

WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

GLOBAL DIALOGUE ON THE ACCRA CONFESSION

Johannesburg, 3 - 8 September 2009

MESSAGE

Introduction

In response to the urgent call to a common witness and faith commitment in the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth, adopted at the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and in continuing recognition of the urgent economic crisis and ecological destruction of our time, we write to reaffirm that the struggle for global economic justice and sustainable Earth communities is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. [Psalms 24:1]

In our continuing journey as people of faith in a God of life toward the June 2010 Uniting General Council, under the theme Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace [Ephesians 4:3], we are reminded that the reign of God calls us into hope for justice, peace, wellness, harmony and unity [Titus 3:13-14]. Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth is a testimony to just communion with God and God's creation.

From the 3rd and 8th of September 2009, church leaders, activists, pastors and theologians who share a deep commitment to justice for the economy and the earth and represent churches of the Reformed traditions and global ecumenical institutions from Africa, North and South America, Europe and Asia met in Johannesburg to reflect and dialogue on the Accra Confession.

Jesus spoke truth to power in word [Mark 7: 5, 6] and symbolic action [Mark 6: 30-44]. Jesus not only spoke and acted but also listened to the voices of those who were forced into silence by the violence of the system [John 4: 1- 26].

We, the participants of this global dialogue, listened to the voices of people who were struggling to come to terms with the neo-liberal economic realities of post-Apartheid South Africa. Some of us were witness to collective action in which the people of Soweto were organizing to resist and find new ways to reclaim their humanity. We experienced examples of people reclaiming the economy to serve the interests of the people through political action directed against the state and its collusion with corporations. We also witnessed concrete action by people who are making the state accountable to them, as well as to the church providing alternatives in places where the state had failed. Some of us were also witness to the painful violence of the poor against the poor created by an economic system that pits them against each other in the struggle for life.

We became acutely aware of the seduction of globalization and the role that it plays in co-opting even the most radical movements while at the same time insulating the privileged from the violence globalization is based on and generates.

We recognized that the present global economic crisis has exposed the inadequacy of the current system to meet the needs of the people across the globe. The crisis has unmasked the failure of the global economic system to nurture sustainable Earth communities. The “idol” has been revealed as Mammon [Mt 6:24]. People are losing jobs, homes and access to public services. The growing awareness and acceptance of the ecological crisis and its rootedness in anti-people growth economies has further exacerbated the need for organized political action for global transformation. The need for churches and people’s movements, then, is to use this crisis as an opportunity to initiate a paradigm shift in the economic system to ensure that deeper democratic institutions enhance life giving economies. The call on the churches in the present context is therefore to resist the life defeating and death dealing blows of the economics of empire and to present alternative economies that have their basis in the promise of life in its fullness for all. [John 10.10]

Reading the Signs of the Times

The Accra Confession continues to be a prophetic response to the state of the world. This is due to the dramatic effects of the global financial crisis and the unprecedented level of ecological destruction and on-going climate change. We discerned a large consensus that the neoliberal economic paradigm, leading to a culture of greed, unlimited growth and irresponsible consumption, is bankrupt.

Since Accra, we have deepened our understanding of empire, the system of death, which contradicts God’s will for life and justice for all. “We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding, even sacrificing, humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking in compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.” (Definition of empire from the Globalisation Project of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany.)

Our churches, in different forms and to various extents, have not only struggled against empire through continuing reflection, dialogue and actions for justice and peace in the economy and the earth but we have also remained complicit to empire. This complicity remains the greatest threat to our communion, to our search for unity in Christ, and is a betrayal of God’s call for compassionate justice.

We see new opportunities in this moment of Kairos, in communion with other women and men at grass-roots, national and international levels, to construct new economies of compassion, care and solidarity beyond empire.

Trinitarian Communion and Christian Justice

II Corinthian 13:13 sees Trinitarian Communion as the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the community of the Holy Spirit. More particularly, Trinitarian Communion acknowledges God as the Creator-Sustainer, Jesus Christ as the reconciler between God and humanity, humanity and humanity, and humanity and the earth, and the Holy Spirit as the ever-present power, inspiring the activity of the redeemed as doers of Christian Justice. On the one hand, we give thanks for the gift of reconciliation in Christ, and on the other, we understand that authentic faith cannot be divorced from actions for justice [Isa 28:16-17]. We come together in unity for the sake of justice [I Cor.12:26].

Because God is love we are confident in the assertion that God continues to love those who have been told repeatedly that we deserve no love [Jn 4:7 – 42]. In obedience to the crucified Christ, we yield to the sovereign God our willing service. And with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we carefully analyse and expose gross systemic subordination as well as microstructures of “naturalness” and patterns of inequality, supposedly sanctioned as the providence of God [Neh. 5:1-5; I Sam 8:10-16]. In other words, we hold Trinitarian Communion and Christian Justice as indivisible entities in the providential unfolding of God’s purpose for humankind. At our best communion is experienced in the struggle as we covenant for justice in the economy and the earth.

