

The time has come

South-north member churches forum
London Colney, UK, February 8-11 2004

The south-north member churches forum in London Colney continued the journey begun by the 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997), which invited member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to enter into a process of “recognition, education, and confession” (*processus confessionis*) regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction. This forum gathered representatives of 26 member churches from the north and south and developed the following faith stance on the way to the 24th general council (Accra 2004).

Why take a faith stance?

There is a growing recognition that the way in which the capitalist market system works today causes the suffering and death of people and creation on a massive scale. Life is at stake; suffering and destruction abound. Hunger and starvation, diseases such as HIV/Aids, social insecurity, and ecological destruction often become opportunities for further profit. The same market forces that victimize the south are at work in the north. The economic and environmental problems are interconnected and aggravate each other in disastrous ways, constantly pushing us away from the God of life and from fullness of life for the whole creation.

Economically, the capitalist market does not serve the exchange of useful goods and services for all, nor is it held politically and socially accountable for the common good. Built on the absolute property rights of a minority of owners and regulated to benefit corporate profit, it has only one goal: to maximize the accumulation of wealth by a few. Financial capital dominates the economy, excludes the poor, fosters speculation, and traps people and nations permanently in debt. Capital goes less and less into the long-range sustainable production of goods and services. Instead, the drive of corporations and the market often causes unemployment, degradation of working conditions, forced migration, and increasing structural indebtedness. Macroeconomic policies such as structural adjustment programmes, privatization, devaluation of local currencies, and cutbacks in social services, imposed on countries by global economic institutions, widen the gap between rich and poor.

Ecologically, creation is in crisis. Nature is seen only as the raw material for consumption and wealth creation. There is no recognition of nature's intrinsic value or that regular communion with creation is important for our spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The unlimited growth policy of industrial economies accelerates the plundering of the earth and the irreversible destruction of the environment. All over the world, the industrialization of

agriculture is driving small farmers out of business. Many species and habitats are being destroyed, and creation as a whole is in peril.

We live in a time of empire – an empire that enforces the current trend of militarism as a global war strategy in order to secure markets and imposes destructive macroeconomic policies on entire countries to serve the ends of the market. The degree to which economic globalization and global geopolitics are integrated today has no historical parallel. Modern science and technology are even used to serve global military power and the global market, rather than to serve life. Structural violence is intensified by racism, caste systems and gender inequalities.

Poverty robs women of the fullness of their humanity. The trafficking of women and children exploits, commodifies, and even enslaves.

In the midst of social, economic and ecological deterioration, plagues and diseases are spreading all over the world, affecting animals as well as people, and hitting the poorest countries in an alarming way. Millions of people die from Aids and too often are deprived of effective medical treatment by profit-oriented pharmaceutical corporations.

The media, increasingly controlled by corporate powers, colonize human consciousness, instilling the consumerist values of the market.

At the heart of today's economic and environmental problems is what is referred to in many parts of the world as neoliberalism, neoliberal capitalism or the Washington Consensus.

This consensus has the core beliefs that

1. competition, consumerism and the unlimited accumulation of wealth are best for the whole world
2. the capitalist market is built on the principle of private property without any social obligation, as well as contract as the only legal basis
3. the practice of liberalizing and deregulating the market, privatization, openness to foreign investment and imports, the unrestricted movement of capital and lower taxes will achieve common wealth.

In fact, the rich and the rich nations use political institutions and military force to secure their own interests and do not follow the practice they require for others.

Neoliberal ideology claims to be without alternative and thus challenges the sovereignty of God, while also demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and from creation. Therefore the integrity of our faith is at stake.

Our faith is at stake because

- suffering and destruction is contrary to the will of God, who created life and conquered death through Jesus Christ
- neoliberal capitalism makes the false promise that it can save the world
- neoliberal capitalism claims sovereignty over life and demands an allegiance that amounts to idolatry.

The integrity of our faith is at stake

As people who belong to the God of life we have been given a new vision, the biblical vision of the fullness of life for people and the earth. We commit ourselves to this biblical vision, which is opposed to neoliberal capitalism in the following ways:

- a) It is oriented to the fulfilment of basic needs and human flourishing, not to maximum productivity and consumption (Isaiah 65, 1 Timothy 6).
- b) It has care and distribution as its driving force, not accumulation (Lk 12.16-21).
- c) It promotes solidarity, serving living communities, and rejecting individualism (Acts 4-5).
- d) It subjects financial markets to the service of the real economy, not the real economy to the rule of finance (Luke 19).
- e) It corrects systematic indebtedness and the loss of land by jubilee measures and constrains the economy to respect the environment, instead of allowing the search for profits to destroy it (Leviticus 25).
- f) It creates a space where justice and peace will kiss (Ps 85.10), instead of subjecting every space – physical, mental, and spiritual – to the ends of the market.

We are challenged as churches to make a confession of faith because we have listened to the cries of suffering people and the groaning of creation. This confession of faith will reject the injustices of today's global economy by reaffirming our faith in the triune God who opens up a new creation in Christ and calls us to respond faithfully to God's covenant.

We affirm that God is sovereign over all creation (Gen 2.8-9)

We repent of the belief that the market economy and the power of money will bring about peace, security and freedom from hunger and disease. We repent of the misuse of the doctrine of creation (Genesis 1) to conquer, exploit and destroy life – especially women and the earth – misinterpreting our role as stewards of creation. We repent of the belief that neoliberal capitalism is the solution to the world's problems.

