



# TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Why you can't solve the  
climate crisis without talking  
about the economy

**A CONVERSATION STARTER**

# INTRODUCTION

“We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, Reformed Churches meeting in Accra made this powerful statement which continues to challenge the basis on which we order our world.

We know that the climate is in emergency. We know that the environment is being degraded and biodiversity is being lost. And more than ten percent of the world’s population still goes hungry.

As Christians we believe people were created in God’s image, and to have abundant life. And we believe that we are part of God’s creation. Our flourishing is dependent on the flourishing of our communities and the whole creation, for we are created interdependently.

Yet we measure – and value – things about our economy which do not enable flourishing. Our obsession with economic growth damages our planet’s ability to sustain human and animal life.

If we care about creation, then we need to care about the economy.

This pamphlet considers – from this end – the vision of flourishing we are given by God. From the other end, it examines how our economic models and practices are failing to enable this. Finally, in the centre we open up some questions about how we might embed values of flourishing in new ways of relating to one another economically.

1 World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2004), ‘The Accra Confession’, paragraph 22

# A VISION FOR THE FLOURISHING OF ALL LIFE

Christians believe that flourishing matters. We believe that each person is made in the image and likeness of God, infinitely precious and part of God's creation. As such we are invited to embrace God's abundant offering of 'life in all its fullness', and to participate in the flourishing of the whole of creation. However from the book of Genesis onward, we see how people's brokenness, oppression or separation from God has prevented such abundant living, such flourishing.

And yet we see glimpses of what the flourishing of all creation might be like, through the miracles and teaching of Jesus, in his resurrection, in the world around us. Flourishing happens when relationships are put right, people can fulfil what they were created to do, when we are truly part of God's creation.

Understanding this biblical vision for the flourishing of all life will help us as we wrestle with the ways in which our social and economic systems enable or inhibit this flourishing.

## Flourishing of individuals

"To flourish is to walk tall, to laugh, to sing, to weep, to create. Abundant life has broad horizons, always in harmony with nature and with others. This is not to say there will be no tragedy and conflict but these need not destroy the spirit. To flourish as an individual and a community means to overcome adversity and to find joy on the other side."<sup>2</sup>

Flourishing can be enabled by many different factors in our lives. But it can also be prevented. A lack of food or shelter can impoverish a person's life, as can a lack of peace, freedom, love or relationships. If Christians recognise the value, dignity and equality of every human being as created and intended by God, then we look to remove the things which get in the way of flourishing, or to "have life, and have it abundantly", as Jesus puts it (John 10:10, NRSV).

Life to the full should not be confused with greater and greater financial prosperity. Research suggests that we do not get proportionately happier or more fulfilled as we get wealthier. Having enough is very important – more and more is not.

2 Paul Chapman (2012) 'Sharing the World's Resources Equitably', a paper presented as part of the development of the Church of Scotland's *A Right Relationship with Money: Report from the Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity*.

## Flourishing of communities

It is also clear in Christian thinking that humans cannot flourish on their own, but only as part of communities. “A human life, well lived, is a life that reaches out in love towards others, echoing the loving purpose which God has in creation.”<sup>3</sup> In communities we have the opportunity to relate and express our love for our neighbours – and our concern for mutual flourishing and well-being – through the pursuit of the ‘Common Good’.

No individual is excluded from the concept of the common good: “Because we are interdependent, the common good is more like a multiplication sum, where if any one number is zero then the total is always zero. If anyone is left out and deprived of what is essential, then the common good has been betrayed.”<sup>4</sup>

This finds echoes in the Hebrew prophets’ railing against injustice in their societies, and is enacted in the early Christian practice of sharing and holding goods in common, to ensure everyone’s needs were met (Acts 2:44-46 and 4:32-35). The community did not flourish if any one within it did not flourish. The 2009 book *The Spirit Level* showed the life-diminishing consequences for everyone of unequal societies, where despite overall wealth increasing, the Common Good diminishes, because many are left behind.<sup>5</sup>

As Christians who are commanded to love our neighbours as ourselves, like the Hebrew prophets we have a particular concern for the impact of any system or policy on people who are locked in poverty or excluded in other ways, wherever they are in the global community. For communities to flourish, for the common good to prevail, none must be prevented from flourishing.

