

# PEACE ON EARTH AND PEACE WITH THE EARTH

## Memorandum

It was Reverend Dr. Lukas Vischer, our colleague and friend, who took the initiative for the John Knox Symposium on “Peace on Earth is Peace with the Earth”. But he died on March 11, 2008, six months before the Symposium took place on September 14 – 18, 2008. As we dedicate this work to his memory we wish to support his commitment of strengthening creation-theology as an essential contribution to the World Council of Churches’ Decade to Overcome Violence and the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation scheduled to take place in May 2011. In our papers and discussions we tried to get at the root causes of the earth crisis. Considering the nature of violence and the fascination that generates it caused us to take a fresh look at some of the deeply engrained features of the culture that dominates our lives. And we returned to key Biblical notions of hope and new creation in order to re-connect with the energizing presence of God in our world. The outcomes of our debates are summarized in the following memorandum. We trust that it will support the churches and the global ecumenical community in their search for proper responses to the urgent situation in which the world finds itself.

### 1. KEY ASPECTS OF THE EARTH CRISIS

Although all of us who were gathered at this consultation have been working on aspects of the earth crisis we were shocked as we were reminded anew of its gravity and utter urgency. The recent reports of the UN Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) - which some experts consider to be far too optimistic! - give clear evidence of the complex consequences of the global warming processes for all forms of life, not only human. They include:

- Intensifying cycles of extreme weather, including drought and flooding
- Melting of the polar ice cap with rising sea water threatening coastal cities
- Diminishing access to safe water, air and food
- Drastic loss of biodiversity, with drastic effects for all species including humans
- Rising levels of political, ethnic and community violence as people seek to protect themselves against the full effects of climate change.

All of this is happening faster than was previously anticipated. Humanity is approaching a ‘tipping point’ from which it will be difficult to even arrive at mitigating solutions; for the crisis itself can no longer be avoided. According to IPCC estimates, for instance, there will be 150 million climate refugees by the year 2050 placing further strain on our ability to create a decent life for all by meeting the minimum standards of the Millennium Development Goals. This in turn will itself contribute to the spiral of environmental degradation, forced migration, conflict and poverty. In the light of this, we are convinced of the urgency of the task facing governments, civil society, ordinary citizens, and communities of faith. Responding in a creative and sustained way to the earth crisis is now a matter of survival.

In order to do this adequately we need to understand its causes. Our analysis confirms the broad insight that the environmental crisis is a direct result of human cultures and economic systems. In this sense it is truly an earth crisis that affects not just the environment, but human life as well. An historical perspective helps us see that the Industrial Revolution, following hard on the heels of discoveries in science and technology, deepened an objectifying and instrumentalizing relationship of humans to the earth. Although we are in many ways beneficiaries of manifold successes in science and technology, we are also learning the hard truth that we, together with all living things, are the unwitting victims of the progress it has wrought.

The artificial distance between human culture and the earth which is typical of the “modern” era created the conditions under which economic progress encompassing the entire world took shape. One of the illusions on which it was based was, and still is, the belief that the earth’s resources can be used without limits in the service of human need and greed. A significant element in this was resource stripping throughout the globe in the colonial period. And many people in the South continue to live with this legacy today, as raw materials are taken from previously colonised nations to serve the economies of their former colonial masters. In our current context the market mechanisms of neo-liberal globalized capitalism continue to seek control of the earth’s resources such as water, food, air and human health to be commodified, privatised and treated as consumer goods to be traded through the ‘market’.

Consequently, it is impossible to separate this concern for the earth from our Christian attentiveness to the experiences and perspectives of the poor and marginalized, particularly in the South but also in more and more places in the North. For it is abundantly clear that while all of us, rich and poor, are affected by this crisis, the impact is felt disproportionately by people who have little access to power and privilege.

Yet what is at stake here is not just the fact that the poor and politically marginalised are the dominant victims of climate change and violence against the earth. Our analysis indicates that the same political and economic system which causes poverty and exclusion is also responsible for the earth crisis. This means that

violence against the earth and violence against the poor are intrinsically related. Social and ecological relations are embedded in the mechanisms of what we might call a syndrome of domination which can be described by terms such as colonialism, capitalism, developmentalism, consumerism, militarism, globalization, patriarchy, and racism. Our culture and economy exhibits a common pattern of abuse and disrespect of the earth and of marginal or subaltern communities.

