable, slaves and strangers. In God’s covenant, the last are first and the first last. When all beings live together in covenant, we will find that God has given plenty and there is enough for all.

Covenanting is an action not only of putting oneself into the other person's place, but also of recognizing oneself in the other. In the covenant, God put God's own self into all creation. In the covenant that God has made with the whole of creation, all members of creation are put into one another's place. Covenant is a decisive form of solidarity, overcoming the contradictions caused by unjust powers (Gal 3.26-29).

In the context of life threatened, communities dismantled and the truth distorted, we must reaffirm and renew the covenant that God made with all creation, that Christ made new and promised would never be broken, and that the Holy Spirit continues to renew even today.

The time has come to reject the false discourse that challenges the sovereignty of God and impoverishes the life of creation. The time has come for churches that are unfaithful to God's covenant to repent of their unfaithfulness. The time has come for abnormal life to be normalized. The time has come to strengthen covenantal solidarity among all life.

Covenantal action

Repentance

God calls us, as individuals and the church, to confess and repent of the ways in which we have been and continue to be unfaithful and disobedient to God's covenant. For God's vision is for the earth to live in conviviality and security. In our context, where so many people, places, and species of the earth are systemically excluded from the fullness of life, faithfulness to God's covenant means working to overcome our embeddedness in the current system.

The time has come for the general council to call churches and members to repent of complicity, through silence, denial, or direct activity, with these particular features of neoliberal capitalism:

1. where debt enslaves people and nations and denies basic needs
2. where systemic ecological damage destroys the habitat of life
3. where we have succumbed to greed for material wealth and possessions
4. where property is coopted by large capital owners as absolute property for private accumulation at the expense of the common good
5. where the financial system leads to speculation, corruption, tax evasion and extortionate rates of return on capital.

In faithful response to God's covenant, the time has come for the general council to call churches and members to repent by

1. overcoming greed and consumerism
2. refusing individualistic understandings and expressions of faith
3. overcoming unjust salary scales
4. disinvesting from banks and funds involved in speculation, tax evasion and taking interest rates beyond growth rates
5. paying more attention to the preservation of natural habitats.

Rejection

The time has come for the general council to call churches and members to take a faith stance against the structural and practical implications of neoliberal capitalism. This ideology systematically excludes the poor, creates suffering, destroys the earth, and claims sovereignty over all of life. It claims to be without alternative and thus challenges the sovereignty of God. Neoliberal ideology challenges and is in opposition to God's covenant. It is based on

1. the principle of private property without any social or ecological obligation and contract as the only legal basis
2. greed, competition, consumerism and the limitless accumulation of wealth as best for the whole world
3. privatizing the gifts of God, as well as liberalizing, deregulating and protecting the markets in the interests of the capital owners
4. misusing technological power so that it plunders, degrades, and destroys the earth's resources and manipulates and destroys the biological texture of life at all levels.

In faithful response to God's covenant the time has come for the general council to call churches and members to reject

1. legal regimes that protect neoliberal powers and principalities and both sacrifice people and life
2. the military regime of the empire that victimizes people and life through wars and weapons and destroys peace on earth
3. the environmental regime that exploits natural resources and living beings and does not care for life on earth
4. the way in which communication and information are used to dominate the consciousness of the people
5. greed that destroys the human person and community.

Action

Faithfulness and obedience to God's covenant requires that we work to enact God's inclusive vision for living together in plenty for all. The time has come for the general council to call member churches, congregations and members to act in accordance with God's covenant for justice in the economy and the earth by examining the following areas of the life of the church: spiritual life, pastoral care, education, finance, diaconal work regarding ecological and economic initiatives, mission, and ecumenical relations.

Examples of things that churches have done

- Resisting consumerism and living simply in order that the lifestyles of some do not destroy people and the earth
- Challenging rich church members to follow Jesus and share
- Building spiritual life, through worship, Bible study and prayer, based on economic justice and ecological integrity
- Educating children in church school/Sunday school about economic justice and ecological integrity
- Tithing in order to support the poor and the community
- Engaging in mission/diaconal work related to ecological issues and degradation of the environment
- Adopting congregational mission statements that include economic justice and ecological integrity and implementing them
- Sharing work and income to prevent redundancy and ensure that everyone has a living wage
- Investing in sustainable funds, alternative banks, and cooperative initiatives
- Working to enact a sustainable economy by supporting initiatives such as “fair/just trade”
- Practising jubilee measures of debt relief and sabbath at both personal and communal levels

Churches, congregations, and members are called to act in solidarity at all levels by

- joining the resistance of the victimized
- gathering and sharing the wisdom of the victimized to build an alternative vision to the current neoliberal one
- building the economy of life through sustainable initiatives in alliance with the global ecumenical movement, faith communities, civil movements, and committed Christian groups in order to overcome the idolatry and injustice of neoliberal capitalism
- working to live together in harmony with all living beings on earth.

Recommendations

The taskforce recommends the general council

- to take a faith stance against neoliberal capitalism and its structural and practical implications because it is not compatible with the gospel;
- to call upon all member churches at all levels to be engaged in the process of covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth, with the aim of actualizing God's economy for fullness of life for all;
- and its member churches to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community and community of other faiths, civil movements and people's movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation;
- to reflect on this vision of the life and work of the Alliance through the decisions and recommendations of the policy and public issues committees;
- to urge its member churches at all levels to implement the vision through a covenantal act.

Notes

1. The members of the taskforce on covenanting for justice appointed by the WARC executive committee are Elizabeth Nash, Omega Bula, Edward Dommen, Ulrich Duchrow, Bob Goudzwaard, Kim Yong-bock, Gretel van Wieren, Takatso A Mofokeng, Leonor Briones and Park Seong-won (WARC staff).
2. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p.43.
3. Already in 1944, at the Bretton Woods Conference, the great economist of the last century, JM Keynes, proposed an institutional framework that would have made possible a socially regulated global economy after World War II. A similar design was suggested by the UNDP Human Development Reports of 1992 and 1994 to the World Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995. In 1944 the plans were rejected by the USA, in 1995 by the neoliberal G7.