

World Council of Churches
Theological Consultation on Economy of Life
27-30 October 2014, Chennai, India

The Economy of Life

An Invitation to Theological Reflection and Action

The 10th WCC Assembly's call to a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace initiates activities by WCC member churches and ecumenical partners on many different levels. The Bogor Statement, "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All: A Call to Action," presented at the 10th WCC Assembly in Busan in 2013 summarizes the outcomes of a several-year process addressing economic and ecological injustices launched by the previous WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006. "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All" is an urgent appeal to the churches to respond to the concerns of peoples and communities of the world who are facing unprecedented economic crises, the threat of climate change and widespread ecological destruction. In places where there seems to be no hope, we are called as people of faith to lift up hope. Building on these calls, the WCC organized the Theological Consultation on Economy of Life, held in Chennai, India from the 27th to the 30th October 2014. The outcomes of this consultation highlight the vision of the Economy of Life.

In this document the WCC addresses churches, church communities, ecumenical organizations, theological faculties, seminaries and partners around the globe with an invitation to more intensive theological reflection and action on the Economy of Life. It is envisaged that this engagement will include reflection within church communities, joint work with partners and focused interfaith dialogue.

Economy of Life as an expression of Koinonia

The Economy of Life embodies God's vision of koinonia,¹ where healthy communities flourish in peace and harmony with one another and with God's creation (Acts 2:42-47). It is a place where all have a dignified, clean and safe place to live and die among family and friends who love and share life with them; where work has dignity and wages are fair and just; where all the Earth's beings – microbes, plants, and humpback whales; seas, lakes, rivers and skies; the depths of the Earth and the hidden waters – live in the integrity God has made; where justice is done, mercy is loved, and all walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

In today's world, we do not see God's vision of koinonia. In the midst of the poverty, suffering, oppression, economic exploitation, and abuse of power that shape life for the majority of the

¹ The essential meaning of the Greek word 'koinonia' (κοινωνία) is community, communion, joint participation and sharing.

world's people, as well as the torture and increasing death of the Earth and all her beings, God weeps with us in our pain and vulnerability.

At the same time, we see God in the lives and resilience of the people who are challenging the powers of death and oppression. We register many initiatives where churches are working for the wellbeing of their communities. We hear God calling us to live out our faith by working together to create the Economy of Life for the Earth and all her beings, for justice and peace, for koinonia. In deepening our commitment to shape the Economy of Life, we must recognize each other's struggles and invite each other to concrete action.

For the last seven years, the WCC's Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) and Poverty, Wealth and Ecology (PWE) processes have examined the connections between prevailing neoliberal capitalist economic structures and the ensuing, simultaneous creation of vast wealth for a tiny minority, agonizing and increasing poverty for billions of people, and the destruction of the Earth and her resources. In response, the 10th WCC Assembly held in Busan in 2013 called for a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

This document, developed in 2014 by an international gathering of church representatives, companions from the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu traditions, and peoples' resistance organizations, responds to that call with an Invitation to Theological Reflection and Action by churches, congregations, communities of resistance, people's movements, civil society groups, theological colleges, seminaries, and our sisters and brothers in other faith traditions.

God's Justice and Peace

God's justice is at the core of the Economy of Life, which is measured by the quality of life of those dwelling in the margins (Matthew 10:42). It widens the circle of inclusion to embrace all who have been pushed to the edges by economies of profit and competition. It is an economy of collaboration, a caring economy which lifts up the values of solidarity, mutual interdependence and relationships. It is embedded in society and ecology, and guarantees that all people and creatures live in dignity. It is nurtured by ethics and aesthetics. Peace is its fruit.

The Economy of Life cares for land and sea, the whole inhabited Earth, which has its own God-given integrity. It is against the commoditisation of all aspects of nature, including water, air, forests and other commons. The bounty of creation is not a commodity to be plundered; rather it is a divine gift to celebrate life through mutual sharing. The Economy of Life is where all creation glorifies God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, so that all may reach fullness of life (John 10:10). It is therefore the foretaste of the reign of God, where we celebrate life in the midst of the 'impossibility of life' through our commitment to radical restructuring of the prevailing economic order.

