

Faith stance on the global crisis of life

South-south member churches forum
Buenos Aires, Argentina, April 23-26 2003

Creation today faces a global crisis of life. In this kairos, a moment demanding a clear and unambiguous decision, a south-south forum of member churches was convened by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Buenos Aires from April 22 to 26 2003. WARC member churches of the south, which experience serious consequences of economic globalization, gathered to reflect and take a faith stance in response to the 23rd general council's call for a committed process of recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction.¹

Our gathering in Buenos Aires acknowledged the present moment in the world's history as a kairos challenging us to decisive action. We have seen and heard the appalling situation experienced by our sisters and brothers in Argentina. The current crisis in Argentina presents new problems for consideration in the ongoing process of confessing our faith that the 23rd general council initiated in Debrecen in 1997. We met with the particular consciousness of the journey from Kitwe to Buenos Aires, being aware of the call of the African churches (Kitwe 1995) for the declaration of a status confessionis on economic injustice. On this journey, in many ways, churches around the world have been responding to economic injustice and ecological destruction. Some churches like the Presbyterian Church in Korea and the Presbyterian Church in Venezuela made faith stances on the crisis of life in their context.²

As churches of the south, we were compelled by the critical situation and immense suffering of our communities to consider seriously our experiences and their significance for the process of understanding and analysing our newly emerging economic and ecological situations. The sharing of our experiences of suffering and reflecting on our faith led us to take a faith stance as we look toward the 24th general council in Accra in 2004 and beyond.

The crisis of life

Experience of the crisis of life

We hear the crying of the people and the groaning of creation...

In Buenos Aires, we have seen the immense suffering which has been caused by the economic crisis. We were shocked to hear that 25 years ago, Argentina had a population of 22 million with less than 2 million poor people; today, the population is 37 million, with 21 million poor people. People in Argentina, like many others in the world, have been deceived by illusion. Over the last 25 years, the increase in the number of poor people has been greater than the

increase in population; the middle class, which used to be 50% of the population, has dramatically decreased; and only 30% of the population has regular employment.

We are clearly living in a new stage of capitalism, which combines all forms of power and affects all dimensions of life. The capitalist system has switched its focus from production to finance. It is also new in its far-reaching and all-encompassing strategy of domination where the global financial market is empire and god. The empire is a global financial one bolstered by military, political and ideological power, and its forces determine the survival of the countries and people at the periphery. The market empire and military forces oppress at all levels, social, political, economic, ecological and spiritual, creating crises for all peoples and all countries in the world.

The consultation heard experiences from representatives of member churches in the south, who voiced the reality of the current crisis. Argentina and South Korea were held up as models of the depth and extent to which the neoliberal strategy subjects the whole world to the laws of privatization and unhindered expansion of capitalist markets.

The churches represented from Latin America related the way in which economic globalization has triggered the crises of debt, trade, marginalization, insecurity, economic inequality, unemployment and the destruction of the environment. The lie that free market policies are a panacea for social and economic problems has been unmasked, and the promise of wealth and prosperity (investment, growth, and employment) has not been fulfilled. Instead, neoliberal economic policies have resulted in social and economic crises, especially for the middle class and poor.

The threats to the Caribbean created by economic globalization mirror those of the rest of the world. Yet, the problems are more dramatic because of the small size of the populations and the fragile nature of the economies and ecosystems. Economic globalization has created job loss and grinding poverty, an unprecedented rise in crime and violence, ecological degradation, and the spread of HIV/Aids. All of these have degraded life.

Asian countries have also been experiencing the negative effect of the neoliberal strategy, beginning with the unexpected and serious economic crisis in 1997. In South Korea, for example, as the western banks suddenly stopped rolling over their loans to Korean corporations, the exchange rate of the Korean Won against the US dollar changed from 800 Won to 2,400 Won to one dollar. In other words, shortage of foreign currency sent the Korean Won into free fall, with its value cut to one-third at its lowest point. Thousands of firms and enterprises fell into bankruptcy and hundreds of financial institutions, merchant banks, and credit unions were closed down. Millions of workers were fired. The social consequences were a tremendous increase in the homeless, broken families, suicides and violence. Five years later, despite claims by the

IMF and the Korean government that the economy has recovered well, the structural crisis has deepened, and the suffering of the poor and unemployed or underemployed has increased. Over 600 of the best industries and banks were sold to multinationals, which have now taken over more than 30% of the stock market. It is said that the Korean economy may face another crisis, because of the terribly increased loans and debts, both foreign and internal. The structural adjustment programme forced by the IMF has only increased structural injustice, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. In Indonesia, the IMF intervention has totally failed. The mask of the neoliberal system has been lifted.

