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19

FIGHTING CORRUPTION IN AND BY CHURCHES. AN IMPORTANT TASK OF CHURCH LEADERS

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No, it is not because I was personally confronted with cases of corruption or because I have been tempted, and it is not because I have lost my job as a whistleblower (an informant who reports cases of corruption), that I have dealt with the issue of fighting corruption for the last twelve years. Economic and ethical analyses have much rather opened my eyes to the fact that corruption can enormously obstruct development and moral credibility. This insight inspired me to found in 1995 the Swiss chapter of Transparency International (TI), the worldwide known NGO against corruption that has chapters in 90 countries.¹ And, during my twelve years of church development cooperation as director of Bread for all, I heard many examples of corruption in churches and by church representatives on all levels. I have become a Wailing Wall for young professionals and church staff in developing countries who wanted to fight corruption but are not supported or are blocked by church leaders. It was them who showed me how much churches are also involved in these mechanisms. Churches are part of the problem, but also part of the solution. Together with church-related partners we therefore launched and supported projects in Africa and Asia for corruption-free schools and churches, described in various publications.²

Responsible leadership must include transparent leadership. Transparency is the opposite of corruption which conducts financial transactions in darkness, ‘under the table’ and not on the table. *To become corruption-free, churches have to ensure they have corruption-free church leaders.* The Mutirão (panel discussion) on ‘How to become a corruption-free church?’ at the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Porto Alegre in February 2006 proposed as first step to elaborate a Code of Leadership which should be signed by church leaders as their personal commitment and underlining their credibility.

1. Not All Evils Are Based on Corruption

Today, the term ‘corruption’ is used excessively. Some are likely to apply this term to all the evils in the world. A few theologians refer to the Latin term *corruptio*, describing apart from corruption also bribery and generally including also the distance from God and the malice of the world from the Fall of Man to the New Testament. But in so doing, the term assumes such a broad meaning that it is no longer of any use and disguises the facts instead of making them transparent. Therefore, I plead for a restricted and simple definition, in the way it is widely used in political and economic contexts: *Corruption is the abuse of public or private power for personal interests.*

There are different kinds of corruption: the *corruption of poverty* (*petty corruption*) has its roots in poverty; the *corruption of power* (*grand corruption*) is rooted in the greed for more power, influence and wealth or in the safeguarding of the existing power and economic position; the *corruption of procurement* and the *corruption of acceleration* serve the purpose of obtaining goods and services that otherwise would not be available or delivered on time, or only with much greater administrative expenses; the *grey corruption* is the grey zone between corruption, nepotism, favouritism and collusion. This article refers to these limited and internationally acknowledged definitions and avoids calling all evils ‘corruption’!³

2. Many Forms of Corruption from Bribes to Sex

Corruption has diverse forms. In the private economic and state sector, many studies have been undertaken.⁴ Here, we limit ourselves to the church sector. Two areas have to be distinguished: corruption within an institution and corruption in the interaction between the institution and society. In societies in which all sectors are affected by corruption (as in many developing countries), it is evident that – unfortunately – churches as part of society are also concerned. Here, we are talking about services ranging from paying kickbacks to obtain state services such as travel documents or legal papers such as land right titles or building permits to construct a church, up to influencing criminal law proceedings, ransoming drugs at customs for hospitals, etc.

More distressful is corruption within the churches themselves, because it could be avoided more easily than when it occurs in the interaction with other parts of society – at least, this is what one could assume. Examples of this kind of corruption are found or heard of in many countries, especially in Africa and Asia. They include signing over church property to private property (e.g. land or rectory), buying

182 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

documents by means of bribes, buying electoral votes in cases of church leadership elections, allocating scholarship to one's own children according to non-transparent criteria or by circumventing the approved criteria, deviating ear-marked funds (e.g. from mission and development cooperation) for other purposes than those agreed upon (this action is often not tied to personal advantage, but simply shows that there is an overall lack of money or liquidity or that it is a consequence of inadequate management and planning of finances). Even admitting students into theological seminaries or church schools, or transferring project applications may here and there be corrupted by paying out bribes.

The sexual abuse of students as a condition to be admitted to a school or to pass an exam is a widespread practice in non-church schools – this has been clearly stated in the Program for Corruption-Free Schools in West Africa – but cannot be completely excluded in church-run schools. A study in East Africa estimated that it is even higher than in public schools. Sexual abuse is a direct form of corruption because it is an abuse of public power (e.g. as a teacher) for the benefit of personal interests.

