

Care for God's Creation

A Discussion Guide for the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu

Introduction

The ecological crisis humanity faces today has many aspects. We are called to respond to the threats of the future on a multitude of fronts. Global climate change represents perhaps the greatest threat for the present and, even more, for future generations. It has far reaching ecological and socio-economic consequences for humankind and represents also a severe threat to non-human nature. Anthropogenic climate change illustrates drastically the three dimensions of the ecological crisis – it is *universal* but affects the poorest most negatively, it is *intergenerational* because future generations will have to carry the burden of our way of life, and it is *disruptive of the order of creation* because it represents the most profound human made change of the biosphere in history.

For too long the churches have remained silent about the ecological crisis. In recent years, however, they have increasingly become aware of the urgency of the situation. Faced with the ethical implications of the crisis, they have realized that remaining silent would amount to violating both Christian and human values. We are called to express clearly the Christian concern about the growing environmental destruction and, even more, to act accordingly. The ecological crisis and, in particular, climate change are “signs of the times” that challenge the Christian faith in God as the Creator and Redeemer. “The Light of Christ shining upon all” includes not only human beings, but the whole of creation. We are called to rediscover the significance of Christ who is meeting us today in the midst of a suffering creation. We are challenged to respond to the light of Christ by developing a new relationship to nature and to bringing light to others through the witness of justice and a sustainable lifestyle.

The ecological crisis places the quest for justice and peace in a new context. Ecological destruction causes new forms of poverty and is a potential source of conflict. Diminishing resources, especially the lack of water for millions of people, are provoking the disruption of society. The churches are called to respond to these new parameters of justice and peace. There is neither justice nor peace without environmental responsibility. This is particularly true for climate change. Substantial efforts have to be undertaken to reduce its impact and to propose and implement effective strategies of adaptation to the inevitable consequences of climate change, especially for the poor and disadvantaged,

Life styles: the heart of Christian witness

But more is at stake. New concepts and new orientations in ordering society are required. The Churches share in the responsibility for applying social values to the requirements of global justice, for the long-term preservation of living conditions and for new patterns of production and consumption. They are bound to defend the social, natural and moral principles of a free, democratic and sustainable society as part of the international community and to introduce the liberating force of the Christian faith into the socio-political dialogue.

In order to find solutions to the environmental challenge, the principle of sustainability can serve as a guide. It combines the three dimensions of ecological responsibility, global struggle against poverty, and economic efficiency in social development. Sustainability provides a framework for Christian environmental thinking and action. In their dialogue with society, the European Churches promote the *true* requirements of sustainability and try to fill it with specific content in the light of Christian faith and their own theological tradition.

Technological efficiency can no doubt make an immense contribution. It is to be welcomed but it would be an illusion to rely exclusively on technological solutions. It is becoming increasingly manifest that possible solutions of the major ecological issues such as energy, water or mobility require a new option in our way of life. In the final analysis, all individual members of society must organise their personal lifestyle in ways compatible with the requirements of sustainability. Without a change of mind and heart technological solutions or political negotiations to protect the climate will not achieve their goals.

In our view the churches should therefore give priority to the cause of responsible and sustainable life styles. The *specific* contribution of the churches to the environmental movement lies in this area. A *spiritual* response, based on fundamental Christian values, must be developed. Today, the way of life adopted by Christians is an essential part of their witness to society.

The term 'life style' does not only refer to the personal sphere of each Christian. It includes the life styles of Christian communities. The time of mere statements 'on behalf of creation' has passed. The churches must begin to work on projects and propose alternative ways of life. Individual Christians and communities must give witness to their faith through a coherent life-style respecting creation.

Sustainable life-styles and Christian values

Turning away from consumerism cannot simply be achieved by passing on

'ecological knowledge'. Values, habits and personal relationships are involved in the transition. Questions of faith are at stake. A change in life-styles will only be credible if it is supported by the inner experience of 'rejoicing and satisfaction'. Respect for creation in its vast variety constitutes the basis for a better quality of life. A culture of life, a fundamental element of an authentic Christian spirituality, drawing from the rich resources of tradition of Christian spirituality, can liberate from the fallacies of consumerism.

For Christians worship is of central importance. Prayer is for them the source nourishing the care for creation. Sunday, the day set apart as a memorial of God our Creator and Redeemer, can help Christians to develop a sustainable life-style which respects Creation's rhythms and interrupts work with time dedicated to rest and rejoicing in the whole of Creation. The Eucharist can be celebrated also as an act of praise and thanksgiving for creation.

The role of churches in European society: dialogue and source of hope

In order to address the environmental challenge new forms of dialogue between the church and society are required. Only through a readiness to learn, through dialogue and collaboration with the other Churches, other religions, social groups and public institutions, will the Churches be able to acquire the necessary competence and efficiency to respond to the complex challenges deriving from the requirements of sustainability.

