

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 10<sup>th</sup> WCC Assembly's call to a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace initiates activities by WCC member churches and ecumenical partners on many different levels.<sup>1</sup> The Bogor Statement, "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All: A Call to Action," presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All" is an urgent appeal to the churches to respond to the concerns of communities of the world who are facing unprecedented financial and economic crises, the threat of climate change and widespread ecological devastation. 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 27<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> 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, among others, 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 people 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 justice is done, mercy is loved, and all walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8); and where the Earth's beings – microbes, plants, and humpback whales; seas, lakes, rivers and skies; the depths of the Earth

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<sup>1</sup> World Council of Churches or WCC (2013), "Message of the 10th Assembly of the WCC: Join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/message-of-the-wcc-10th-assembly>).

<sup>2</sup> WCC (2012), "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All: A Call to Action" ([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](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)).

<sup>3</sup> The essential meaning of the Greek word 'koinonia' (κοινωνία) is community, communion, joint participation and sharing.

and the hidden waters – live in the integrity God has made. Indeed, each of us is part of a web of relationships which connect a 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 bound in Christ to the whole created reality in whose midst we live and on which we physically depend for our continued existence.

In today's world, we do not see God's vision of koinonia. The liberalization and deregulation of markets over the last three decades as part of the sweeping processes of neoliberal globalization have allowed the build-up of a system which promotes insatiable consumption of human and natural resources and thus ever-growing economic, social and ecological imbalances. Today, just 67 people own half the world's wealth. Religious traditions of the world have long warned us against the greed that leads to this utter disruption of the divine vision. In the midst of the poverty, suffering, oppression, economic exploitation, and abuse of power that shape life for the majority of the 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 with religious and secular communities for the wellbeing of their neighbors. 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 this Economy of Life as an alternative to dominant economic forces and structures, we must recognize each other's struggles and invite each other to concrete action.

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, contesting the manufacture and trade of weapons of mass destruction, and challenging our governments and global financial and economic organizations in all possible ways.

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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 on the Economy of Life 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). The Economy of Life 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 cooperation and collaboration, a caring economy which lifts up the values of solidarity, mutual inter-dependence and relationships. It is embedded in society and ecology, and guarantees that all people and creatures live in dignity. It is nourished 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 commoditization 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 in the common good. 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 their common vulnerabilities, and accompanying the struggles of people in different parts of the world. It is a relational economy. The Economy of Life calls us to go beyond abstract and distant-from-daily-life generalizations to concrete engagement, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. We are called to relationships of solidarity that witness to justice and social transformation, not charitable 'mission projects.' We must dare dying to our own economic privilege so that we do not merely hear, but act in solidarity with struggling people in our communities, our countries and the groaning world.

The various Christian understandings of baptism reflect such a dying. St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, spoke of baptism as being *“buried in Christ, and rising again to a new life”* (Romans 6:4). Such a death we interpret as referring to renunciation of economic privilege, and such a rising we interpret as referring to a turning away (metanoia) from a life devoted to consumerism and accumulation to one of detachment. Religious traditions across the centuries have valued renunciation and detachment – as demonstrated by the livelihood of most religious founders, leaders, saints and gurus.

In the Economy of Life, we are joined to all other human beings, all beings in God’s creation, including the Earth herself in deep solidarity. Deep solidarity is an essential part of our baptismal experience. For those of us living in locations of power and privilege – through class, gender, race, caste, etcetera – it is a spiritual and political expression through which we immerse ourselves in 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. It is a decisive act of publicly denouncing and rejecting the lordship of all imperial powers over our lives, and publicly declaring that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of our lives, and not the gilded sham of the market. We demonstrate such a witness 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 towards God’s Economy of Life for all beings on this planet, and for the Earth herself.

### **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, indigenous identity and religion – have a voice and participate in decision-making at all levels. Decision- and policy-making on economic matters must genuinely *“embrace those who suffer the most from systemic marginalization”* because *“nothing without them is for them.”*<sup>4</sup>

At his glorious ascension, our Lord Jesus Christ promised to his disciples an outpouring of power (Acts 1:8). Transforming power is God’s promise that we may fearlessly live out, speak out and build a base of powerful people called to resist and subvert the destructive hegemony of economies of death. Though not without risk or cost, we must as Christians take courageous public stances, and where there is abuse of power, raise a common voice, demanding from public authorities and institutions a commitment to ensure justice and peace in society and challenging corporations and businesses to care for people and creation.

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<sup>4</sup> WCC (2012), “Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All: A Call to Action” ([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](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)).

