

Changing Social and Economic Context

17. The scandal of poverty and growing inequality

Poverty threatens life and human dignity. It is not a destiny, but the very result of the methods and structures of wealth creation and distribution of wealth in individual societies and worldwide. Inequality increases not by accident, but by the way economic and political processes are structured and function. Poverty undermines the very basis of life of billions of children, women and men who are denied not only the benefits of growing wealth, but even of access to basic necessities of life. Over-consumption and over-development on the one side correspond to hunger, disease and suffering on the other.

The Bible reminds Christians of God's agape love and calls for the sharing of gifts and resources so that all may have life. Seen from the perspective of the biblical notion of justice and of God's preferential option for the poor, inequality and poverty are a scandal. The word of God through Amos decries those who "practice deceit with balances" and "who buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 8:5f.). Jesus challenges the rich to share their resources with the poor - he is asking them to go beyond what is practised today as charity. "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me" (Luke 18:22b) Justice for the poor is, therefore the biblical yardstick by which any economic system can be tested. This faith conviction calls us to act resolutely to work for a world free of poverty and inequality.

A number of ecumenical reflections on Christianity, wealth and poverty have argued for a sharper focus on the scandal of the growing gap between rich and poor and increasing inequality. We need to engage ourselves on what we can concretely do to ensure that resources are justly shared. Can the sharing of resources among and within our churches be revisited and made more just and transparent? Do we have a specific ministry to the rich urging them to share resources? What examples for transforming structures that create poverty can we share?. How can our churches contribute to developing credible alternatives?

To contribute to transformation is not easy. The complexity of the context needs careful processes of discernment so as to identify the main actors and how they contribute to a web of oppression and exclusion, so as to determine actions that need to be taken by individuals, communities and the churches.

The **first session** will reflect on the way wealth creation results in the scandal of poverty today and provide an opportunity for participants to discern the main factors that contribute to the growing inequity and to scandal of poverty at national, regional and international level.

The **second session** will share specific examples of church action, advocacy and accompaniment to overcome inequality and poverty either directly or in making alliance with other actors. The objective will be to highlight best practices and reflect on lessons that can be drawn and shared with the ecumenical fellowship learned.

The **third session** will look at different ways by which the ecumenical movement could commit itself to and get more boldly involved in promoting transformations that will address the scandal of poverty from a theological, ethical and political perspective, at local and global levels.

18. Overcoming health threats to humanity in the context of HIV and AIDS

One of the unique features of Christianity is the identification and practice of healing as one of the four pillars of sharing the good news along with preaching, teaching and nurturing (Matt. 4:23 and 25:41-45). This is grounded in the holistic vision of achieving fullness of life for all. The people of God are called to be effective channels of the healing and transforming power of God's love for all humanity.

The context of iniquity and injustice in which we live today is making humanity susceptible to health threats as never before. Despite great progress in the technical aspects of the prevention and cure of many diseases, access to health care remains practically impossible for the majority of the world population. Preventable diseases such as HIV and AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis are still causing massive death and

suffering among the poor and the most vulnerable (an estimated 6 million people die each year of these diseases). At the same time there is a global increase in chronic illnesses often related to life-style and behaviour.

In a rapidly changing world, poverty, illiteracy or oppressive patriarchal societal structures continue their suffocating influence on the health status of our human family. And, tragically, many newer challenges are emerging, calling on our churches to find relevant and appropriate responses that would contribute to overcoming the health threats of today. In order to refer our reflection to a concrete reality, so as to be able to discern specific ways forward, we will focus the ecumenical conversation within the context of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and look at some of the fundamental questions that our churches need to address.

How can we renew our theological and ethical perspectives in dealing with this disease holistically? The need to address issues of stigma, discrimination and marginalization with determination and courage continues to challenge us. How are our churches applying the body of experience and the spiritual and theological resources they have, at the pulpit, in theological formation or in renewed liturgies?

In the situation where a whole generation has been wiped out and orphans are heading households, are congregations equipped and able to be caring communities? What is the experience of churches in become welcoming communities, promoting meaningful participation of people living with HIV and AIDS in our churches and societies?

Our effectiveness in advocating for equitable access to education, prevention, care & treatment for all and in addressing the fundamental issues of gender inequity and poverty will be addressed too.

The **first session** will provide an overview on how the HIV and AIDS pandemic exposes in an unprecedented manner the vulnerabilities of our societies. The participants will reflect on the diverse impacts of the disease and the varying responses (including denial and silence) in their own church and society contexts.

The **second session** will provide opportunities for participants from different regions to share experiences, best practices and models for change and advocacy undertaken by their churches locally, nationally and internationally.

The **third session** will suggest ways forward on how the fellowship of Churches can best live the healing ministry and strengthen cooperation among us and with the civil society.