Grey corruption in the form of clan nepotism or ethnical affiliation can be observed in particular when accessing church offices and positions. Yet, this occurs in another form not only in developing countries but also in industrialised countries. The necessity of larger church development organisations to have a substantial outflow of means with too scarce project staff or a cutback of job positions can foster corrupt practices, as too many funds always flow through the same channels and individuals. In the case of emergency aid, there are particular difficulties tied to it, namely, that one should be able to help as fast as possible and that one depends on material, permits or transport opportunities that are for example controlled by rebel groups that impose their own conditions.⁵

In the field of microcredits, the relevance of which has been rightfully promoted now,⁶ corruption may arise for example in hidden and not easily recognisable forms of writing off credits. A credit officer grants a credit via two different detours to a relative who seemingly cannot pay the credit back, and the credit officer writes it off upon apparently comprehensive reasons (e.g. AIDS-incurred death of the first borrower). As president of ECLOF International (i.e. the Ecumenical Church Loan Fund), having its head office in Geneva, I was confronted with several such cases. They clearly lead to the dismissal of the involved staff members as such cases can not be tolerated.⁷ The donors of church development agencies and missionary societies have a special co-responsibility not to support fallible partners but to openly call them to account. Here, I have identified – and it has been clearly confirmed at two conferences with German missionary soci-

eties – that often staff members of these agencies and societies are willing to apply the necessary standards including sanctions, but the church leadership of the Northern partner church recoils from it and protects the church leader from the South, because they are friends and he fears negative headlines. In contrast to that, it is my experience that donors react very positively when they learn that church agencies have courageously and outspokenly fought corruption, in particular among their own ranks.⁸ So much can be heard and read about corruption, that it can only be beneficial to adopt a pro-active, forward-looking strategy. With such a communication strategy donations can even increase and must not be affected.

3. Carcinogenic Effects

As many studies show, corruption has disastrous effects on all sectors of society. These effects concern financial, political, ecological, cultural, moral and religious aspects: misdirection of development⁹ (wrong allocation of resources); increased indebtedness; lack of tax and state income; tax evasion; reduction of quality in the provision of services, increased risks (safety, health, environment); negative economic effects¹⁰ such as distortion of competition/market; economic inefficiency; obstruction to investments; increase of the gap of affluence and of non-transparency; extortion; loss of confidence in state and economy; weakening of the moral integrity of individuals and institutions; loss of democracy (corruption at elections); violation of human rights;¹¹ violation of the principle of gender justice; weakening of the law system; support of dictatorships and rebel groups (which partially finance themselves and their activities with money from corruption); risking the reputation of development cooperation and church credibility. It is particularly serious if the *four sectors* of society that should offer orientation are involved in corrupt practices: *courts of justice, religious communities, media and schools!*

In some countries, the corruption payments to and from state and private bodies amount to the country's overall indebtedness, as has been shown by several studies. Hence, its relevance as to the implications on development cooperation is huge. At the same time, development organisations and churches invest a surprisingly small amount of manpower and funds in the fight against corruption, compared to the important efforts for debt relief! It is also correct and important that the global fight against HIV/AIDS has received major support and that churches now run big programs against HIV/AIDS. AIDS kills, but if we consider the negative effects that were just enumerated, corruption also kills – directly and indirectly – hundred thousands of people annually. Corruption is to society what cancer or drug

dependence is to a body: it infiltrates all segments and destroys from within the organs of life until the body (or a society) collapses. I will come back to this analogy below.

4. The Bible: in Unconditional Manner Against Corruption

Corruption not only has political and economic effects; it also undermines values that are vital for the coexistence within a society: injustice instead of justice; inequality instead of equal rights also for the poor; lies instead of the truth; extortion instead of freedom; theft instead of performance; unpredictability instead of rationality and efficiency; non-transparency instead of co-determination and participation; manipulation instead of human dignity; self-interest instead of general welfare; irresponsible use of power instead of power used with responsibility.

Corruption is almost as old as humanity, at least it is known to have occurred since the beginnings of jurisdiction. When looking for ethical criteria to judge corruption, biblical insights may be illuminating. Various comprehensive theological-ethical studies are dealing with it.¹²

The oldest reference to corruption in the *Old Testament* seems to be found in the book of Exodus, only three chapters after the Ten Commandments. 'Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe makes people blind to what is right and ruins the cause of those who are innocent' (Ex 23:8) This prohibition of corruption dates back to the times before the kings and is not accidentally addressed to judges not to accept bribes. An unbiased jurisdiction is vital for every legal system. Also, in the environment of the Old Testament, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the phenomenon of corruption was known, but here in the book of Exodus a law against corruption has already been drawn up! It is also important to note that the ethical justification used to prohibit corruption is truth and justice, in particular the legal protection of the poor, as is shown in other verses. 'Ah, you who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!' (Isa 5:23) The goal of fighting corruption is to protect the poor and the weaker from the corrupt practices of the powerful. But at the same time corrupt practices of poor people are condemned and not justified. 'You shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit' (Ex 23:3). One cannot justify corruption because it is a result of poverty.

