

PURSUING NEIGHBOR-LOVE THROUGH ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Some perspectives emerging from an LWF consultation

As part of the ongoing theological-ethical address of economic globalization, a small consultation under the theme, “Globalizing Vocation and Neighbor-Love,” was convened 17-19 June, 2004 in Stuttgart, Germany by the Department for Theology and Studies of the Lutheran World Federation. Participants from LWF member churches included pastors, theologians, ethicists and those involved in public policy, economics and business. Background papers were shared ahead of time; some of the perspectives and insights discussed are indicated below. These are not comprehensive or fully developed, but intended to “plant some seeds” for further discussion and action in different contexts. Although the focus at this consultation was especially in relation to business, it was linked to the various other discussions and actions related to the LWF “Call to Participate in Transforming Economic Globalization,” and with other ecumenical and civil society efforts.

Some theological points of departure

As Christians we do not stand outside the dynamics of economic globalization, but are caught up in them. This is especially the case for those in positions of access to economic and political power, as well as for others who are attracted by the allure of economic globalization but largely left out of its benefits. The life of faith is lived out in the midst of this tension.

Christians are invited to approach ethical dilemmas that emerge through economic activity from a deeply formed sense of baptismal vocation to further what will be good for neighbors around the globe, especially those who are economically marginalized. How can *their* interests be more directly factored into economic decisions and actions? How can the good of the most vulnerable neighbors—close by and around the globe—best be served through the decisions that are made and actions that are taken in economic life?

The criterion of neighbor-love goes against the grain or resists the neo-liberal assumptions¹ embedded in economic globalization. In these ways, the grammar of the church and that of the prevailing economic theory and practices are in tension. But for the most part, this tension and the conflicts it generates within believers as well as within the wider society are not made explicit or addressed. Christians who work in business are left to struggle with this for themselves, rather than the church being a place for this deliberation.

¹ For more on this, see the two LWF documents, “Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion” and “A Call to Participate in Transforming Economic Globalization,” both available at www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/Programs/DTS-Church-Social_Issues

The hands and fingers of action

In the face of the powerlessness that people often feel in relation to economic globalization, it is important to point to the different kinds of action they can take, as expressions of “neighbor love.” At the consultation, this was envisioned in terms of “fingers” that are connected as part of the hands of one body—i.e., the body of Christ in the world. As a communion, these are not separate actions but connected with what others are doing. These “fingers” include, for example

- Worshipping: receiving God's gracious gifts through Word and sacrament, being “formed” to live out our baptismal vocation in the world
- Praying: interceding for and standing in solidarity with those especially harmed by economic practices
- Living our daily lives: what we consume or boycott, how we produce, exchange and relate to one another and to the rest of creation
- Sharing our resources and giving to others
- Raising awareness of what is occurring and why
- Organizing people and communities
- Protesting injustices and their causes
- Pursuing economic alternatives that are more sustaining of life
- Advocating the corporate social responsibility of businesses
- Seeking public policy changes for the good of all.

What does it mean to pursue neighbor-love in different arenas?

Neighbor love must be viewed contextually; how economic globalization is experienced varies greatly across contexts. At this consultation, examples from Kenya showed how the local sugar industry had been destroyed due to trade policies inspired by economic globalization. In each case, there must be an accurate description of the problems at stake, comparing these with criteria emerging from our faith (e.g., human rights, distributive justice, care), weighing up the courses of action, and acting.

Furthermore, we live out neighbor-love differently, depending on the arena or level:

In the arena of personal or *individual ethics*, what it means to “love the neighbor” in word and deed is usually rather obvious and direct. Here is where the churches’ moral formation has tended to focus.

More challenging, and often overlooked, has been discerning what “neighbor love” means in *organizational ethics*, especially in businesses that must make a profit if they are to survive. Here neighbor-love is lived out within the constraints of certain structures, which requires deliberative reflection. Neighbor-love needs to be translated into additional “bottom lines,” such as protecting or enhancing conditions for the most

vulnerable, distributive justice, environmental sustainability, and restraint in the use of power. The corporate culture of an organization plays an important role, along with how responsibility is understood and lived out by those involved. Exchanges are “fair” if they add value to all those involved in the exchange. This applies, for example, when a company enters a host country. Without this, there is not a viable relationship with the neighbor. “Love” is expressed corporately by building up all kinds of assets—for all affected—rather than by depleting the resources of some. The corporate social responsibility movement has pursued adherence to criteria such as these through dialogue and persuasion.

A third arena or level is that of *structural ethics*, which focus on the framework, policies, laws and regulations by which organizations or sectors are expected to operate. This is where public policy advocacy work has tended to focus. The challenge increasingly raised today is the need for enforceable international standards or laws, given the increasingly global reach of economic activity. Lacking this regulation at the global level, it is even more important for responsibility to be exercised on the organizational level.