19. Witnessing to the sanctity of life: bio-ethics and the challenges of new technologies

What does it mean to be human and to be part of God's creation? Responses that seemed to be clear and unshakeable for centuries are severely challenged by new scientific and technological developments. Genetic engineering, for instance, added a new dimension to the capabilities of humankind to modify and change the development of ourselves and other species. Genetic technologies touch our deepest convictions about the value of human life and human dignity. Often religious language is invoked in public: "We learn the language in which God created life" was the claim made when the mapping of the whole set of human genes began.

The ecumenical movement addressed some of these concerns as part of a study process that culminated in the 1979 conference on "Faith, Science and the Future". In the meantime, churches have wrestled with the often difficult and divisive ethical questions concerning the beginning and ending of human life and have engaged with the newly evolving challenges of rapidly developing technologies. Genetically modified seeds are now available. Cloning, stem cell research and pre-implantation diagnostics are possible now.

Confronted with these challenges we need to go further in searching common ground for the churches witness to the world. How do we assess the new possibilities? Do we see them as opportunities or risks for the future of life? How do we address justice issues involved such as unequal access to technologies and the allocation of resources away from most urgent needs?

How do our beliefs and convictions concerning the sanctity of life inform our reflection and action? It is important to look again at the biblical witness. What is the deeper meaning of the tradition that human beings are made in the image of God and life is a gift of God (Gen. 1). Human lives are not at the disposal of human goals or wishes. We understand what it means to be human in the light of Jesus Christ as the one human being in whom God's creative will for humankind and all creation was revealed (John 1).

This ecumenical conversation will provide an opportunity to exchange experiences and lessons learned by churches and ecumenical partners in addressing the challenges of new technologies; e.g., genetic engineering and the more recent developments in the area of nano-technology, the very small-scale technologies in the nano-meter area that attract much attention and research funding for a very wide range of possible applications. A number of these applications are of special concern to persons with disabilities.

The **first session** will invite to dialogue concerning the different issues our churches are struggling with and on to the ethical challenges these questions pose to the churches and their respective society. Identifying some of the most complex and divisive issues, it will at the same time explore common ground for addressing the challenges of new technologies. Persons with disabilities will share their perspective on these issues.

The **second session** will focus on instructive examples of churches responses to these ethical challenges and on models for reflection and witness in the wider public.

The **third session** will focus on the question how churches can better listen to each other and walk together in their search, developing their own responses fully aware of the ways how others approach the issues, thus learning from each other and strengthening common ground.

20. Co-existence in God's creation: caring for the earth's resources

Many of the challenges facing the world today, highlight the need for churches to be actively engaged in the search for better ways to relate to

the earth and to balance our human needs with care for all life. Our understandings of how we view God as Creator, and God's purpose for creation, are also integral to the way in which we seek to be the church in solidarity with struggles for life and "life in all its fullness". The creation stories (Gen. 1-2), but also Psalms (Ps. 24, 104) and other books of the Bible remind us that we are part of the earth community, God's household of life.

As we are called to challenge the dominant economic paradigms of the world today, that exploit both the earth's resources and human labour and creativity, these issues present some of the most important ethical concerns facing humankind. For the poor and the marginalized, these concerns are matters of life or death as they are the most exposed to pollution, more frequent and violent storms, changing rainfall patterns and other forms of disasters. Environmental degradation and dramatic loss of bio-diversity are the legacy that we leave to our children and to the generations to come. Caring for the earth's resources is indeed closely linked to our commitment to justice.

Indigenous peoples' struggles for land and identity, farmers' engagement for sustainable agriculture, action to curb climate change, and peoples' initiatives to defend their rights to water, are just a few key examples for relevant and vital engagement for transformation. Such transformation is urgently needed, especially as people struggle with these crises that threaten their very existence. Churches together with relevant social movements have engaged these concerns at a local level and internationally with ecumenical partners and organizations.

What kind of actions, do we want to support and strengthen concerning the struggles for vital resources of life? How do we promote understanding of care for God's creation in our Christian education ministries? Together with people of other faiths, how can we best deepen the discussion on the relationship between ecojustice and social justice, recognizing that the struggle for a sustainable livelihoods is a struggle for a sustainable humanity?

The **first session** will give an assessment of the major ecological concerns facing the world today, and how our diverse understandings of the

relationship between theology/spirituality and ecology/economy inform our actions in our local contexts.

The **second session** will provide opportunities for participants to share how churches, in their local contexts are addressing the ecological concerns - sharing experience, best practices and models for change and advocacy.

The **third session** will propose ideas and directions for just and environmentally sound teaching and practice in faith communities, focusing on how the fellowship of churches can best strengthen cooperation in promoting just and sustainable alternatives.