As we witness in many parts of our planet, economic expansion and an improved macro economy do not automatically lead to a better life for people. Thus the Economy of Life is not reduced to growing Gross National Product, but rather is based on responsible consumption,

just distribution, sustainable production and investment. God invites us to enjoy the abundance of nature, but not at the expense of people, other living beings and the Earth herself. The Israelites in the wilderness learned that the 'manna economy' requires that we only take what we need for the day (Exodus 16:13-30). The 'manna economy' of 'enough' teaches us to limit our consumption because all we accumulate will evaporate and decay, no matter how rigidly we grasp it.

Solidarity as Baptismal Experience

The Economy of Life is founded on just relationships between peoples, recognizing common vulnerabilities between peoples, and accompanying struggles of people in different parts of the world. It is a relational economy. As Christians we are called to go beyond abstract and distant-from-daily-life generalizations to concrete engagement, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. We are called to solidarity, not charitable 'mission projects.' We must dare dying to our own cultural contexts so that we do not merely hear, but act in solidarity with struggling people in our communities, our countries and the groaning world.

In the Economy of Life, we are joined to all other human beings, all the beings of God's creation, including the Earth herself, by our baptism into Christ. Each of us is part of a web of relationships which connect that butterfly in China with the entire atmosphere of the Earth, all her oceans, mountains, fields and rivers, deserts and anacondas and the deep mysteries of her physical body – rocks, lava, and water, magma, metals and precious minerals. We are not removed from the Earth through baptism, but bound in Christ to the whole created reality in whose midst we live and on which we physically depend for our continued existence.

For those of us living in locations of power and privilege – through class, gender, race, caste, etcetera – solidarity is a spiritual and political expression through which we immerse ourselves in the life stories of communities who struggle for life in the midst of the 'impossibility of life' and then act together with, not simply for, our sisters and brothers. Solidarity is an essential part of our baptismal experience, because in our vows we publicly denounce and reject the lordship of all imperial powers over our lives, declaring that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of our lives. We witness our faith in the God of Life, not the gilded sham of the market, by living in a spirit of repentance, reparation, and solidarity. More than life-style changes informed by stewardship, and charity inspired by philanthropy, our baptismal confession of Christ as Lord requires a commitment to join the pilgrimage to God's Economy of Life for all beings on this Earth, and for the Earth herself.

The Economy of Life is a culture of compassionate justice where those of us in the more affluent sections of society live out our faith in God through solidarity: transforming privilege, divesting from life-denying corporations, living more simply, standing with and supporting peoples' and workers' movements, engaging in fair trade practices, supporting local alternative economies and community-oriented agriculture, and challenging our governments and global financial and economic organizations in all possible ways.

Transforming Power

In the Economy of Life, power is shared as a system of checks and balances, and all people – regardless of class, gender, race, caste, sexual orientation and religion – have a voice and participate in decision-making at all levels. Decision- and policy-making on economic matters *“must embrace those who suffer the most from systemic marginalization”* because *“nothing without them is for them.”*²

As Christians, we are called by Jesus Christ not to withdraw from the world, but to be the ‘salt’ of the Earth (Matthew 5:13) and to live out the gospel in our daily lives and work (Matthew 28:19). This means that we must not only articulate a Christian voice internally, we must also take courageous public stances. Where there is abuse of power, we must as Christians raise a common voice, reminding our public authorities and institutions that their task is to ensure justice and peace in society and challenging corporations and businesses to care for people and creation.

Learning from the Margins

In building the Economy of Life, we must learn deeply from the perspectives, experiences and spiritualities of those who dwell in the margins and with whom Jesus Christ identified (Matthew 25: 40): women, indigenous peoples, Adivasis,³ migrants, people of color, refugees, Dalits,⁴ and others. How do people in the margins define and shape the Economy of Life?

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The Economy of Life casts off dualisms which separate body from spirit, belief from action, human beings from nature, economy from ecology, and which perpetuate hierarchies of domination and oppression. It rejects homogenization which denies differences in identity, ethnicity, culture, tradition, values, history and systems of governance and economics. Rather, it conserves and celebrates ways of life and economies practiced by marginalized communities. These ways of life depend on need rather than greed, and respect the integrity of all living beings who are considered of equal importance. They are rooted in the understanding that we belong to the land and the land does not belong to us, that we are all part of one wondrous organic web of life (Ubuntu and Ujamaa in Africa, Sansaeng in Korea, Sumak Kawsay in Quechua).