Even before the time of the kings the sons of Samuel are said to have accepted bribes for their own benefit (1 Sam 8:3). In the Book of Kings it becomes clear that corruption was also used in external affairs and in military matters: allies of the adversary were offered bribes to use military actions against him (1 Kings 15:19; 2 Kings 16:8).

The prophets are also very clear about the effects of corruption. Corruption kills. Corruption destroys life. 'In you, they take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbours by extortion.' (Ezek 22:12) Similar in Psalm 15:1 and 5: 'O Lord, who may abide in your tent? ... Those who do not lend money at interest and do not take a bribe against the innocent.' The prophet and the psalm mention in the same verse corruption and usury! The effect is the same: exploitation; reduction of life expectancy and violation of just distribution. Wealth must be rooted in good performance and not based on exploitation, therefore 'better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice' (Prov 16:8).

The theological justification of refusing corruption becomes clear in particular with the prophets. God Yahweh is incorruptible, as he is the right and justice himself. This is why he is not trying to bribe King Kyros when he repatriates his people from exile to their land (as some individuals among the people may have proposed and hoped). Corruption destroys communities. Whoever uses the evil of bribery is called pagan and is thus called as being excluded from the community with God (Prov 17:23). Devout is he who does not take bribes (Ps 26:10).

Cases of bribery are also mentioned in the *New Testament*. And again, bribery is always condemned. In connection with the events around Passion and Easter, it is reported that Judas was bribed by high priests (Mark 14:10f). The elites of the Roman Empire under Pontius Pilate have been heavily corrupt. And Pilate in cooperation with the Jewish authorities (Synhedrium) killed Jesus. Corruption kills, in a double sense: it killed Jesus of Nazareth and Judas hanged himself (Matt 27:5) because he lost all self-respect through corruption. High priests and elders also bribed the soldiers to spread the lie that the body of Christ was not resurrected but stolen (whether these passages are historical is controversial). The Acts of the Apostles report on how judges were bribed, the governor Felix wanted some money from Paul, to sentence him less severely (Acts 24:26f). It is also documented that customs – controlled by the Romans – was corrupt at the time of Jesus; this fact is also shown by the story of chief tax collector Zacchaeus who illegally acquired goods and who later gave half of his belongings to the poor (Luke 19:1-10). The corruptibility of the spirit is probably the most dangerous form of corruption: Simon the magician offered money to the apostles Peter and John, thus trying to buy the power so that anyone he places his hands on would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:8-24). To draw a moral from this story, it shows that what is an inalienable power of God cannot be acquired with underhand dealings.

The relevance of these biblical insights – mostly conveyed in narrative stories – for the ethics of fighting corruption lies in the fact that

the stories reflect images of successful life and of a society that knows no corruption. There is no single verse in the Bible which justifies corruption! But many verses offer a very clear analysis of the effects of corruption and very clear values of a corruption-free society, which can be summarised as follows:

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|---|-------------------------|
| • Corruption kills and destroys life | God wants life |
| • Corruption oppresses the rights of the poor | God wants justice |
| • Corruption hinders economic performance | God wants honest wealth |
| • Corruption destroys trust and confidence | God wants community |
| • Corruption strengthens violence and military forces | God wants peace |
| • Corruption destroys integrity and credibility | God wants dignity |

5. The Course of a Disease and the Healing Process

Let us take up the analogy of corruption as a disease like cancer or rather as an addiction, in order to describe six therapy stages towards overcoming corruption. How do we overcome an addiction?

Stage 1: minimisation and justification. Corruption is justified as a culture of giving presents. The language hushes up facts (in business: ‘useful additional expenses’ instead of ‘bribes’), talks about corruption only in private.

Stage 2: the problem starts exerting pressure. The economic and political pressure on individuals and companies increases. The payments of bribes reach the limit of tolerability in economic terms.

Stage 3: acknowledgement of the addiction. ‘Yes, I am sick, our institution or our society is sick. Measures are required.’

