



Faith, Economy, Ecology

A Theological Statement from the World Communion of Reformed Churches

Framework: Decade for Climatic Justice

The Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, in 2022, called on the General Secretariat to engage in urgent action in light of the devastating impact of climate change. The Executive Committee called a Decade for Climate Justice, recognizing that we have less than ten years to act to address the ecological crisis. The General Secretariat took this mandate forward by creating a core team to work for the Decade for Climate Justice. The core team has worked out a programme for the next five years under the theme “Learning from the Earth: Witnessing to Climate Justice,” drawing from Job 12:8.

Introduction

A gathering of 20 activists, theologians, and church leaders met in Depok, Indonesia, to flesh out the interconnections between ecology, economy, and theology. The gathering was acutely aware of the urgency of the crisis and the context. We recognize that Jakarta is a sinking city and will be underwater within the next thirty years! We recognize that other islands in Indonesia and the Pacific face similar challenges, including seabed mining and other climate-related impacts.

Amid this devastating crisis, we recognize that there is also an opportunity for the churches to engage in God’s mission to witness our faith. At the same time, there is a call for the Church to revisit our faith and practices to get into a covenant weaving the web of God’s life.

We recognize that our starting point for reflecting on ecology, economics, and theology and the myriad interconnections between them is those who are left out and those who are being crucified. We particularly recognize that Indigenous peoples and non-human creation are among the left-out and crucified.

We were challenged by the reading of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, where the child was placed in the centre of the reordering of the economic system. In stark contrast with the *oikodespotes* (landowner) or the head/lord of the household, the ordering and care of the economy in the context of John’s telling of this miracle, a child is in charge. We seek an economic system that is ordered from the perspective of the most vulnerable. This requires a *kenosis*, which is the emptying of the powerful and a collective resistance from the exploited; an economy of enough.

Discerning the Signs of the Times

Listen. Creation is groaning.

We live in the “new normal” of scorching summers, raging forest fires, prolonged droughts, devastating storms, epic floods, melting glaciers, ocean acidification, unprecedented forest depletion, and alarming loss of biodiversity. Coastal cities and small island nations are slowly but surely sinking. Hunger and water scarcity are increasing. The livelihoods of farmers, fisherfolk, and Indigenous peoples are jeopardized. Environmental defenders, many Indigenous, are criminalized and even murdered. Though they are least responsible for climate change and the degeneration of our ecosystems, the bulk of the suffering has always been borne by impoverished and vulnerable communities.

We are spiralling from climate crisis to catastrophe as tipping points¹ are being reached, the remaining carbon budget is squandered, and the window for climate action is closing. Yet scientific warnings are denied as “fake news.” In the name of security, new fossil fuel projects are, even now, being developed by Saudi Aramco, ExxonMobil, Shell, and other oil and gas giants with funding from states and big banks, potentially unleashing carbon bombs². At the global climate negotiations, wealthy, industrialized nations’ governments consistently block fossil fuels’ phase-out and withhold climate finance for adaptation and “loss and damage” reparations for climate-vulnerable nations.

We dwell in the Capitalocene³, spanning the complex historical development of a world system that has led to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, drastically reshaped the relationship between humans and the environment, and wrought indelible ecological destruction on a global scale. Labour (especially the social reproductive labour done by women), energy, and nature have been cheapened, and the ecological commons, including the atmosphere, have been colonized. Nuclear power, geo-engineering, and other technologies are marketed as “green solutions.” Well-being and progress are measured in terms of the monetary value of production. The human search for happiness and fulfilment is reduced to unlimited material satiation. Billionaires’ wealth has ballooned to trillions of dollars even as the rising cost of living pushes hundreds of thousands of people into poverty, and the outsized carbon emissions from their hyper-luxurious lifestyles and especially their investments are cementing a trajectory towards global warming of 2.7°C above pre-industrial levels with catastrophic consequences.

The climate and broader planetary emergency represent *the* existential challenge of our generation. It is rooted in a structural impulse to maximize short-term financial gain, an extractive model of development fixated on limitless economic expansion, and a conception of humans as superior to nature (and of some humans as superior to other humans on account of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation). Therefore, we find ourselves at an ethical, moral, and spiritual crossroads today.

¹ “Tipping points” are critical thresholds that, if crossed, will lead to irreversible and catastrophic changes.

² A “carbon bomb” is a coal, oil, or gas project with the potential to emit over a gigaton of carbon dioxide.

³ While the word “Anthropocene” indicates that human activity lies at the root of our planetary crisis, “Capitalocene” suggests that it is not all humans but only some who are responsible. Capitalocene is more than just suggesting that economics lie at the heart of our ecological catastrophe; it is instead a word which indicates that capitalism is a world-ecology of power, production, and reproduction. See more at <https://www.maize.io/cultural-factory/what-is-capitalocene/>

Faith, Economy, and Ecology

We understand that a) a profit-driven economy, b) unlimited consumption as an indicator of well-being, and c) extractivism and carelessness for the rest of creation constitute a trinity of death. This way of life is mainly responsible for inequality and the climatic catastrophe.