The two first European Ecumenical Assemblies in Basel and Graz pointed forcefully to the need for a new commitment of the churches. In the *Charta Oecumenica* signed in 2001, the representatives of the churches later declared: "Together we want to help create sustainable living conditions for the whole of creation ... and commit ourselves to strive to adopt a lifestyle free of economic pressures and consumerism." This declaration constitutes a solid basis for a 'coalition of forces' for the accomplishment of this great task on an ecumenical basis. The processes of Agenda 21, in which numerous ecclesial groups in some European countries already take part, offer good hope for collaboration with other social forces. Christians must actively seek dialogue with those responsible for decision-making in the political, economic and cultural field. The Churches as global communities are devoted to international solidarity which is the key to sustainable development. Safeguarding and rediscovering the cultural identity of Europe are only possible if *all* European states are involved in this process with the ethical perspective of unconditional respect for the dignity of every person and for sustainability.

In many countries initiatives pointing to an alternative approach in social living are already under way. Many churches have issued guidelines on the responsible use of energy. They support fair methods of production and call

for the respect of human rights and the care for the environment in trade with developing countries (for example, in the production of coffee, textiles, flowers, etc.). The proposal of an 'economy of communion' has met with an increasing response. Churches support so-called 'ethical or ecological investments or banks' which provide the material basis for projects promoting both social justice and the environment. Ecological management of land and church properties has become a theme for many churches which offer model contracts to provide energy from renewable sources. In the framework of the 'Decade to overcome violence' the relationship between ecology and violence is being explored.

Indeed in many countries life styles begin to change. Christians are becoming aware that their faith commitment requires concrete steps in favour of the environment: saving electricity, changes in mobility patterns, introducing environmental management systems, buying local food, caring for responsible waste disposal, participating in sustainable investment, environmental education, and development cooperation. Tribute must be paid to certain monasteries and residential Christian communities which have become models of an ecologically responsible life. In their wide variety, these little steps are a symbol of hope given by God.

Christians can draw on the power of hope, joy and peace from their faith to enable them to change and act with responsibility. Resolute, determined and committed support for climate protection is not a side-issue for the Christian faith, but rather an acid test for its power of liberating hope, creative invention and unrelenting justice. Shared responsibility for creation within the churches in Europe is an important opportunity for ecumenical progress.

What can the Third Assembly in Sibiu achieve?

Happily, the assembly in Sibiu will be organized according to environmental criteria. The hope is that in future all church gatherings will follow this example. We therefore encourage all participants to support the initiatives at the assembly in Sibiu and to copy them at home. For churches and parishes we suggest the following priorities:

- *Time for Creation:* Churches and parishes should designate the period from 1st September to the second Sunday of October as an opportunity to reflect together on God the creator and the gift of life. To celebrate the mystery of God's presence in creation, to join in common praise and to share the richness of spiritual and liturgical traditions in Europe are a central source for a new orientation in our relation to nature.
- *Climate protection through CO₂-Compensation:* Participants in the Sibiu Assembly are invited to pay a CO₂ compensation for their travel to Sibiu. The amount collected will be channeled to Sibiu to make possible the plantation of a forest near the city. Air travel is one of the major sources of CO₂ emissions and

should therefore be reduced. But when flying cannot be avoided, the damage can at least be compensated by investing in CO₂ sinks.

- *Water – source of life.* Water scarcity is an increasing concern. Millions of people have no access to safe water. Even in Europe, historically a privileged continent, more and more regions are affected by water shortage. For the churches the situation is increasingly alarming and it is high time that they begin to act together on the issue. Since water is the yardstick of our condition of life on this planet, it must be used with care and a sense of common responsibility. In the eyes of the churches water is a common good; it must not be turned into tradable good.

- *Sustainable life-styles on personal and social level:* An important witness to Christian faith and values in our time is a sustainable lifestyle. Let us repeat some of the areas of action. At the individual level: energy-saving, regional and seasonal food, sustainable mobility. At the level of churches and parishes: eco-management and ecological guidelines for buildings, agriculture and investment, environmental education. In the public sphere: climate-alliances on national and international levels, defending the human right to water-supply and food sovereignty, new models of ecological sound welfare and global economy etc. Churches and individual Christians cannot become active on all fronts. But could not the Sibiu Assembly provide the opportunity for each church and each Christian to choose one new commitment?

We would appreciate your comments and reactions to the way in which Christian attitudes to the ecological challenge is outlined in this text. We invite you to come with concrete proposals what Christians and churches could do in facing current environmental crises. We encourage you to come with a report of examples of good practice of churches, parishes, church based organisations in your respective countries (address: ppt@cece-kek.be or ccee@ccee.ch).