The African experience of the crisis gave rise to the cry at Kitwe, which voiced the systemic exclusion of Africa from the global economy, the growing gap between rich and poor, social disintegration, hunger and disease. The effects of the free market system on the HIV/Aids pandemic are evident in the management and treatment of the disease. The policies and practices of transnational pharmaceutical companies have privileged profits over the health of people, and the high cost of HIV/Aids drugs and trade agreements exclude the poor from effective treatment and prevention from infection.

The economic and ecological problems of the Pacific island nations are tightly interconnected. The ecological problems are real and dangerous. Global warming endangers the low-lying islands; nuclear testing contaminates the sea, land, people and all living creatures. Especially affected are the Marshall Islanders and Tahitians. Mining and logging increase deforestation, resulting in the destruction of most of the rain forest of the island countries. Economically, the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. Socially, there is an increase in crime, violence and suicides.

The most significant feature of these reports is the dramatic convergence of the crises for countries of the south. We are conscious of the new signs of the times: the unparalleled integration of economic globalization and global geopolitics. We were unanimous in our recognition of the negative effects of the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization in their domination and exclusion of the southern nations. We share the experience of the negative and destructive effects of deregulation and speculative investments on our national economies. We recognize the current trend of militarism as a total-war strategy of security for the global market. We recognize the ways in which our hearts and minds are invaded and dominated by print and electronic media in a "colonization of consciousness". We are convinced that the neoliberal model cannot be transformed or adjusted: it has inherent contradictions and has failed again and again to lift the countries, peoples and natural environment of the south toward life. We are united in our rejection of this model. We are not alone, as significant movements in civil society, including the global peace movement, are also resisting and rejecting the model as destructive of all creation.

Critical analysis of the crisis of life

The experiences of the peoples of the south reported at our meeting reveal a great diversity of problems, pains and threats. Each country carries the weight of her own history behind her present predicament. Yet striking elements of commonality also emerged. These common themes pointed to at least two of the root causes of the economic and ecological problems.

Change driven by the powers that be

We are aware not only of rapidly changing social, cultural and economic reality, but also that the most painful and difficult changes and pressures are being forced upon us from the outside. For example, previous colonial powers still have a hand in a lot of so-called ethnic conflicts; transnational corporations, not national industries, take the lead in the so-called modernization of the economy. The actions of these firms are often accompanied by increasing poverty (especially in the traditional sectors of the economy); a systematic deterioration of nature and a loss of indigenous cultures; the world of finance and international financial institutions demands continual reductions in wages, subsidies and government budgets, and in doing so, they claim authority over national governance and economic policies.

Change driven toward the ends of the global market

We are also deeply concerned with the direction of the changes made by the powers that be. The question we must always ask is: will these changes lead toward fullness of life for God's creation? Overwhelmingly, the primary concern of global market players is financial profit, even at the expense of life. When poverty deepens, then comes suffering and death. And if violence grows between groups, and is even accelerated by political and economic powers from outside, then again we see the dynamics of death at work.

All of these problems are interconnected. They aggravate each other in disastrous ways, constantly pushing us away from the God of life and from fullness of life for all. Therefore, we must ask what lies behind this ongoing cult of death and its life-denying forces. Is it because modernization, technology, and all forms of the market are in themselves bad?

We have to dig deeper. The dynamics of death and exclusion are of human making. They have a common base. The neoliberal deregulation of the capitalist market at all levels, driven by an unbridled lust for money and control, turns the market into an idol.

Economically, the capitalist market no longer serves the exchange of useful goods and services for all, nor is it willing to be held politically and socially accountable for the common good. Built on the exclusive private property of a minority of owners, the pure deregulated market has one single goal: to maximize the accumulation of wealth by a few, which the Bible calls Mammon.

Capital goes less and less into long-range sustainable production of goods and services. Instead, capital is concentrated in financial dealings, causing unemployment, degradation of working conditions, and increasing structural indebtedness. Nature is seen only as raw material for wealth accumulation. And technology serves the same purpose, even risking irreversible damage in the case of biotechnology.

Politically, nation states and democratically elected governments are weakened, blackmailed or coopted. They are less and less able to put social and ecological obligations (taxes) on private property. Basic public services like water, energy, transport, health, and education are being privatized so that only people with buying power have access to them. The democratic UN system has been out-manoeuvred step by step. The rich nations have taken over by dictating international policy through undemocratic institutions like the G8, the IMF and the World Bank (only those who pay have a say) or by the WTO with the transnational corporations as the main advisors.