Also, it is shaped by the way that human beings comprehend their place in relation to the rest of the creation, how they understand justice and beauty, what is good and desirable, what should be accepted and what is to be rejected, what is the sense and meaning of human existence.

In that sense, as with any other, this economic system needs a spirituality that supports and justifies its values. At the same time, any economic system will nurture a kind of religiosity, spirituality, or theology, and vice versa.

If so, what kind of values nurture an inequality-based economic system? What kind of spirituality, theology, or religion supports the exclusion and death of millions to favour a few? What kind of values support the destruction of God's creation? And vice versa, what type of spirituality shapes this "scandalous world" if we allow it in our faith?

Indeed, the Accra Confession is right when it says:

"We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization..." (15)

On the other hand, what kind of values nurture a more equitable, sustainable, and just economic system? What kind of spirituality, theology, or religion may support a more harmonious way of life? How can re-reading the Scriptures help overcome humanity's alienation from the rest of creation?

Religion, economy, and ecology are interwoven aspects of the production and reproduction of life. Every economic system brings a theological or religious understanding of human beings and society. The same can be said about ecology. Then, deepening the mutually critical correlation between economic models and their impact on human subjectivity and spirituality is necessary.

Biblical Theological Reflections

The dominant forms of Christian tradition have been complicit in the abuse of creation. They have held to the belief that the world is given to use as we please. It is here for our use. Its value comes from us, for we are made in the image of God: we have been called to go forth, multiply, and exercise dominion and authority over creation, coupled with the view that Christ's salvific action and dying on the cross is only for the redemption of humanity. This anthropocentric reading of the biblical texts places humankind at the centre of creation with the authority to subdue the Earth. It has justified and validated a doctrine of the violation of nature whereby we have accepted and engaged in practices that have failed to safeguard the integrity of creation. We have supported systems and structures that exploit

the natural environment to serve what we thought was good and, most often, for human greed. Changes have now been made to the created order, the Earth system, that cannot be reversed.

Mission has been understood as *missio Dei*; unfortunately, humans are primarily seen as partners in the mission while the Earth is the object on which this mission takes place. Further, the Church, as the body of Christ, has been understood to have people as the body's only parts. It is time to rethink the missiology and ecclesiology to include the whole Earth as a partner in the mission of God.

The current time calls for a re-reading and interpreting of the Bible through a multidimensional ecological lens. It calls for using creation-centric lenses, which recognize that humanity is a part of the whole interdependent and interconnected creation. All creation has intrinsic dignity. A re-reading of the Bible understands God as a compassionate God who loves and cares for humanity and all creation.

The old narrative powered by colonialism and capitalism, justified by Christian narratives of dominion, domination, and power, has led to the degradation of the environment and the fabric of human relationships. A multidimensional ecological reading and interpretation engage the complexity of the intersectional nature of the web of oppressions between economics, ecology, and theology whilst seeking to avoid the pitfalls of ongoing complicity. The cry of the Earth and the cry of the impoverished and marginalized are inextricably interwoven. The theological concept of stewardship has its limitations and needs critique.

A multidimensional ecological lens will require us to ask, Who are the voices that have been marginalized, oppressed, and silenced? Furthermore, where are we doing theology and for whom? It means doing theology with the crucified and the marginalized, including non-human creation. This approach to reading and interpreting biblical texts seeks alternative interpretations that lead to life-affirming actions that support an economy of life that affirms the interdependent and interconnected nature of the whole of life.

In this time of grave emergency, Christian churches are called to imagine a new economy that privileges the life of the whole household based on a theology of enough. "Economics is not just about money; it is about who lives and who dies, and who lives decently and who does not. It is about what is needed for life to flourish" (*A New Climate for Theology*, p. 36). A theology of enough compels us to reconceive practices of household economics from the perspective of the most vulnerable within the household instead of the lord, thereby subverting colonial and patriarchal practices. This would ensure the integrity of the whole household will be sustained now and into the future. In the context of climate change this means just transitions to renewable energy, calling to account the insatiable greed of the economy of the Capitalocene, recognizing, confessing, and owning our complicity within the web of structural sin and accompanying with love communities who are already experiencing the grim reality of leaving and losing home.