## 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): the impoverished, women, indigenous peoples, Adivasis,<sup>5</sup> migrants, people of color, war victims and refugees, Dalits,<sup>6</sup> and others. These communities are forced to bear the heavier brunt of intertwined economic and ecological crises because of their experience of subalternity,<sup>7</sup> challenging us to consistently combine our struggles for economic and ecological justice with struggles against patriarchy, sexism, racism, casteism and militarism. How do people in the margins define and shape the Economy of Life?

Adivasis, tribals, Dalits, women and other marginalized communities recognize the Economy of Life as a place to 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. It is informed by Black theologies of liberation that 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.

Their vision of the Economy of Life casts off dualisms which separate body from spirit, belief from action, human beings from nature, economy from ecology, male from female, and which perpetuate hierarchies of domination and oppression. The Economy of Life rooted in justice and egalitarianism affirms the indispensable role that women play as 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.

A holistic Economy of Life 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 (a principle present in many communities, such as Ubuntu and Ujamaa in Africa, Sansaeng in Korea, Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay in South America).

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<sup>5</sup> Adivasis ('original inhabitants' in Hindi) comprise the ethnic and indigenous tribes in India.

<sup>6</sup> Formerly known as 'untouchables' in Hindu society.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'subalternity' refers to a condition of subordination brought about by colonization or other forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and/or cultural dominance (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/Subalternity-and-Representation/index-viewby=title.html>).

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 commoditization 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.”*<sup>8</sup>

The spirituality of the Economy of Life is palpable in the practices of marginalized communities which negate dominant metaphysical,<sup>9</sup> 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.

People living in poverty, 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,”*<sup>10</sup> and we must deepen our accompaniment and support for their struggles for life.

### **Working with the World’s Religious Communities**

We recall the life-affirming economies recorded in the world’s religious traditions and in alternative sources of people’s history. Stories such as the early Christian practice of sharing for the common good (Acts 2:44-46 and 4:32-35) are abundant in these sources and can inspire their followers to collaborative action.

Across the centuries religious traditions have warned their followers of the defilements of greed and attachment that lead to accumulation, and called them to lives of renunciation and detachment that promote redistribution. In economic terms, renunciation and detachment mean redistributing surplus and profits into serving the common good such that they can be reinvested into economic activities that sustain and enhance the material and spiritual well-being of the community (e.g. systems of just compensation and wages, systems of care and support for the ill and elderly, and community-operated renewable energy projects). Theologically and

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<sup>8</sup> Ramirez, Rene, Ecuador’s National Buen Vivir Plan, cited in Irene Leon (2010), “Re-significaciones, cambios sociales y alternativas civilizatorias,” *América Latina en Movimiento* #457, Alai, Quito, July 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Metaphysics concerns the study and philosophy of existence and the nature of existence – a theory of reality beyond the physical.

<sup>10</sup> WCC (2012), “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism is Changing Landscapes,” (file:///C:/Users/Athena%20Peralta/Downloads/Together\_towards\_Life.pdf).

ontologically,<sup>11</sup> 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.

The dominant economic culture sanctions and even esteems greed as a primary motivator, corrupting some of our own religious institutions. Notwithstanding this, all of the world's major religious traditions consider greed the primary spiritual problem,<sup>12</sup> and advocate renunciation and detachment as fundamental principles. Buddhism's goal of Well-Being is achieved through wisdom borne of detachment. In Hinduism the primary modes of being (student, householder, forest-dweller and wandering ascetic) build into one's seasons of life the requirement of renunciation. In Islam, the primacy of community and its common good requires followers to practice detachment, renouncing any form of oppression, injustice and exploitation of our neighbors in the course of earning our sustenance.

The religious commonality of analysis and practices on the Economy of Life create significant opportunities for Christians to work together with the world's religious and secular communities to dismantle structures of relentless accumulation and 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 neighbor**

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

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<sup>11</sup> Ontology in philosophy is about articulating the nature and structure of the world.

<sup>12</sup> The Working Group on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation at the WCC Churches Commission on International Affairs meeting in Matanzas in 2009 identified greed as violence. A joint WCC and Lutheran World Federation-sponsored Buddhist-Christian Consultation on Structural Greed in Chiang Mai in 2011 identified greed as the most enduring spiritual problem of our time. Likewise, the report of the WCC Greed Line Study Group in *The Greed Line: Report and Studies* (WCC forthcoming) also states that greed is strongly denounced in all religions.

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 neighbors of different faiths, 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 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 our communities develop healthy theologies and spiritualities that reflect and inspire courageous actions toward the 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).