Ecologically, creation is in crisis. Mother earth is dominated, exploited, raped and murdered for profit by greedy companies and selfish human beings.

Ideologically, the colonization of consciousness, reinforced by most of the media, makes people believe that there is no alternative (TINA). Not to follow the market laws is regarded as sin.

Militarily, the USA and the western powers (NATO) have developed a global hegemonic strategy to protect their economic interests worldwide. They have openly broken international law, and have spread violent conflict and reactive terrorism all over the earth. We are seriously worried that rich countries are more and more inclined to use military force to impose the neoliberal economic system in the world, playing a divine Caesar. The war against Iraq is a clear example of this kind of politics, and war again is a continuation of politics to extend domination. This war reveals a crisis of the international institutional system which endangers the balance among all nations.

In short, through neoliberal globalization, the economy, designed to sustain life and the wellbeing of all, has become a totalitarian faith system of wealth accumulation for the few, endangering life as a whole on our planet. This system is structural sin. Globalized neoliberalism is in complete contradiction to the central tenets of the Christian faith.

With regard to economics, these contradictions are the following (as understood by Calvin and the whole Reformed tradition): While God's economy is inclusive, neoliberal economy is exclusive. While God's economy is a protective economy for the poor, neoliberal economy is an exploitative economy of the poor. While in God's economy, wealth flows from the rich to the poor, in the neoliberal economy, it flows from the poor to the rich. While the economic index of God's economy is the poor, the neoliberal economic index is the rich. While God's economy is based on God's love and grace, neoliberal economy is

based on greed and profit making. While God's economy is an economy of solidarity, neoliberal economy is an economy based on limitless competition.

The neoliberal economy produces an ongoing flow of sacrifices: sacrifices of the south, so that the north may continue its lifestyle; sacrifices of nature, because the market requires them; sacrifices of ongoing indebtedness of the poor, so that the rich can stay rich and accumulate more and more.

Why a faith stance?

Because the very integrity of faith is in question

Neoliberal ideology claims that the global market will bring about a world which is free of hunger and disease. It uses a theological and ideological framework to justify its presumed messianic role by claiming economic sovereignty, absolute power and authority beyond any regulation, the right to act above national and international law, the right to act beyond ethical and moral rules, that God has blessed prosperity, and that poverty and disease are the results of God's disfavour due to disobedience and laziness.

It demands the sanctity of private property, excessive materialist greed which perverts the human spirit, and the colonization of conscience.

We believe that neoliberal ideology violates the will of God, the creator of the garden of life.

In this historical ideological and theological situation where neoliberal ideology claims absolute power over and against the sovereignty of God and gospel claims, it is critical, for the integrity of our faith, that we take a faith stance. Our Reformed communities have taken such faith stances in the past whenever the sovereignty of God has been undermined and the gospel has been at stake politically, socially and economically (Barmen Declaration 1934; Theological Declaration of Korean Christians 1973; 21st WARC general council, Ottawa 1982; Confession of Belhar 1986).

In line with this history, we, representatives of churches of the Reformed tradition in the south, take a faith stance against neoliberal ideology that compromises the integrity of the Gospel and faith, so that God may be glorified and the promise of abundant life may be fulfilled.

Our faith stance

Study of the Bible shows that in times of profound crisis provoked by the rise of great empires (Babylon, Assyria, Selucedae, and Rome) the authors of scripture (particularly apocalyptic and prophetic writings) held up a vision of hope that God would intervene. This vision formed an alternative way of life in opposition to life defined by the empire. These visions of God's reign give us strength to reject the present imperial power and to look for alternatives to the present organization of life and society, reaffirming messianic reign and declaring God's sovereignty over all of life.

Garden of life

We *reaffirm* that God created the garden of life – political, social, economic and ecological as well as spiritual. (Gen 2.8-9)

We *repent* from idolatry, believing that the empire will bring about the peace and security, and that the power of money will solve all problems.

We repent that the doctrine of creation (Genesis 1) has been used to conquer, dominate, exploit, and destroy life, especially women and the earth, and that we have neglected to care for life which is under the threat of ultimate destruction.

We *reject* any claim of economic, political and military power which subverts God's sovereignty over life.

We reject absolute property of private entity, personal or corporate, for it denies God's sovereign ownership over all things.