We reject any claim of economic, political and military power that subverts God's sovereignty over life. We reject the cooption by large capital owners of the gifts of God, given to all people, as absolute property for private profit at the expense of the common good, because this denies God's sovereign ownership over all things. We reject the idea that humankind has an unrestricted right to dominate and conquer nature.

We declare that God's design is to sustain all creation. We declare that God's sovereign reign means that all creatures are endowed by God with dignity and are to live in companionship with one another.

We affirm that God has made a covenant with all creation (Gen 9.8-12)
This covenant has been sealed by the gift of God's grace, a gift that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). God's covenant is over and against any contract that is the "law" of domination and exploitation. It is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are in a preferential way God's partners. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant.

We repent of our complicity with neoliberal capitalism, which excludes the poor and vulnerable from the fullness of life. We repent of our excluding people because of their class, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

We reject the misuse of the biblical idea of God's covenant by any group or nation to exclude others on ideological or political grounds. We reject military, political, and economic domination. We reject the ideological and political misuse of Scripture and Christian faith to justify any form of domination.

We declare that God's covenant invites all creation into a relationship of participation in common living. We declare that God gives us the freedom to build, preserve, and care for all creation (Genesis 2, 1 Cor 10.23-26).

We affirm that in Christ all divisions and exclusions are overcome. There is unity of life in community, among nations and in the cosmos (Eph 2.11-21)

We repent of not recognizing the unity of life in the whole universe through the reign of Christ and the presence of the Spirit. We repent of degrading people of other faiths and spiritualities in the name of Christ. We repent of breaking the body of Christ through divisions and schisms.

We reject unlimited competition and the cynical social doctrine of the survival of the fittest.

We declare that the body of Christ is called to be, unconditionally and universally, an inclusive reality.

We affirm that the Holy Spirit gives us a vision for a new heaven and a new earth

The Holy Spirit continually renews and sustains the vision of the garden of life in a new heaven and a new earth (Col 1.16-18, Rev 21.1-5). The Spirit moves us into fellowship with one another and towards hope for a new vision based on love, forgiveness and transformation in Jesus Christ.

We repent of not being sensitive to and trusting in the life-giving, transforming power of the Holy Spirit and therefore limiting our vision of justice, peace and hope for the world. We repent of justifying the ideology of individualism by confining the Spirit to the soul.

We reject the view of modernity that privileges the material over the spiritual. We reject the market's drive to dominate all of life through materialism and consumerism.

We declare that the Holy Spirit is working in all creation, inspiring, renewing and transforming life.

Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth

The Alliance fellowship has been led by the Holy Spirit to a time and place where a choice must be made, a stance must be taken. Churches can no longer remain lukewarm in responding to the suffering and destruction of people and the earth. Now is the time for churches to proclaim with passion that we will commit our time and energy, indeed, our very selves, to changing, renewing and restoring the economy and the earth.

We, as the church of Jesus Christ, oppose

- maximum productivity, consumption and accumulation to serve the ends of individuals and corporations at the expense of the poor and creation;
- the use of the military to promote the market mechanisms;
- the misuse of the Bible to oppress people and the earth, and to support the goals of the current economic ideology;
- the unjust applications of tariffs and subsidies;
- corporate activity that utilizes unjust labour policies in order to maximize profits;
- the consolidation of agriculture that drives small farmers out of business;
- structural adjustment programmes that create unemployment and exploit the environment;
- the destabilization of economies through unregulated currency speculation;
- unpayable levels of international debt;
- the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

We, as the church of Jesus Christ, confess and repent

- of falling short in responding to the urgent cries of the poor and creation;
- of not speaking prophetically against the powers that oppress and enslave;
- of failing to lift up a biblical vision of the economy as opposed to the current market vision;
- of giving in, especially in countries in the north, to materialism and over-consumption.

We, as the church of Jesus Christ, are called to

- support economic activity that promotes sustainable communities and ecosystems;
- work for the release of systematic indebtedness where it enslaves people and countries;
- support governments in protecting their people and markets and developing infrastructure, healthcare, and education in locally appropriate ways;

- work for rigorous and internationally enforceable pollution controls;
- advocate the upholding of universal human rights;
- promote the protection of workers' rights;
- strive for multilateral and unilateral disarmament and peace;
- make significant contributions to environmental protection and preservation;
- promote sustainable investment that gives consideration to the poor and the environment;
- adopt lifestyles that witness to God's economy for life;
- create faith stances and continue with the process of recognition, education and confession regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction within our own churches.

We, as the church of Jesus Christ, and as a sign of hope, reaffirm our commitment to work with

- national, regional and global ecumenical bodies and faith communities to covenant for justice in the economy and the earth;
- civil, peoples' and citizens' movements in the struggle for justice;
- groups who work for alternatives in order to build a sustainable economy and environment (eg the Fair Trade and Just Trade movement).

We pray

We praise you, O God, for your creation; for the diversity of humankind; for the provision you have made for the sustenance of life throughout the earth; for the interconnectedness of creation; for the privilege you have granted us to play a role as stewards in sustaining creation.

We confess, O God, that we have not always recognized our place in creation, as people created by you to be in companionship with one another and the earth. Help us to be instruments of renewal and restoration and not of destruction. We repent of our fears, inconsistencies and weaknesses in responding to your call.

We pray, O God, for the vulnerable who are negatively affected by ecological and economic injustice and ask that you give them the strength and resources to rise above their situations.

Grant your church, O God, in the midst of the forces of evil and death, the power to truly represent your voice and to work with you as partners in bringing about life in all its fullness. *Amen.*