Stage 4: decision of zero tolerance. In the same way as an alcoholic recognises that he can only get away from his addiction if he completely renounces alcohol and not only a little; the zero tolerance decision as to corruption is taken. And subsequently, programs to combat corruption as well as codes of conduct are introduced, etc.

Stage 5: accept support. ‘We need support as we are unable to get out of our addiction ourselves.’ National laws and international conventions with inherent sanctions are important support mechanisms.

Stage 6: healing. A corruption-free life is developing. Yet, it is necessary to remain vigilant as corruption can come back at any time. Zero tolerance must be maintained even if corruption decreases.

6. Therapy Measures Undertaken by Churches

I witnessed and observed these stages of fighting corruption in particular as founder and president of the Swiss chapter of Transparency International in the years 1994-2004. Today, in the international debate and efforts we have reached stage 3-5 in the political and economic field. As to the churches, we have only reached stage 3 in many countries, sometimes even not this public acknowledgement. In order to move the healing process forward to stage 4-6 also in churches, we finally need concrete steps by implementing binding programs and agreements, initiated or at least led by the church leaders.

The beginning has been encouraging: in many places churches or parts of them start raising their voice against corruption, mostly against corruption within state and society, and increasingly against corruption within the churches. Public statements in Cameroon and Nigeria, codes of conduct connected to a plan of action in India, campaigns for corruption-free schools in Western Africa, publication in China, training courses for the church finance officers in Eastern Africa, self-commitment and anti-corruption clauses in agreements of missionary societies and aid agencies, publications about biblical reflections in Madagascar, a church campaign for corruption-free schools in Western Africa, a letter from the Argentinian churches from the South to the churches in the North on the connection of indebtedness and corruption, an anti-corruption plan of the All African Church Conference (AACC) in Nairobi – all these are just a few encouraging examples.¹³

Often these initiatives emerge from stress-induced suffering. Wherever it is about corruption in the state system, the church leadership publish relevant declarations. Yet, when we talk about corruption within the church structures, we often find courageous individuals in church-related special institutions or even staff members of church parishes who are very often called back or even sanctioned by their church leadership. When a church governing board has lost the trust of its members due to corruption, then the new church leadership feels often motivated and forced to introduce measures to fight corruption.

Women in churches have an important role to play in fighting corruption. Since they often are more affected by corrupt practices than men and since they often are still less involved in power structures of churches, they are more independent to speak and act against corruption. But women and men together have to undertake the efforts. Otherwise the addiction cannot be stopped.¹⁴ The whistleblowers should not be punished but protected as it is more and more the case with anonymous call centres for whistleblowers in companies and governmental administration.¹⁵ A doctor who tells a patient that he is sick should not be sanctioned, but taken seriously.

188 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

As examples of encouraging measures, I would like to mention two global church statements aimed at fighting corruption. The 8th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare in 1998 called its member churches – in the declaration ‘The Debt Issue: A Jubilee Call to End the Stranglehold of Debt on Impoverished Peoples’ – ‘to work for an ethical governance in all countries and legislative action against all forms of corruption and misuse of loans.’¹⁶

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) approved a plan of action for economic justice and environmental questions at its 24th General Assembly in Accra in August 2004. Upon the proposal of the author of this text it states in the ‘Report of the Public Issues Committee’ in the section on ‘Economic and Environmental Justice’ as recommendations to the churches that they should ‘...5. Commit themselves to eradicating corruption within the churches by implementing existing and new plans (e.g. AACC General Assembly and NCC India).’¹⁷

However, the encouraging measures taken by the churches so far are not enough. This is why the WARC proposal has now to be taken up and put into concrete steps.

7. ‘Program to Overcome Corruption in Church and Society’ (POC)

I hence propose an *ecumenical international* ‘Program to Overcome Corruption in Church and Society’ (POC). In the same way as there was the famous WCC ‘Program to Combat Racism’ (PCR) and now there is the WCC ‘Decade to Overcome Violence’ (DOV), we now need extensive joint efforts to overcome the cancerous evil of corruption – undertaken within and by the churches. The program should set the following *two goals*:

- the WCC member churches are corruption-free churches – at the latest by the 10th General Assembly of the WCC; and
- the WCC member churches support the various sectors of their societies in order for them to abolish corruption.