We *resist* the power of death in the forms of global economic exclusion, imperial domination and military hegemony which annihilates people and the earth.

We *declare* that God's design for the economy is to sustain the life and wellbeing of all creation.

We worship God, not Mammon which demands limitless sacrifice of life for its existence. We declare that God's sovereign reign means that all creatures are free partners in the whole realm of life.

Covenant with creation

We *reaffirm* that God has made an all-inclusive covenant with all creation (Gen 9.8-12).

This covenant has been sealed by the gift of God's grace, a gift which is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). We reaffirm that God made a covenant to liberate from the imperial powers (Babylon and Rome). God's covenant is over and against any contract, which is the "law" of domination and exploitation. It is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are God's primary partners.

We *repent* from believing that Christians have an exclusive relationship with God.

We have excluded people because of their class, race, sex, ethnicity or religion, and in our beliefs about salvation we have excluded people outside the Christian community and also the non-human world.

We *reject* any Christian exclusive claim over God's blessing and protection, and thus, we reject any theological justification for neoliberal ideology and the imperial power.

We *resist* the domination of the global economy, imperial power, military hegemony, and modern science and technology that destroys the wholeness of creation.

We *declare* that God is creator and sustainer of all living beings for their common living.

Unity in Christ through the Spirit

We *reaffirm* that the body of Christ unites the whole cosmos, overcoming all divisions and conflicts.

We reaffirm that the garden of life under a new heaven and a new earth is continually sustained and renewed through the Spirit (Col 1.16-18, Rev 21.1-5).

We *repent* from not recognizing the unity of life in the whole universe in the reign of Christ and the work of the Spirit.

We repent that, in the name of Christ, we have condemned other faiths and spiritualities of the peoples as well as degrading the other creatures.

We repent that by confining the Spirit to the soul, we have justified the ideology of individualism.

We *reject* any doctrine of limitless competition, which is the source of economic, political and social conflicts and violence.

We reject corruption at all levels as an integral part of the system.

We *resist* any power that promotes the logic of the jungle – a new social Darwinism, an ideology that legitimates the survival of the fittest and the victory of the strong over the weak.

We *declare* that the body of Christ is unconditionally and universally an inclusive reality, and that the Spirit is an all pervasive energy in the universe that works for the constant renewal of life.

We commit in covenant

Taking a stance of faith is never without consequences. It is a public matter from the beginning and, thus, may prompt severe counter reactions. Despite this risk of confrontation, even more important, a joint stance of faith creates a new ecumenical space, a space for new public visions, for renewing the economy and for alternative community building. It breaks through the existing closed reality if people commit themselves to cooperation and resistance at local, regional, national, and global levels. Churches should form alliances with civil and social movements, which are also working for the deep changes that are necessary.

The biblical vision of renewal of the economy

It is a lie that there is no alternative to the present form of neoliberal globalization. In fact, this view is a kind of tunnel vision. It is built on the expectation that only the maximum expansion of market-oriented production and trade will bring us to the light of growing wealth and reducing poverty.

The biblical vision is different in the following ways.

- a) It is orientated to the fulfilment of basic needs and blossoming, not to maximum productivity and consumption (Isaiah 65, 1 Timothy 6).
- b) It has care and distribution as its primary force not accumulation (Lk 12.16-21).
- c) It promotes solidarity, serving living communities, and is not individualistic (Acts 4-5).
- d) It subjects finance to the service of the real economy, not the real economy to the rule of the financial markets (Luke 19).
- e) It corrects systemic indebtedness and loss of land by Jubilee measures (Leviticus 25).
- f) It binds the economy to the restraint of ecological respect instead of allowing profits to include ecological destruction (Leviticus 25).

Examples of resistance

1. Church members should participate with peoples' movements in civil disobedience against increasing consumption levels. The richness of sufficiency needs to be relearned, especially by the rich.
2. Church members should resist church investment where financial profit is the key concern, over and against the basic needs of the poor.
3. Churches should press for the democratic redesign of the international financial and economic system, replacing the present institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization) which are mainly owned by and serve the interests of the rich countries.
4. Churches should not stand on the side of the big land owners but on the side of the small owners and the landless people.