21. The agenda of racism: a priority for the churches?

In spite of the fact that we all belong to one human race, racism as a social construction is a reality. Incidents of racial violence are happening every day, everywhere in the world and are reported by the media. In the recent past an alarming increase of racist practices and attitudes has been recorded, notably in Europe, but the problem exists in all continents. Is any country free of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia? Racial violence is only the tip of the iceberg - racism manifests itself in many forms both overt and covert.

The victory against the institutional form of racism that was apartheid in South Africa did not mean that racism had been defeated in the rest of the world. Systemic and structural forms of racism, profoundly integrated in societies continue unabated; for example, the discrimination and oppression of Dalits, Roma, Indigenous peoples and of Africans and people of African descent. Racism is becoming more pervasive and complex as it is increasingly interconnected with the widespread phenomenon of migration and with many other economic, political, social and ideological factors. It grows and festers in situations of tension and conflicts and accompanies the polarization of extremisms, be they religious, nationalistic or ethnocentric. These factors can explain the resurgence of antisemitism in Europe, more than fifty years after the end of the second world war.

Indeed racism remain a crucial issue for our time. But is it still a priority in the agenda of our churches? Several decades ago the ecumenical movement condemned racism and called it a sin. Our many Christian traditions have continually affirmed that "all human beings - regardless of religion, race, national origin, colour, creed, or gender - are living icons of God, innately worthy of respect and dignity. Whenever human beings fail to treat others and creation with this respect, they insult God, the Creator" (statement of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew). Yet, the situation is as challenging as ever for the churches who are faced by a number of serious questions: How are we and our churches living out that commitment? How can we and our churches continue to advocate for and express concrete solidarity with those affected by racism and by racist immigration policies? Have we been able to address racism in our own churches' structures and institutions? How can we and our churches deal with memories of past racist discrimination caused by some missions and by ex-colonial powers?

The **first session** will focus on discerning the present trends of racism in the world today. Participants will share experiences and reflection from their own contexts and listen to stories of hope and struggle, including the claim for reparations, from people who experience racist discrimination today .

The **second session** will address the question of the churches involvement to overcome racism. It will lift up stories of good practice, as well the difficulties faced by our churches. It will give visibility to actions taken by our churches to live out transformative justice and to address some of the historical wrongs they have experienced. It will include a theological reflection on a racially just and inclusive world.

The **third session** will reflect on how we should and could equip ourselves and our churches to further their engagement in overcoming racism in all its forms.

22. Zero tolerance for violence against women and children

Each day more stories of violence against women and children hit the

media. The World Health Organization releases a world report on violence and health which records that intimate partner violence occurs in all countries irrespective of social, economic, religious or cultural background. The statistics are startling to say the least - in 48 population based surveys 10-69 percent of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives. The issue of clergy sexual abuse and of pedophilia in the church cannot be hidden any more and is reported from different parts of the world.

For nearly two decades the issue of violence against women and children has been in the agenda of the churches. Sexual violence is understood theologically and ethically as "sin". Such a conviction has guided the commitments of many churches in addressing violence against women and children. And yet, women in the church today have to ask again and again the question "How long are we to speak about this? When will we be heard?"

At the heart of the problem is the abuse of patriarchal power which leads to violent behaviour as a mechanism to control women. Theology, the Bible, church teachings and practices have all been abused by some to legitimise violent behaviour. The psalmist reminds us that, "It is not enemies who taunt me... it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I have kept pleasant company" (Ps. 55), which describes well the hurt women feel when it is someone who they trust betrays the relationship. But if violence were a biological imperative in men, all men would be violent, and they are not. Many men have become part of movements to reclaim positive images of masculinity as decent, loving, responsible and respectful and as people who do not harm women and are willing to work with other men to redress this historical wrong.

This ecumenical conversation will bring some of these burning issues to the table.

What are the obstacles that still remain in our churches and societies to allow these widespread trends of violence against women and children to continue unabated? Do our churches through their theology and practice contribute in any way to promote, or condone violence against women and children? Jesus demonstrated a new understanding of power - how can the church in its own life model this? How can the teaching, preaching and forms of leadership of the church and its pastoral and practical responses

be transformed, so that women and children will find advocates, support and sanctuary in the church?

The **first session** will assess the present trends of the violence against women and children in our churches and societies. Participants will share experiences and reflections from their own contexts and identify the key concerns that the churches should take further at local, national and international level.

The **second session** will reflect on how our churches address - or fail to address - these concerns. We will address the theological imperative to overcome violence against women and children and will listen to actions by women in addressing violence. It will also listen to good examples of men's initiatives in overcoming violence against women and the challenges before men in the churches. Space will be given to the sharing of good practices of the churches in responding to this issue.

The **third session** will focus on looking at ways forward to engage our churches further in their efforts to overcome violence against women and children, and to become both transformed by a renewed commitment to the gospel imperative and agents of transformation in their societies.