## Flourishing of creation

But focusing on individuals and communities does not give the full picture. In the Christian worldview, we add a growing understanding that full flourishing can only take place in the context of all life in creation. Humans are integral to, not separate from, God’s created order. The World Council of Churches points out, “The belief that God created human beings as part of a larger web of life and affirmed the goodness of the whole creation (Genesis 1) lies at the heart of biblical

3 Christian Aid (2017), ‘An Unquenchable Thirst: Faith and Economic Growth’, p. 26

4 Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales (2010), *Choosing the Common Good*, p. 8.

5 Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett (2009), *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Allen Lane.

faith. The whole community of living organisms that grows and flourishes is an expression of God's will and works together to bring life from and give life to the land, to connect one generation to the next, and to sustain the abundance and diversity of God's household (*oikos*)."<sup>6</sup>

Genesis 1:26 speaks of humans having dominion over the rest of creation, but as theologian Richard Bauckham argues, "The dominion is a special role of responsibility that humans have, but it's a role within the community [of creation], a role in relation to other creatures. If we forget our own creatureliness, our creaturely limitations, our interdependence with other creatures, if we think of ourselves as demi-gods, that's the way the dominion goes wrong."<sup>7</sup>

At the other end of the Bible, the Book of Revelation offers a vision of the New Jerusalem. This is a place where there is enough light to shine across the nations and a "river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city" (Revelation 22:1-2). For a city without its own water supply, this is flourishing! There is more than enough for everyone, abundant water that flows through the street. The tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations are not only a clear reversal of the Fall, but an image of the people of God rooted in a transformed world, alluding to the vision of Ezekiel with the dusty land between Jerusalem and Jericho brought back to life, with the Dead Sea full of fish and its barren banks full of trees.

'Salvation', biblically speaking, is by no means all about what happens to us when we die, but the renewal of the whole creation. As Baptist minister Simon Woodman writes, "The coming of the kingdom of God involves the transformation of the earth itself; it is about the salvation of all things and the healing of the nations occurs as part of the process of the healing of creation."<sup>8</sup>

6 World Council of Churches (2012), 'Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action'.

7 Richard Bauckham (2012), 'The Community of Creation' <http://therhino.org.uk/other/bauckhamwp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Community-of-creation.pdf>

8 Simon Woodman, 'The New Jerusalem: Building a Vision for the Common Good', in Virginia Moffatt (ed.) (2017), *Reclaiming the Common Good: How Christians can help rebuild our broken world*, DLT, pp. 201-202.

## Vision meets reality

The vision for the flourishing of all creation found through the Bible envisages a world in right relationship with God, and with itself. It is this vision Christians seek to reflect, living in ways which mirror God's intentions for creation and which realise right-relationship on the earth.

Our economy often confuses the simple idea of “more wealth”, “more activity”, “more consumption” with flourishing. Flourishing is not a simple idea, and it involves engaging with the complexity and messiness of human relationships as well as our relationship with the wider creation. No single number can measure it, but a just economy must point towards it. Turn this pamphlet upside-down to read about how we can begin the process of creating an economy that enables the flourishing of all life.



## **EXCERPT FROM THE ACCRA CONFESSION: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth**

We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness.

Therefore, we reject economic systems which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life.

We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God's covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation.

Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.

We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused.

Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatizes gifts of God meant for all.

We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ, who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness.

Therefore we reject any church practice or teaching that excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10) rather than following the "Good Shepherd" who has come for life for all (John 10:11).

We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign. We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgement of God's justice.

Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deuteronomy 30:19).