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Commitment after accra

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ENGAGEMENT

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Commitment after Accra: In Europe

Jan Gerd Heetderks, Oosterhout, The Netherlands

Declaration of Accra (WARC 2004)

5. *We have heard that creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation (Romans 8.22). We are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself. We see a dramatic convergence between the suffering of the people and the damage done to the rest of creation.*
6. *The signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted. The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death.*
7. *We live in a scandalous world that denies God's call to life for all. The annual income of the richest 1% is equal to that of the poorest 57%, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition.*

This is the beginning of the “Declaration of Accra”¹ and sets out the area in which the Churches are acting. We find another expression of these ideas in the glad confession “The earth is the Lord’s!” God should reign and not Capitalism, not an unbridled materialistic way of behaving and not an uncontrolled accumulation of wealth and unrestricted growth.

Although a good many formulations in the Declaration of Accra and several analyses of the current situation have led to criticism in some European churches, the subject-matter has been widely taken up and European churches have again put the question of justice and poverty on the ecclesiastical agenda as a matter of urgency.

Many Reformed churches within Europe have in the last years conducted an animated discussion on the consequences of globalization – particularly on the consequences of “Capitalism without bounds”:

1 <http://www.pkn.nl/site/uploadedDocs/TheAccraConfession.pdf>

What conditions are necessary for trade to be fair and just? What qualifications are needed in the money-market, what significance should money be permitted to have? Which ethical criteria are necessary for an economy which serves the people? What are the consequences of the assertion that trade controls everything, what kind of ethics is concealed behind this self-regulated market?

What are the tasks facing the Church in this context and how can it meet them? The WARC in Europe together with the Reformed Alliance in Germany has produced a survey of the main emphases and projects in which the Reformed churches in Europe – following the Declaration of Accra – are involved against unfair structures of globalization.

Alongside the “traditional” projects against poverty or the projects of political co-operation in development, more and more ventures to help the poor are emerging in Europe. Currently the topic of “Child Poverty” is moving increasingly to the fore.

A further central focus of European commitment can be seen in projects relating to the protection of the climate and the preservation of a balanced agriculture.

Here it is above all the large European Reformed Churches – Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands – which are doing sound work and have developed outstanding exemplary projects. This may depend on resources of money and personnel, but certainly also on the fact that these large institutions constantly seek the partnership of non-governmental organizations and work in co-operation with them.

The discussions in the European Churches had various main focuses:

Analysis

What are the real driving-forces in our economic system? Where does money become Mammon? Where is God’s sovereignty totally undermined and other agencies (money, the obsession with capital, economic or military interests) are the real driving-forces of global development? The General Secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, Dr. A.J. Plaisier, writes on the current crisis:

“There are two elements which at present are to the fore:

- 1. Our economic system has become a system which can be described in Shakespeare’s words: Money breeds money. The medium of exchange has taken over control. That can go well for a long time ... until the system nevertheless breaks down.*
- 2. Our economic order is directed exclusively to the increase of our own wealth. The unrestrained growth of material wealth lets others pay the bill. Which others? Who are the debtors? One day they will stand on our doorstep: Human nature*

which has become spiritually poor; the indigent who were unable to participate; the third World, becoming impoverished; the natural springs which have dried up; the earth, which cannot endure this gluttony”²

Dialogue with Politics and Commerce.

The Church does not live for itself. The Church lives in dialogue with people. For this reason the churches regularly seek dialogue with those responsible in politics and commerce on the questions thrown up in Accra. Here it is a matter of discussions on the economic system as such, also – and above all – with emphatic reference to the responsibility of politics and commerce for the poor in the South, but also in their own land. In the economic crisis various churches have sought contact with their governments to point out emphatically that savings should not be made in the area of developmental aid or affect the poor in their own land.

Thus, for example, the conference of European churches at the beginning of May 2009 drew attention in an open letter to the Presidents of the European Union under the title, “The economic crisis is a call for change”,³ to the consequences of undirected globalization, and in the course of this demanded ethical conditions for the political action of the EU.

Examination of its own Finances

How does the church itself use its money? How does it spend its money? Critical analyses have taken place on this topic, and decisions – some radical – have been made (e.g. the pension fund of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands recently invested 10 million Euros in the Ecumenical Developmental Co-operative, Oikokredit).

Development work by the Church

The churches’ development work has gone on undiminished. In the process it is conspicuous that co-operation with commercial businesses has also been more intensively sought. In such co-operation the churches function as bridges: They warn businessmen and women to conduct their businesses in a socially vigilant way and to accept responsibility. “Corporate Social Responsibility”, the taking on of responsibility for social development by companies, is one of the particularly forward-looking projects of this co-operation.