² WCC (2012), “Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All: A Call to Action,” retrieved from http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/agape-call-for-action-2012/economy-of-life-justice-and-peace-for-all?set_language=en.

³ The original inhabitants of India, before the Aryan Invasions.

⁴ Formerly known as ‘untouchables’ in Hindu society.

Operating for centuries outside of the colonial and neo-liberal market, these economies are often described as ‘subsistence.’ Yet these economies find wholeness and fullness in simple living, foster heterogeneity and bio-diversity, and deny both the commoditisation of life, and the profit- and competition-driven corporate market. Thus, the indigenous Quechuan concept of Sumak Kawsay *“identifies as goals the satisfaction of needs, the achievement of a dignified quality of life and death, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of all in peace and harmony with nature, the indefinite prolongation of cultures, free time for contemplation and emancipation, and the expansion and flourishing of liberties, opportunities, capacities and potentials.”*⁵

The spirituality of the Economy of Life is palpable in the practices of marginalized communities which negate dominant metaphysical, institutionalized spiritualities and subvert dogmatic narratives. The Economy of Life affirms the importance of social relationships in production and reproduction as well as the dynamics of the ‘spirituality of labor,’ that is: giving birth, nurturing children and elderly, tending the land, rearing the animals, attending to the symbiotic relationship in nature, etcetera.

The Economy of Life is where women are a part of the struggle for transformation; where generations of women: grandmothers, mothers, spouses, sisters, aunts, and daughters are valued not just as bodies but as sacred beings; where early priestesses, Mudangs (Korea), Babaylans (Philippines), the Ranis (Naga Tribes in India,) are remembered; where women's movements are supported and celebrated. The Economy of Life denounces the feminization of labor and the commodification of female bodies.

The Economy of Life is where Adivasis, tribals, Dalits, women and all who are marginalized create, nurture and uphold life; raise and teach children to become prophets and human rights advocates who will defend their communities; promote resistance, solidarity, and interdependence in perspectives and practice. It is where the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy, racism and capitalism is exposed and denounced. Black theologies of liberation have deconstructed the centrality and racial supremacy of the West, empowering people of color to wield their political and collective power to seek social change.

Women, indigenous peoples, Turtle Island First Nations, Adivasis, migrants, people of color, Dalits and others offer wisdom and knowledge evident in their storytelling, traditions and ways of living which enable creative imagination and bold action towards an Economy of Life. We must listen attentively to their voices *“to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying,”*⁶ and we must deepen our accompaniment and support for their struggles for life.

⁵ Ramirez, Rene, Ecuador’s National Buen Vivir Plan, cited in Irene Leon (2010), “Re-significaciones, cambios societales y alternativas civilizatorias,” *America Latina en Movimiento* #457, Alai, Quito, July 2010.

⁶ WCC (2012), “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism is Changing Landscapes,” retrieved from file:///C:/Users/Athena%20Peralta/Downloads/Together_towards_Life.pdf.

Working with Other Faith Communities

The world's religious communities call us to remember life-affirming economies recorded in alternative sources of people's history, such as the early Christian practice of sharing for the common good and similar alternative economies in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity value renunciation and detachment, for the basic precept is that though we are 'in' the world we are not to be 'of' the world. Both body and spirit are to be nurtured in service to God's vision of justice and peace. In practice, or in economic terms, renunciation and detachment mean returning or reinvesting surplus and profits into serving the common good of the community. These practices mean the circulation and recirculation of surplus and profits of economic activities into sustaining and enhancing the material and spiritual well-being of the community. Attachment to material goods leads to the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, whereas detachment leads to its recirculation back into nurturing the common good. Theologically and ontologically, renunciation means to be detached from the material, i.e. the relative and the unreal because it passes away and to be attached only to the Absolute and the Real (Luke 12:15).

Whereas our dominant global culture emphasizes attachment and greed, all major faith traditions value renunciation and detachment. In Buddhism the goal is The Good Life, which is living in detachment. In Hinduism the contemporary challenge of more affirmative modes of renunciation links renunciation to elevating the quality of life in people. In Islam detachment is related to good work and right livelihood, such that we detach ourselves from and renounce any form of oppression, injustice and exploitation of our neighbors in the course of earning our sustenance.