Some corporate social responsibility challenges

In recent decades, churches and related organizations have given more attention to encouraging and furthering corporate social responsibility: by investing in socially responsible companies or funds, dialoguing with corporations regarding their practices, and in select cases, organizing boycotts against them. Many sets of guidelines, principles and benchmarks have been developed. Four “gateways” through which greater social responsibility can be pursued are through market demand (e.g., intentionally buying or refusing to buy certain products), through nurturing a culture of social and environmental responsibility in a company, through government regulations, or through legal action.

As corporate social responsibility is pursued, further dilemmas and challenges arise, such as:

- If public protest is organized against a transnational company because of the bad working conditions of those it employs, the company may shut down its operation (“cut and run”). Not only does this expose workers who may be in the country “illegally,” but they lose their source of livelihood.
- With today’s increasing practice of outsourcing, long-term agreements between transnational corporations and local producers are absent; the quest is for ever lower cost production. It is important that corporations be held responsible for working conditions in their whole supply chain.
- When a beverage corporation in India extracted groundwater to produce its well-known soft drink, it not only reduced the groundwater available to thousands of local farmers, but in addition, waste distributed for use as fertilizer further contaminated the water. Because companies need to be held responsible for multiple negative effects of their practices, legal action was pursued and compensation sought for those who suffered.

- We can dialogue with those companies willing to be socially responsible, but what of those violators who are unwilling to comply, or who do not care? Many companies claim to be socially responsible, but without meaningful, effective monitoring processes, compliance is difficult to ascertain. In addition, actions are needed to deal with those who do not comply.
- Companies need to be advised and equipped to engage in more ethical trade, through dialogue and possibly confrontation.
- When even governments fail to protect people's rights, where can people go, given the lack of enforceable global mechanisms?
- How can corporate social responsibility be globalized beyond the North, with an agenda not primarily driven by the North, or misused for its own protectionist interests?
- Promoting social responsibility in large transnational corporations is very difficult. A globalized world needs a globalized civil society.

For continuing discussion and action

It is important that churches boldly proclaim God's prophetic word of critique and at times judgment on unjust economic practices. At the same time, they need to be more hospitable and open to people sharing and discussing the tensions they face in economic activity, and to process these in light of the Christian faith. This involves being more attentive to the language used, which sometimes is polarizing and alienating. It is important that faith-based criteria be translated into terms that are meaningful to those in business, and visa-versa.

Consider the following as discussion starters in your setting:

- The market economy is not to be equated with economic globalization. Some market systems can work for the good or ill of others, depending on the terms and relative power of the parties involved.
- The era of industrial production has been devastating, by extracting the earth's natural capital. How can natural capital be included in the accounting, for the sake of the sustainability of all of creation?
- Measuring growth in terms of money only is limited. Other kinds of growth should be emphasized, for the sake of the flourishing of communities and the rest of creation. The planet itself is unable to sustain high growth-oriented globalization.
- People's sense of ownership and participation is key. They need the freedom to develop rules and structures that make sense for them in their own context.
- It is not necessarily bad when companies move to other locales; people there also need jobs. What is troublesome are the terms under which companies typically do so; these can have devastating effects.

- If a company enters a host country, its activity there is *just* only if it adds value to both sides, does not deplete the human or ecological resources in the short or long term, and carries out the commitments it makes to the host country.
- There are important reasons for churches to favor and encourage the development of small businesses: their size is appropriate for developing countries, they are likely to be more responsive and accountable to the communities in which they operate, and they create most of the new jobs. Cooperatives and business incubators using new technologies can also be important in helping small businesses to get started and be sustained.
- Attention needs to be given to how, in a given context, social capital is generated and sustained, both through institutional arrangements and informal networks of reciprocity and good will.
- Because organizations can focus power and resources in ways individuals cannot, it is crucial that organizations exercise restraint in how they use these.
- Companies must move beyond focusing on short-term growth gains, and account for externalities that affect human and ecological well-being. Financial planning and strategies must take into account the natural life cycle for producing their product or service.
- Churches should support persons who experience the gaps between their values, those a company espouses, and how it actually operates.
- When injustice is structured into our lives, we need to ask (1) what is going on (who loses, who benefits); (2) what is normative (what beliefs, criteria); (3) what constructive alternatives are there?; and (4) how are we empowered spiritually and morally to act?

<p>How can your congregation be involved in supporting members as they seek to pursue neighbor-love through their economic activity? In helping small entrepreneurs? In contributing to the economic development of communities?</p>
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You are invited to share what you are thinking or doing in these areas:
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