² www.pkn.nl

³ <http://www.ccc-kek.org/pdf/Openletter5May2009.pdf>

Poverty in Europe

When one speaks of poverty in Europe one must add: this is nothing like the existential poverty under which the people in the developing countries suffer. Basically no one in Germany, Poland or Portugal has to go hungry or do without clothing or somewhere to live. No one is turned away from hospital when he or she needs medical treatment. And no one has to pay for schooling. The social net may in the meantime have developed holes, but it exists – just. Yet: It is indisputable that economization, e.g. in educational establishments, intensifies the problem of poverty. In the meantime it has been scientifically proved that children from poorer homes have less chance of achieving qualified school-leaving certificates. We have said for a long time – poverty is hereditary. Charitable organizations, trade unions and academics have for years been warning of the increasing poverty in Europe. Naturally “European poverty” – in comparison with the poverty in the countries of the South – is different, is not life-threatening. Yet it excludes people, deprives them of a voice and puts them at a disadvantage.

A Quotation about Poverty in Germany:

“27% of the people in Western Pomerania live beneath the poverty threshold. Western Pomerania is the poorest region in Germany. Anyone who has less than 60% of the average income counts as poor. The poverty threshold in Germany in 2007 for a person living alone was 764 Euros per month, for a couple without children 1,376 Euros, for a couple with two children 1,835 Euros. Those particularly threatened by poverty are the unemployed and single parents and their children.”⁴

In most European countries almost all areas of daily life are regulated by the market – by money. People find themselves in poverty when their income cannot supply the subsistence minimum. But how high must this income be? In Germany the Social Welfare Allowance counts as the “official” borderline to poverty. Other calculations start from the national average income: Anyone who does not have at least more than half of this average income counts as poor.⁵

Children are particularly affected by poverty. A study made by the European Union postulates that one in five children in Europe is poor.⁶ Half of these children come from single-parent families or families with numerous children. A person who has little money at her or his disposal tends to be undernourished,

4 <http://www1.ndr.de/nachrichten/armutsatlas100.html>

5 http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/child_poverty_leaflet_de.pdf

6 http://1.bpb.de/themen/HJSR7B,O,O,EUSozialbericht_beklagt_Kinderarmut.html

worries more, is more easily affected by psychological illnesses such as depression, and has fewer possibilities of changing his or her situation. When one looks at the development of poverty in Europe under the conditions of globalization – and especially too with the consequences of the financial crisis – the prognoses are devastating. The commitment of churches and social welfare institutions will be called upon in future even more than before.

What are the Churches doing?

The Churches are intensely and extensively involved – which two examples here may illustrate.

The Children's Table Project (Kindertafel)

Even in Germany many children suffer from hunger. And by far not every child receives a warm meal each day. The Evangelical Church of Westphalia (PCW) is continuing its campaign against child poverty, "Don't let us down", with the *Kindertafel* programme. The campaign of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia aims to make people in the church and in society in general aware of their share of responsibility and to thematize the background and consequences of child poverty. To the political goals and demands of the Westphalian Church's campaign belong – in addition to a hot meal each day for every child – children's participation in the life of the community irrespective of the financial situation in their homes. To this belong among other things free places in nursery-schools and open whole-day schools, free schoolbooks, access to computers and the internet, participation in school excursions and access to public cultural and leisure activities. Here, however, it is not simply a matter of material things but of love, security and acceptance. For: "Poverty does not begin with underprovision of material goods but when people are not given recognition, when they cannot enter with their abilities into the life shared by all."

Helpen onder protest – Help under Protest

The Protestant Church in the Netherlands has requested the diaconal services in the local parishes to register cases of poverty and also to register what kind of help and lobbying is being carried out by the congregations. The results of the investigation⁷ are regularly presented to the responsible minister in order to refute the myth that everyone can live well on Social Security and at the same time to indicate how many stitches in the network of provision the state-run institutions let drop in their accompaniment of the poor. Material is also produced for the diaconal organizations of the local parishes – how and by what means they

⁷ The investigation of 2008 can be found under: <http://www.kerkinactie.nl/site/uploadedDocs/PovertyintheNetherlandschurchesinvestigation2008.pdf>

for their part can give concrete help to the poor and, on the other hand, how they can forcefully and effectively represent the interests of the poor to the responsible civic authorities.

The Churches in the European area of the WARC have assumed responsibility in various projects. In so doing they have taken into account the fact that in Europe too, many people have been affected by the changes brought about by globalization. What many people even today cannot imagine: In the traditional “Welfare States” of Europe there is dire poverty. The European Churches are committing themselves under conditions which are increasingly more difficult – declining financial resources and a growing secularization of society increasingly hamper their engagement.

Following the Declaration of Accra the European churches have reconsidered and extended their engagement in manifold ways. Inter alia they have done this as a reaction to the Accra Declaration which emphatically demands that all economy and all capital should serve humanity. For: *“The earth is the Lord’s!”*

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