Given the precarious time we live in, aware that the climate crisis is already, now, and beyond, we lean into a hope that calls us to relinquish false optimism or denial in order that we may be freed to re-imagine a future beyond the grim limits of the horizon before us;

holding fast to the affirmation that this is still a world that God so loves (John 3:16); a world that is groaning in pain with humanity for salvation (Romans 8:22-23). Therefore, what we do here and now still matters. The church as a partner and agent of the mission of God, which is a mission of salvation of all creation, has to take action; action that is backed by life-affirming theologies that are intentionally contextual and liberational.

Actions/Calls

While we continue to advocate for a sustainable future and make changes in our lifestyles necessary for a transition towards a just world, we understand the climate catastrophe cannot be solved by individual actions alone, but a concerted effort of masses to transform its root causes: structural sin. We cannot let ourselves get “greenwashed” by an environmental piety that prioritizes individual changes over systemic transformation. In our present context environmental piety is most often mediated through the market and in fact reinforces consumerism rather than making any structural critique of capitalism.

As part of a global, faith-based, environmental, and climate movement, we must work across the aisle to dismantle the structures responsible for the ecological and economic collapse present in our culture, policies, and institutions. We must also consider where we as a Church have contributed to its worsening or establishment, as in the case of the doctrine of discovery and colonialism, and address inequality in each of these systems.

To support us in that aim, with humility and courage, we need to build our capacity, partnering with theological institutions, social justice movements, and organizations, dialogue with scientists and grassroots leaders of Black and Indigenous peoples, women, small farmers, and the youth and others. Their voices will lead us to the systemic solutions necessary to avoid a climate and humanitarian catastrophe. They know the structures that oppress, destroy the system of life, and the changes that can make a positive impact on people’s lives and the Earth.

We must address the inequality of women. Gender justice is climate justice.

Women and girls, especially those who are already suffering multiple forms of discrimination, are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, environmental destruction, and ecocide. We recognize that there is a connection between violence against women and violence against the Earth; that capitalism exploits productive and reproductive labour. They are on the front lines of climate change and the fight for sustainability, providing solutions in their communities, in their families, churches, and countries. However, they are not at the decision-making tables where policies are made to address these disasters.

Climate justice is justice for Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples protect 80% of the world’s biodiversity and are the protectors of forests around the world, without whom the world will not be able to ever stop global heating. Privileging Indigenous peoples and their wisdom in climate justice and sustainable solutions

means integrating their leadership and epistemologies into all policies and in all sectors that seek solutions to the present ecocide.

Racial justice is climate justice.

It is time to address the inequity caused by structural racism, white supremacy, and colonialism, so prevalent in our cultures that during the promotion of green technologies, the Global South continues to be seen as the source of cheap labour and raw materials by the new extractive industries working in connivance with corrupt and oppressive governments, at levels that perpetuate human rights abuses and the pollution of water, air, and soil, making it impossible to participate in a just transition and increasing the debt and impoverishment of these communities.

While “climate change may be the most far-reaching manifestation of the white privilege and class privilege humanity has yet to face; and climate change is overwhelmingly caused by the world’s high consumers who are disproportionately descended from Europe” (*Eco-Reformation, Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, p. 40); racism is the product of economic and political elites that need cheap labour, and purposely stake fear and division using race, but also immigrant status, sexuality, and more, to divide and conquer so they can continue to use up people and use up the Earth on the way to the bank and global boiling. In the end, all people get hurt by racism, as the Earth.

The time of fossil fuels is over.

The church must divest from fossil fuels and extractive industries and invest in climate-just solutions, supporting people who have been hurt for that, and environmental organizations.

Conclusion

We look with hope to church-based restorative efforts like the Jakarta Theological Seminary’s Green Campus Blue Seminary in Indonesia, striving to live out eco-ethics and eco-theology in their curriculum and in buildings; Centro Emmanuel in Uruguay, building capacity for sustainable agriculture, supporting farmers to take steps towards greater ecological and land care; and FaithLands in the United States, in collaboration with an interfaith network of leaders, farmers, and land carers, donating church lands as an act of healing and reparative justice.

At a time of such needed societal transformation, the role of the Church and our spiritual practices is crucial to provide space for visioning, encouragement, confession, lament, and solidarity. The elements of nature present in the Sacraments also provide us an opportunity to reimagine who we are as Church in relationship with a world that sustains us and is also in need of healing and liberation (Romans 8).

A Church committed to using its voice in support of climate and economic justice will lead to nothing less than radical discipleship: action in the public arena, the halls of power, speaking to lawmakers and corporations alongside justice movements, coalitions, environmental organizations, creating and joining ongoing justice efforts to overcome structural sin. The

gifts of the Spirit present in the Church today more than ever have a role to play in the healing of Creation.

We recognize that our Christian faith is at stake every time our world faces an unprecedented collapse. As our sacred texts teach us, we believe God is inspiring spiritual gifts necessary to face it and help life find the Good News even in the midst of chaos, as in the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:1-2).