One of the most difficult matters for us to engage with is that many poor people pin their hopes for a better life on the promises of the current economical and political systems to provide more factories, more jobs, better houses, more consumer goods, greater luxury. Yet, our analysis indicates that this is the selfsame economy which impoverishes and destroys the earth. **Legitimate hopes for livelihood security, community sustainability and human flourishing therefore have to be de-linked from the promises of the dominant culture.** This is a hard message to proclaim to those who have been victims of colonialism, political marginalisation and racist or ethnic abuse.

Alongside this hard message, however is a task of immeasurable importance. This is to recognise that the Industrial Revolution, Colonialism and Political marginalisation have been accompanied by an **epistemological violence** in which the wisdom and insights of people in the South, as well as women, indigenous people and racially marginalised communities have been at best ignored and at worst intentionally destroyed in the name of 'progress' and 'development'. Recovering this wisdom and honouring these perspectives is a crucial challenge for today.

All of this presents a particular challenge for Christianity because it has been deeply related to the Industrial Revolution, to colonialism and to such epistemological violence. But while Christianity is part of the crisis the Gospel of Christ helps us to see the earth crisis in which we are as a *Kairos* moment for the Earth Community. Hence what is required is a theologically informed political engagement, a re-engagement with the resources of our faith traditions interpreted from the standpoint of those who suffer most, a re-imagination of our liturgies, rituals, proclamation, and diaconal ministries to affirm, protect, and celebrate life. The *Kairos* moment carries the promise to re-invent Christian witness as a resistance movement that will contribute to liberating earth and its children from the forces of decay and destruction.

## **2. Assessing Root Causes**

The ecumenical movement helps us to encounter and to understand the ecological interrelatedness of human communities in and with the earth community. At this moment of crisis within many human communities and within the larger earth communities of life, it is crucial to also understand the

interrelatedness between social and ecological forms of domination and violence. Domination of both human societies and particular peoples, and as a form of relating to the natural world is governed by complex sets of ideas, structures and actions. Domination and violence, while destructive, are connected to **a fascination with the exercise of power and the capacity to inflict pain and destroy dignity**. They involve a refusal to recognize the selfhood and moral agency of the other, and they reduce rather than enable the potential for life to flourish, or even survive.

As said above, the consequences of violence and domination, and the ensuing sufferings, are grossly uneven in their impact on human communities and on other life forms within the earth community. The use of power and the responsibility for these forms of violence and domination need to be considered in terms of invasive and oppressive systems that benefit some to the detriment of many. **We need an accurate method of assessing responsibility and accountability**, with a specific focus on the hidden ecological, social, cultural and personal costs. Guilt is not equally shared.

As we judge the difficulties of our era, we must come to terms with **several levels of sin**. Traditionally, the Christian emphasis focussed on personal sin, but now we must also consider structural and social sin. Cultural ideas, structures and practices that promote, or do not limit, domination and violence necessitate an understanding of social sin and require cultural repentance. The rampant destruction of earth's life communities requires an understanding of **ecological sin**, and ecological repentance.

Christian communities **affirm the ever-present opportunity of *metanoia***: that repentance, forgiveness, and new life is possible. The transforming grace of Christ continues to reconcile the world to God's love, within the creative and healing powers of God's Spirit. This empowers us to take responsibility, and to immerse ourselves into the urgent and radical conversion of our ethos, life styles, ethical actions and policies for strategic change.

Facing the massive scale of social inequities and ecological damage can be overwhelming. The awareness of our guilt, albeit unevenly shared, can be so severe as to become paralyzing. It is not surprising, therefore, that there should be so much **massive denial and scapegoating in the face of the earth crisis**. If we could not be part of the community that firmly believes in God's presence as forgiving, sustaining and loving creation, our coping with both the depth of the crisis and of our responsibility for it could be unbearable. Where we can confess guilt and speak of a loving God, we can grieve and lament the irreversible losses to humans, other species and ecosystems. Hopefully, such lament can become a joyful grief, a baptism of tears. It allows us to open our minds and hearts, and gives us the courage to acknowledge the truths about what is occurring. This opens the door to a renewed hope.

*Metanoia* is a journey and a daily struggle in the service of life. Within the body of Christ we are sustained with companionship, and encouraged to **adopt an ascetic practice of living within limits**, and releasing greed that binds the consumer and crushes the lives of others. As we turn from a selfish trespassing into the living spaces of others we strive to become partners of life-sustaining communities.