The deregulation of markets in the last three decades has allowed the build-up of a system which promotes insatiable consumption of human and natural resources and thus ever-growing economic and social imbalances. Today, just 67 people own half the world's wealth. Our religious traditions have long warned us against the greed that leads to this, and encourage the development of local community-based economies rather than the hyper-individualized economic structures we have today. We must work together across religions to dismantle systems of relentless accumulation and to link our local economies, employing values in our religious traditions that will enable nurturing and sustainable economies.

Living Out the Economy of Life, Justice and Peace: Where Koinonia and Our Baptismal Confession Meet

The WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is a journey calling us to that time and those places where we are able to come together in solidarity to struggle for liberation, to learn from and teach one another about how we know God in our lives and communities, and to discern how to live together more simply as disciples of Christ who have renounced the 'lords' of the world and are called to live well (Buen Vivir), rather than to live better.

1. Koinonia – respect for neighbour

Glimpses of koinonia are present in our life together in community, in our laughter, and when we reach out to stand together to keep dignity and hope alive. All theology arises out of our life experience and community (contextual theology). There is power in talking together about how God is working in our midst to create new forms of human solidarity and to probe the boundaries of how we are called to live out our life in Christ and our faith in actions.

Invitation to the congregations:

What is the context in which our congregation lives? Where in our community do we encounter violence, oppression, suffering, and exclusion that prevent us from embodying koinonia? Are we the oppressor, the oppressed or both? What is God saying to our community about how we address these problems? What do our baptismal vows require of us? What is God calling us to do as disciples of Jesus in these situations? How are we doing this today and what is hindering us?

2. Solidarity and interdependence of Earth community

God's community, the koinonia, includes all of God's creation, human and non-human creatures. Listening to the stories, theologies, and witness of others – the Earth community, our interfaith neighbors, our partner churches from around the world – is a necessary part of knowing ourselves in community and understanding our interdependence as a human and ecological community. Koinonia calls us to be accountable to God and each other.

Invitation to the congregations:

Who are our neighbors, near and far? Do we know them? In what ways do or can we talk and learn with and from them? Where are our prejudices and who are we not listening to? How are we working together on community issues with other churches, faith communities, people's movements, and labor organizations and what can we learn in the process? With whom are we united in Christ? How do we expand the boundaries of who we deem to be our neighbors? How are we making community with others and what is hindering us?

3. Respect and care for creation

Koinonia requires our attention and care, not only for our human neighbors but also for the whole earth community. It requires us as well to respect nature as a sacred gift from God which we are called not to exploit and destroy, but to defend, nurture and heal. The loving-care that God displays in the creation story of Genesis is inspiration for our own role as care-takers, guardians, trustees, stewards of the Earth. In an industrial and technologically advanced world we must relearn from those who remember how to tread more lightly on the earth and how to live in harmony with the natural world. We must also be aware as of our accountability to God for the gift of creation and for maintaining it for future generations of all living beings.

Invitation to the congregations:

What impact do our lives (individually and collectively) have on the Earth? How are we involved in changing our lifestyles and our church's behavior so that we tread more lightly on the Earth? How might we learn from indigenous communities and 'subsistence'-oriented societies about how to order our lives and societies differently so that we might begin to live in more

sustainable ways? What theological resources help us to think about our relationship with the natural world? How can urban dwelling people reconnect with nature and what is hindering us?

4. What kind of transformation do we need?

Living into koinonia requires the radical experience of *metanoia* or transformation that will allow us to live together in new ways that reflect justice and peace. Spiritual practices such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, hospitality, tithing, fasting, liturgy, worship, and prayer, among others, can help communities develop healthy theologies and spiritualities that reflect an Economy of Life.

Invitation to the congregations:

What changes are necessary in our understanding of church, sin, lifestyle, blessing? What do we (personally and as congregations) need to confess? How is God affirming and challenging us? How do our understandings of grace, salvation, resurrection, and justice inform and/or distort our lives and our spiritual practices? What do our baptismal vows require of us in our current context? How are we transformed by our life in Christ to an Economy of Life and what is hindering us?

How might we be transformed by this Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace into a new and daring manifestation of the body of Christ in the world? Into a global Economy of Life founded on just and accountable relationships between all Earth's peoples, with all the beings of God's creation, and with the Earth herself?

"Behold, I have set before you today life and well-being, death and adversity Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19b).