Signs of Hope and Energy

We have listened carefully to the experiences of how people are resisting the effects of empire on their communities. We saw how women and men in Soweto are engaged in organising for change and reclaiming their respect and dignity through struggle for clean water and electricity in a context where the political leadership has failed them. These stories of resistance are attested to in many other places as well.

We heard of stories of how churches, both in the North and South, are living out the Accra Confession in their contexts. For example churches in Zambia are studying and understanding what globalization is and its impact on their daily lives. Some churches in the North have and are developing policies that enable them to set aside resources for the promotion of the Accra Confession and education for justice.

We have been encouraged by an emerging dialogue between churches in the North and those in the South, especially on Empire and what it means for both perspectives. The dialogue on globalization that is ongoing between the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany has served as a signpost of what is possible for us all. This journey of conversations holds potential for South to South dialogue also [Isaiah 1:18]. The growing consensus on empire as a lens from which to read the Accra Confession and to seek after justice is a sign of hope.

We listened to the pain of communion in the light of the South African churches experience of apartheid. We search for community in Bible study, prayer, and hearing of the healing word of God in our world, aware of the agony that can only be healed by truth, repentance and reconciliation.

We look to the future with hope, new energy and the commitment to walk in communion and struggle together seeking justice despite our different social locations.

The Way Forward

In John Calvin's theology, human life is set in relation to the life of God [Institutes of the Christian Religion 3.2.7]. Life for the honour of God is based on faith in God, who put God's own life at stake for the benefit of humankind. Our common journey forward as a people of faith is accompanied by our life-giving God [Matthew 1:23].

We are faced with a crisis that is far more than an economic or financial crisis. It is a spiritual crisis of a civilizational model that is economically unjust, ecologically unsustainable, and structurally violent and socially degrading of human dignity. Therefore the answer to the crisis cannot be only economic or financial. We are in need of a more holistic and integrated strategy, led by a renewed and deepened spirituality of life [John 10:10].

We need to recognize that all power is accountable to God [Romans 12:3-8; 14:12]. If economic or political structures fail to serve life, they must be changed. Theology of life needs to guide us in our way. Christians cannot accept that humanly constructed organizations, structures and systems, as powerful as they might be, are unchangeable. We experience everywhere in the world the struggle of people against an "economy of death" rearing its ugly life-threatening head on the poor and marginalized [Rev. 13:11-18]. We need to seek for cooperation and solidarity of the body of Christ with grass-root movements, international groups and civil-society groups. One example is the Network for Global Water Justice.

In the faces of women, children, people living with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, those discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, caste, sexual orientation and sexuality we see the suffering of those most affected by the consequences of neo-liberal globalism. We affirm that all of life, in all its diversity, together is the image of God [Gen 1:27]. The broken body of Christ that is united in the bond of love, and with the Spirit of Peace, invites us to journey together for justice and peace in the economy and the earth.

We need the expertise of Reformed women and feminist theologians, ecumenical leaders, young people, lay persons in economics and international relations to go forward, reflecting on gender, race, caste and other implications of empire of which the Accra Confession spoke.

We found that a change of paradigm needs transforming education, on different levels and in different ways. This requires mutual learning by exposure, engagement and dialogue and needs to happen on the levels of church-leaders as well as on the level of the local congregations.

We should develop and agree on a set of specific principles of Economic Justice that are based on the biblical values of care, compassion, responsibility and accountability, taking into account the work done by the ecumenical family [Lk 10:30-35; 11:5-8; 16:1-8; 19-31; 18:1-5. Mt 20:1-16; 22:1-10; Mk12:41-44]. It should lead to the following steps:

- To organize a global ecumenical conference (including the Roman Catholic church) to propose a new international financial architecture, that is:
 - a. based on the principles of economic and climate justice,

- b. serves the real economy,
 - c. accounts for social and environmental risks,
 - d. sets clear limits to greed;
- To support processes strengthening regional and local economies in the different social and cultural contexts;
- To make use of the 10 - 15 year ecological time window to reach and implement the necessary goals of Climate Justice;
- To engage in climate justice with a twofold strategy:
 - a. mitigation in order to slow down global warming to the level agreed in the ecumenical family (WCC Statement on eco-justice and ecological debt and campaigns of churches and ecumenical agencies),
 - b. adaptation to climate change and support, especially of the most affected and vulnerable people.

In this Global Dialogue, we realized the importance of sustained dialogue which brings together the Reformed sisters and brothers from all ends of the earth. We need to share our experiences from each of our contexts, on the basis of our communion in Christ. This should take place in consultations between churches of the north and south as well as between churches from the same hemisphere. We recognize that many people in the north live in conditions of the south and that there are elites in every country in the south who live as those in the north. With commitment to one another in partnership and solidarity we need to engage in an open trustful space for an ongoing discussion and common understanding. In light of communion and participation we need awareness for the different contexts we are coming from.

As WARC/WCRC looks to its future, it needs to ask questions about its vision, its membership and their commitment and how it best lives out that vision. This process needs continuing support in organization and administration.

This vision of a way forward requires the development of policy and strategy for support, resources and engagement of its member churches to prioritize the urgency of covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth. The new WCRC communion needs to pay attention to this reality.

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