Within God's *oikonomie*, it is urgent that **we attend to the building up of the world - oikodome**. We are, in Christ, a new creation. We are thus responsible for new ways of relating, for participating in developing ecological alternatives, and for supporting communities of resistance and resilience. We gratefully acknowledge many prophetic examples of communities already living alternatives, conviviality and hope.

### **3. God's Presence – Hope in Hopeless Times**

How can we become – and remain – people of hope in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation? The response is based on our faith in a God who, in the words of St. John's Gospel, "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." ( 3. 16) Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection, is the central mystery of God's unconditional commitment to the wellbeing of creation, to the healing of all wounds, to the righting of all injustices, to the flourishing of all. We put our trust in a God who subverts and disarms the existing structures of violence by entering this world as a child born to a Jewish woman at the margin of the Roman Empire, first proclaimed to poor shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem. This **subversive love** is expressed in the ministry of this Jesus and most visibly manifested in his crucifixion. The good shepherd and the lamb slain for the sins of many – these are two of the metaphors with which the "people of the Way", as Christ's followers were first called, have attempted to express the disarming and anti-violent nature of God.

That such subversive love has immense political and indeed cosmic proportions is expressed in the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic texts which are also found in the New Testament. Their central message is that God's power reigns supreme. This is the perspective within which all empires are held to account, their corruption and cruelty judged and their lies exposed. At the same time the powerless followers of Christ are graced with courage and perseverance and thus empowered to endure persecution whenever and wherever it becomes unavoidable.

The hope to which the presence of God is calling us sharpens our sense of realism. It is *spes contra spem*, hope against hope. In this spirit we affirm the possibility of redemption. **It is possible to reconcile enemies, to overcome entrenched systems of enmity, to repair and restore unjust and broken relationships.** We believe that the energies of God that sustain all forms of life call out for our

cooperation. Energy and synergy are interrelated. In the New Testament this is often expressed in words related to the Greek word for house or home: “oikos”. We can see **creation as a house of life** within which human beings are called to dwell. Indwelling, not domination is the joyful goal to which human beings are called.

This also calls us to reconsider seriously the tendencies in Christian theology and spiritual life that have denigrated matter as something without value in itself. That has also had a far-reaching impact on the ways in which the human body was thought of. Often it was regarded as a dangerous set of impulses and forces that needed to be subjected to reason and controlled by will. This has produced severe implications for the relationships between men and women. Since women were widely seen as creatures ruled by bodily impulses whereas men were supposedly guided by reason and will, structures of female subordination and male domination were set up. Furthermore, this perception has been extended to the understanding of nature. It was not seen in its intrinsic value and integrity, but as a system of forces threatening human lives and as a base of good to be used for human needs and whims. The earth crisis that we are now facing does not only signify the breaking down of the carrying capacities of the earth’s ecosystems within which human activity was possible. It is also indicative of human greed and, what is more, human estrangement from the very foundations of life.

In other words: We humans need to learn afresh **what indwelling really entails**. And as Christian communities encouraged by hope in the impossible we are called to redirect our ways and to provide useful examples that others may be attracted to follow.

In this context it is necessary for Christian theology to critically re-assess its tendency to over-identify with philosophical thought forms and lifestyles that have mainly developed in Europe. Other cultural and religious traditions and their ways of looking at creation have been discarded widely. This needs to change. The wisdom traditions in Indigenous cultures, such as *ubuntu* and *bophelo* in large areas of Southern Africa or *sangseng* in Korea, are important components in **rediscovering the art of peace-building within God’s creation**. This leads directly to the cooperation with emerging social movements at local, national and global levels that attempt to protect, and work within, the sustaining structures of life on earth. In this context we refer specifically to the great efforts that have gone into the creation of the “Earth Charter. A declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. (For details: [www.EarthCharter.org](http://www.EarthCharter.org))

There are many ways in which Christian communities can deepen their spiritual and liturgical life in order \*  
to affirm more openly our faith in God the Creator,  
\* to celebrate the life-giving breath of God in all creation,

- \* to affirm joyfully the reign of God (*basileia theou*) as the manifestation of hope in contexts of oppression, despair, exclusion and suffering,
- \* to provide room for lament and grieving so that they can transform themselves into sources of strength and endurance
- \* to create spaces for the restoring of peace (*shalom*) within ourselves, within human communities and within the earth community.

There are stories and examples of this peace-building activity in the Bible to which we can turn. We only refer here to the Sabbath and Jubilee ordinances in ancient Israel, Noah's Ark, Joseph's food security programme in Egypt, the post-exilic reconstruction-programme of Ezra and Nehemia. We are part of an inspiring history of hope in the midst of great adversities and called upon to add our own chapter.

