

Poverty Wealth and Ecology

1) The Poverty Wealth and Ecology (PWE) process has taken a number of years. It was a participatory process and involved several 'layers' of the broader ecumenical movement: representatives of the WCC member churches, ecumenical organisations, and experts of all continents of the world.

Parallel to this, a meeting in Sao Paulo was held, in October last year, on the international financial system, organised by the WCC, WCRC and CWM.

I will briefly say something about the outcome of these two processes and conclude with expressing my hope for the Busan Assembly.

2) The AGAPE process – Alternative Globalisation Addressing People and Earth – came to an end at the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006. The results of that process were not supported by all the member churches of the WCC, and it was decided to engage in a follow-up process under the name Poverty, Wealth and Ecology (PWE).

3) Poverty-related and ecological issues were not new on the agenda of the ecumenical movement. What **was** interesting was that the issue of 'wealth' was added. This followed a recommendation that came out of a study process of APRODEV, according to which churches should make an effort to try to define a 'wealth line' in addition to an already well established 'poverty line'. We know more or less what the minimum level of income is below which people will simply not survive, but are there also limits to the gathering of wealth? And, if so, how could such limits be defined? In other words, poverty and wealth need to be seen in connection with each other. In the context of the PWE process, a special "greed line" working group was set up to explore that issue. Their report should be out by now but I have not yet seen it.

4) I live under no illusion that it would be possible to define a universally valid 'wealth line' that would be applicable in all the different contexts in the world. Each and every situation needs a different approach. Nevertheless, the idea to try to establish limits is very Biblical. In the Exodus story we read about the people of Israel who received the manna but could not gather more than one *omer* per day (except for the Sabbath). The notions of the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year are also about setting limits to the gathering of possessions. We cannot imitate the rules given to the people of Israel but we can try to follow them, and assess what those rules may mean in our time and age and in our different situations.

5) The PWE process consisted of a number of regional studies and consultation that took place from 2007 to 2011, and which culminated in a global consultation in Bogor, Indonesia, in 2012. That consultation produced the document *Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All*. Among other things, the document refers to over-consumption and growing inequalities. It reminds us that 'good life' lies not in the competitive quest for possessions, the accumulation of wealth, fortresses and stockpiles of armaments to provide for our security. Rather, our concept of 'good life' is modelled by the communion of the Trinity in mutuality, shared partnership, reciprocity, justice and loving kindness.

The one-side belief that social benefits automatically follow from economic growth is misguided, according to the document. What we need is a "transformative spirituality" that helps us to discover the grace of being satisfied with enough, while sharing with those in need.

6) The document ends with a Call to radical transformation. The Bogor document asks the Busan Assembly to set aside a period of between now and the next Assembly for churches to focus on faith commitments to an *Economy of Life – Living for God’s Justice in Creation*. The process is envisioned as a flourishing space where churches can learn from each other and from other faith traditions and social movements what an economy of life could look like.

#### The Sao Paulo document

7) A second major resource document for the Assembly comes from a meeting that was held in Brazil, in 2012. The meeting was organised by the WCC, WCRC and CWM. It gathered economists, politicians, church leaders and activists, and resulted in *The Sao Paulo Statement: International Financial Transformation for the Economy of Life*. The meeting showed that the ecumenical movement is still capable to bring together some top economists, political scientists and politicians. The document that emerged contains a well-informed ecumenical plan of action and landmarks for a new international financial and economic architecture. The main objective of the necessary overhaul of the governance of the world economy is to ensure that financial markets and the economy are brought under the primacy of democratic decision-making structures and that they function as good servants rather than bad masters in political and economic life. In this context, it was recommended that a global ecumenically instituted commission be formed to carry forward the valuable work that was started on these topics by the Stiglitz Commission.

8) On some of the issues raised in the Sao Paulo document, some progress can already be seen, e.g.

- after a campaign of many years, we can now see how several countries in Europe are making plans to establish a Financial Transaction Tax;
- tomorrow, the European Parliament will discuss the plan to limit the bonuses paid to bankers to a maximum of a one-year salary;
- the Tax Justice movement is gathering steam;
- tax evasion is now squarely on the agenda of the OECD;
- more and more people are thinking of establishing criteria for welfare that go beyond rates of economic growth and try to identify key issues that are important for well-being or, to say it in Biblical terms, ‘life in all its fullness’.

#### My hope for the Assembly

9) It is my hope for Busan is that political-economic issues that came out of these two (and other) documents will not be dealt with in a separate corner of the Assembly but that they will, in an effort to look at things in a holistic way, permeate other important issues that are on the agenda, notable issues related to **Mission**, and **Faith & Order**.

10) The relation between political-economic issues and **mission** is clear. It is not so difficult to discern how, in economic life, we are surrounded by false gods and idols who are worshipped and who demand sacrifices. If mission is about inviting people to turn away from idols and to turn to the living God, economic life is a mission field for the churches.

The WCC Assembly in Canberra, 1990, spoke about ‘mission in foreign structures’. Let’s try to unwrap that and include that in the discussions we will have in Busan about mission.

11) Another core concern for the WCC relates to issues concerning **Faith & Order**. Again, that is an area which cannot be isolated from AGAPE and PWE issues. The WCC Assembly in Nairobi, 1975, said that “economic structures may obscure the confession of Christ... while we confess a Christ who frees and unites, the economic structures in which we live tend to enslave to wealth and divide.” Seen in this light, economics is even a confessional issue; it is a matter of faith. And if this is so, such

issues have to be inserted in discussions around Faith and Order themes. Oikumene, economics (and ecology) stem from the same Greek word 'oikos'. If only for that reason, economic issues also have ecclesial dimensions. The ideals of the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind cannot be separated from each other. Just as the Lord's Prayer is about spiritual and material issues (daily bread and debt), Faith & Order issues relate to the spiritual and material realms of life. The church as 'koinonia' is called to share not only in the suffering of its own community but in the suffering of all. The very being, 'esse', of the Church is at stake. I hope that message will come out loud and clear at the Busan Assembly.

12. In 1993, a commendable effort was undertaken by Faith & Order and the church & society arm of the WCC to explore the ecclesial dimensions of our concerns for justice, peace and creation. The result was an excellent study paper called "Costly Unity. Koinonia and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation". Now 20 years later, the global scene has changed dramatically. This would warrant, in my view, to engage in a process on "Costly Unity – 20 years on".

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