Examples of hope

1. The development of self-supporting agricultural systems through "Integral Mission" where indigenous people cultivate land (Brazil).
2. Banks, which belong to ecumenical organizations make loans available at reasonable rates for lower and middle class people (Indonesia).
3. Watch-persons are appointed to focus on and render services in the areas of health, justice, education, and environment (Cameroon).
4. Corruption is being exposed (Costa Rica).
5. Sensitizing churches on issues of faith and economy, promotion of human rights, justice and peace dialogues (Colombia).
6. Support of the self-management of small producers in urban peripheries and rural areas (Argentina).
7. Practising ecologically sound agriculture.

Covenant for life

In response to a liberating God who made a covenant for life with the whole creation, we declare the following covenant for the life of the whole creation community.

God of life,

you are our God who liberates us from any system of oppression, exclusion and exploitation.

- I. We shall not make Mammon our God, accumulating power and wealth.
- II. We shall not make ourselves an idol, worshipping the effectiveness of our achievements.
- III. We shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord God, calling the implementation of the wealth-accumulating market and imperial wars a Christian policy.
- IV. We will observe the sabbath day by not exploiting human labour and destroying mother earth.
- V. We will provide for solidarity between the generations, not only by securing a decent living for the aged but also by not burdening the coming generations with ecological damage and debt.
- VI. We shall not murder, excluding from the economy those who have no private property nor ability to sell their labour in the market.
- VII. We shall not tolerate the commodification and sexual exploitation of women and children.
- VIII. We shall not allow the manifold robberies of economic and financial actors.
- IX. We shall not misuse the legal system for our personal profit but promote the economic, social and cultural rights of all people.
- X. We shall not follow the greed of limitless accumulation by depriving our neighbours of their means of production and income, so that all may live in dignity on God's rich and beautiful earth.

A prayer for life

God, you are creator, restorer and renewer, you are the one who moulds life, mends life, and moves all creation toward life.

You are, at the very heart of your being, life in abundance.

God you are life.

Creator God, we are grateful for the ways you preserve and sustain your creation:

for the garden of life by which we are nourished and know beauty and wonder,

for rivers, lakes, seas and oceans, mountains and valleys, trees, plants and flowers, insects, fish, birds and animals,

for people – men and women, young and old, brown, black and white.
We celebrate your abundant goodness.

God you are the moulder of life.

Restorer God, we come before you as a penitent church and people,
for our own and the whole world's failings.

We continually fall short of your perfect love, justice, righteousness and
compassion

and we ask for your mercy.

For believing and acting as if your salvation was only for the individual,
instead of for all of creation,

and pointed heavenward

instead of beginning on earth with the wholeness and peace of those people,
species and places most in need of your mending love;

for misinterpreting your word in scripture

and believing and acting as if domination of the earth, women, children
and the poor is the way to faithfulness;

for trusting in the powers;

for believing that the market that we call free will create the personal and
social growth, prosperity and security for which we long;

for our self-justification of accumulation and material excess,

lack of sabbath and attention to life-enhancing activity,

desire for status and recognition,

and neglect of spiritual and worshipful disciplines;

for being drawn into the evil that degrades the earth, disenfranchises the poor,
and encourages us as humans to believe we are privileged beings of God's
creation;

we ask for your mercy and compassion.

God, you are the mender of life.

Renewing God, we ask for your help in rejecting and resisting the powers that
have brought us to this point:

where the weak are systematically excluded from and sacrificed to the global
market;

particular species and the biosphere are destroyed;

the nightmare of suffering and destruction of the poor and the earth is
accelerating at unprecedented speed.

God, you are the mover of life.

Creating, redeeming, renewing God, may this moment be a *kairos*,
where your timing and initiative become ours.

May your Spirit move in and through us and the whole cosmos
so we might be bound to your justice and peace, mercy and compassion in
all our relations with one another and the earth.

Centre us on your truth
that we may know your presence and will in the community of Christ and
earth.

May your hope be our hope, and your vision our vision,
so destruction may be repaired, and death overcome with life.

Amen.

Notes

1. The WARC south-south member churches forum on confessing and covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth (*processus confessionis*), April 22-26 2003, Buenos Aires, Argentina, was attended by representatives from churches in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific, and members of the WARC taskforce on covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth (*processus confessionis*).
2. We are grateful to the ecumenical family, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Christian Conference of Asia, the Conference of European Churches, the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Latin American Council of Churches as well as the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Northeast Asia area council, the European area council, and the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Latin America (Aipral), who have been making the journey together through the regional consultations that have taken place in Asia (Seoul and Bangkok 1999), central and eastern Europe (Budapest, 2001), the Pacific (Fiji, 2001), western Europe (Soesterberg 2002), and Latin America (Buenos Aires, 2003).