#### 4. Hope in action

Groaning as it does through an ecological crisis of epochal proportions, the earth calls for and is in desperate need of a vision of peace that will enable it to restore itself in accord with its own intrinsic dynamism. A faith that transforms minds and people and generates transformative actions is the crying need of the present era. Such a faith engaged with the world places peace with earth and justice for its peoples at its core.

As communities of hope Churches are able to live and act for an earth that is in tune with its natural, ecological and sustaining patterns and cycles, for an earth that is cherished and valued as part of God's wholesome creation. Churches have the framework to engender action for ecological justice for communities. They are well placed to offer modes of thinking and approaches that can lead its members on a path to an ecologically informed *metanoia*, and develop the appropriate ethical perspectives for responding to the imperatives arising from 'peace with earth'.

In this spirit we call on Christian churches and other communities of faith to act with and alongside all communities in the following ways:

Sustained by hope in God's presence Churches can be **agents of truth against the constructs of deceptions, lies and denials**. To tell the truth implies the naming of the underlying logic and driving principles of the dominant economic and political philosophy. It confronts and resists against the trend of systematic exploitation and abuse of the earth. We need to challenge the 'empire' worldview resulting in unjust political structures based on an overarching neo-liberal, capitalistic, free market economic and

political system reinforced in turn by other interrelated systems emerging from it. The effects of such a global arrangement are real and quantifiable: an earth plundered for its resources, and communities left ecologically and economically impoverished, politically voiceless and powerless. Against such a backdrop, Churches are called to provide a prophetic voice and leadership by standing with and among the marginalized. In this sense Christian communities can be instruments of *Education, Awareness raising, and Conscientisation*. We wish to highlight the following key aspects:

1. Working for **Eco-literacy**. Congregations and others should be assisted with information, analysis and theological understanding regarding the depth and extent of the ecological crisis facing humanity. While such a contribution will delineate the physical and environmental damage, it should not stop there. By linking it with broader and deeper philosophical and cultural contexts, it should help bring to the surface concerns and insights regarding to driving and destructive role of anthropocentrism which has widely dominated decision making on the use and application of the earth's resources.

2. A further step is **the development of an ethics of intrinsic worth of all creation**. Churches are called to become actively involved. As we have said already this goes against the powerful ideologies in modern times that regard nature as a set of resources to be used exclusively and ruthlessly for the benefit of human beings, especially the economic and political elites. Hence the new point of view should be to focus on educational principles that critique and challenge the rampant abuses and enable human beings, children and youth especially, to value nature as an intrinsic part of God's creation. Nature exists as an interconnected economy of life, designed to promote life, dependent on a immensely subtle mutuality of dependencies and directed towards intimate systems of fairness and justice for all living things.

3. These goals are complemented by efforts to **educate persons and communities for lifestyles in harmony with nature**. Materially advanced Western societies, and elite sections of populations in the developing world, are characterized by consumption patterns that are energy-rich, over-exploitative of resources, and highly wasteful. Instead we need lifestyles that are simpler, less demanding of resources, less wasteful and in harmony with nature.

4. Church communities will gain credibility if and when they develop **alternative modes of practice and lifestyle**. The Christian responses to the earth crisis become tangible in their attempts to live in practical ways what is said above. This calls for concrete **behavioural change**. Church history provides examples and models of people living in monastic and similar communities grounded on a theology and practice of sharing, simplicity and mutual concern. In contemporary times we can point to congregations that try to run their buildings and to operate their programmes in such ways as to make them CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral.

These efforts point to the need to incorporate concepts such as ‘an ecological audit’ for our styles of living. Further, we refer to communities that develop communal gardens, to theological seminaries that train their ministers and other persons with leadership responsibilities to become skilled gardeners, thus setting useful examples for others to become more mindful of nature and to strengthen forms of self-reliance. There are many more ways in which churches are called to take the lead by educating the faithful towards alternative modes of living and thus to steer them away from the materialism that is aggressively advertised and promoted in the media and the market place. Peace with Earth is possible if we live by the values of sustainability, respect, inclusiveness, justice, equality and solidarity.

It goes without saying that such a message and way of life is countercultural. There will be strong opposition from various quarters on different grounds. The warlords of this world are not easily overcome. But churches can persist with their message that is founded in the Gospel of Christ and right for the earth because they can rely on the presence of God’s Spirit as the creative and sustaining power in and between all things.