The program can be implemented on local, regional, national, continental and international level. It should include *four activities*:

- biblical-theological reflections on corruption and its overcoming;
- analyses of mechanisms that foster corruption;
- exchange of information among member churches, regional ecumenical organisations and special services such as aid agencies

and mission societies on existing and planned measures to fight corruption as a sign of hope; and

- development, implementation and regular evaluation of instruments such as plans of action, codes of conduct, administrative guidelines and sanctions.

The role of the WCC in these programs could be that of motivator, animator and networker. The WCC should motivate its member churches to increase, to interlink and to continuously implement their efforts. Yet, each of the member churches can also start with such a program on its own. The program could be turned into a part of the WCC Program to Overcome Violence – as corruption is an open form of violence against the weaker members of the church and society. It could also be turned into a part of programs for economic justice. How can churches fight for economic justice in society if they handle their own meagre resources in an unjust way? Either anti-corruption programs of governments, international organisations or Transparency International can support such programs for corruption-free churches.

As to the credibility of the churches in the future, the relevance of the program should not be underestimated, because the churches have not played a prophetic role so far. But, this is what they urgently have to comprehend, and do what others have already started to do – in order to credibly play their proclaiming and prophetic role of pastoral care within society.

NOTES

¹ TI International: www.transparency.org; TI Switzerland: www.transparency.ch.

² See Stückelberger, Christoph, 'Continue Fighting Corruption. Experiences and Tasks of Churches and Development Agencies', in: *Impulse* 2/03, Berne: Bread for all, 2003; and 'Fighting Corruption. An Urgent Task of Aid Agencies, Missionary Societies and Churches', in: *Impulse* 5/99, Berne: Bread for all, 1999. Can be found on www.christophstueckelberger.ch.

³ More on definitions in Stückelberger, Christoph, *op. cit.*, 1999, pp. 5 ff.; Pieth, Mark/Eigen, Peter (eds), *Korruption im internationalen Geschäftsverkehr*, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1999.

⁴ As an example of two country studies see Friedrich Ebert Foundation/Gerddes Cameroon (eds), *Corruption in Cameroon*, Yaounde: 1999; Hajadj, Djillali, *Corruption et démocratie en Algérie*, Paris: La Dispute, 1999. Many country reports can be found on www.transparency.org.

⁵ Recent reports include: Ewins, Pete *et al.*, *Mapping the Risks of Corruption in Humanitarian Action*, Transparency International, 2006; Transparency International, *Corruption in Humanitarian Aid. Working Paper 03/2006*. Both papers can be found in pdf format on <http://www.transparency.org> (last accessed 12 August 2006).

⁶ Especially during the International Year of Microcredit launched by the United Nations in 2005.

⁷ Examples from the field of development cooperation can also be found in Cremer, Georg, *Korruption begrenzen. Praxisfeld Entwicklungspolitik*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Lambertus, 2000, pp. 61-151. Cremer is the executive director of Caritas Germany.

⁸ See Gabriel, Lara *et al.* (eds), *The Role of Bilateral Donors in Fighting Corruption*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Institute, 2001.

190 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

- ⁹ See Robinson, Mark (ed.), *Corruption and Development*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998.
- ¹⁰ See Jain, Arvind K. (ed.), *Economics of Corruption*, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998; Elliott, Kimberly Ann (ed.), *Corruption and the Global Economy*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1997.
- ¹¹ See Borghi, M./Meyer-Bisch, P. (eds), *La corruption. L'envers des droits de l'homme*, Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1995.
- ¹² E.g. Rennstich, Karl, *Korruption. Eine Herausforderung für Gesellschaft und Kirche*, Stuttgart: Quell, 1990, pp. 137-197; Kleiner, Paul, *Bestechung. Eine theologisch-ethische Untersuchung*, Berne: Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 83-160; Christian Council of Ghana, *Bribery and Corruption*, Christian Home Week 1999, Accra 1999; Cameroon Federation of Protestant Churches and Missions (FEMEC), *Jugulate Corruption. Anticorruption and Protransparency Code for Our Churches and the Entire Society*.
- ¹³ One can find an extensive description in Stückelberger, Christoph, 'Continue fighting Corruption. Experiences and Tasks of Churches and Development Agencies', in: *op. cit.*, pp. 8-29.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-50 on 'The Gender Dimension of Corruption'.
- ¹⁵ Leisinger, Klaus M., *Whistleblowing and Corporate Reputation Management*, München: Rainer Hampp, 2003.
- ¹⁶ Official Report of the Eighth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches Harare, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998, especially the declaration on Debt issues, point 4.
- ¹⁷ Proceedings of the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana, 30 July-12 August 2004, Geneva: WARC, 2005, p. 200.