

**THE
OIKOS
JOURNEY**

**A Theological Reflection
on the Economic Crisis
in South Africa**

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The Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban,
on behalf of the *Oikos* study group

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Chapter One

Why an *Oikos* Journey?

South African history is marked with social and economic injustices and inequalities. In 1985, as the apartheid regime imposed a State of Emergency in response to rising resistance, people in the churches recognized a moment of crisis and opportunity – a *kairos* moment – resulting in the *Kairos Document* published in September 1985, challenging injustice in the apartheid system as well as in the church.

The inspiration of the *Kairos Document* has led us twenty years later to embark on the *Oikos Journey* arising out of our present context. We believe we are at another *kairos* moment. The present economic system is a challenge to us all.

Since 1994 we have had a democratic government in place, which has brought with it expectations of a better life. We have celebrated the establishment of a constitutional democracy with its stress on freedom from injustice, more equal opportunities and a better quality of life for all. However the majority of people continue to live in poverty.

We present this *Oikos Journey* as a challenge to the church, the state and society. It uses the image of *oikos* to express our thinking. *Oikos* means a home or household. From this we get the two words 'economy' and 'ecology'. A concern for economics – *oikos-nomos* – has often been disconnected from a concern for ecology – *oikos-logos* – or the environment. In fact the two are closely linked and both relate to the establishment and undergirding of a society reflecting God's will.

The Diakonia Council of Churches, other ecumenical organisations, and churches in KwaZulu-Natal identified many resource people to assist in this process. A study group met together for over a year, and from their research and reflections the *Oikos Journey* was produced.

In this document we share the experiences of poor people, we look at the world economy, analyse the South African economy, reflect on current thinking in the churches, and then offer a vision of what would be needed for the economy to benefit the poor in line with God's economy. The last section concentrates on ways in which the church can address the crisis, and help create a society which is good for every person and all of creation.

We invite you to take up the challenge of the *Oikos Journey* with us.

Chapter Two

The voices of the poor

The poor are everywhere, yet are often invisible to those who are not poor – the non-poor. The poor beg on city streets, some come to our churches for a daily or weekly bowl of soup and chunk of bread, others live long, lonely lives of quiet desperation. The further one moves from the city centre, the more visible the poverty becomes, with inadequate housing, scarce water and little sanitation, and a daily struggle for food, health care and education. Few of the non-poor venture into the deep rural areas, where the struggle is for survival. People are amazingly resilient, communities and local churches give support, and hope thrives against all expectations.

But the voices of the poor are seldom heard.

In 2005, research was commissioned by the *Oikos* study group on people's experiences of poverty, through the Department of Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. People who would normally be classified as poor of diverse backgrounds were interviewed in the city streets of Central Durban, at an old age home and a hostel in Umlazi, at a church-run soup kitchen in Durban North and at churches in Newlands East and Central Durban.

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*Justice for the poor
remains the test of any
system.*
”

Here are some of the things they said. Some words are direct quotations, others are an English summary from interviews carried out in isiZulu.

Man from KwaMashu at Durban North soup kitchen:

From his point of view things got worse, much worse since 1994. The main cause of poverty, for him, is unemployment. AIDS contributes to poverty because the main source of income dies. He has no knowledge about the role of government. For him there is no difference between the time before 1994 and today. From his point of view men are more affected by poverty because they have to maintain their families and do not get employed easily.

86-year-old woman, Umlazi old age home:

"They [people in general in South Africa] are very poor, poorer than myself, they do not have this funeral [insurance]. ... Some people are lazy, because they do not suffer from anything, but they are poor. There are these street children, they left their homes because they did not get even food, and the parents drink too much beer, that's a [cause of] suffering – beer drinking. ... Women suffer a lot because they look after their children with nothing: men go around everywhere, getting and stealing people's money. (Question: Did something change since the apartheid system ended?) Many things came alright, but again many things came wrong, very, very wrong, because people thought they were free, that is why they left their homes and flock to town. It is full up in town, because they think there is no more apartheid, we are free to go to town and leave our places. It was proved that is worse than before."

Male street vendor, West Street:

"It [the economic situation of South Africa] has changed, but we're doing better than before and mostly blacks are supported by the power state. ... People are poor ... because of jobs, you see ... Mostly Indian and Africans were working in the factories, a large amount, but now they're importing the stuff from China, they run out of jobs ... it is a lot of jobs, you see, thousands of workers in the textile industry, there are no jobs [here]."

69-year-old woman from Newlands East, living there since 1978:

"I am a nurse ... I was trained to train others, they get their certification from the department of health ... I think many people are [too] lazy to plant, that is why we started [a] community garden. In our days when we were young we used to have fine foods from our garden, in the farm, even the mealie meal was fresh. ... We're training people how to plant. ... It [the economic situation after apartheid] did change, because now they're training people to do things. People are learning now, going back to what we were doing before in the 1950s and 1960s. There is permaculture: it is a training centre. Afterwards [there is] training people on home-based care, I always take them there: they have a video and a cassette for HIV/TB so they can see how the virus comes in. ... Last year there was this thing SITA [government training programme] so they gave me two young ladies. We need a creche: we look after volunteers. Those mothers who are very sick, the young children get hungry, so we give them food, then they stay here, because the mothers are very sick."

Woman, West Street:

(Qn: What is your source of income at the moment?) *Nothing.*
(Qn: How do you survive?) *On the street I beg for money.* (Qn: Do you get some support from the government? any grant?) *No, at the moment I am waiting [for it] to come through. I'm waiting now for eight months. I was married and my husband he hadn't any income to give, so I ended up. ... I have to stay here every day 'till I make twenty rands for the shelter where I sleep and I have to make money for food.* (Qn: What do you think about poverty in general in South Africa?) *Terrible, it is very, very bad, there is no job for anybody, they just want to give the jobs to black people."*

Male refugee, Pastoral Refugee Centre, central Durban:

"We are surviving, it is not bad, we are facing some problems [like] xenophobia whereby African foreigners are disliked by the local population ... they saying we are taking their jobs. There is also sometimes violence, we are not supposed to go anywhere: there are some townships where you can become a victim of violence, ... we have lost a couple of friends [who] have been victims of this xenophobia behaviour:

that makes us afraid. You cannot live wherever you want, it makes us live in town where we can get a little bit of security. ...
(Qn: Did you get any support from the government?) *No we don't get, all support is not for refugees, only local, national. ... I did cultural and community studies and agricultural sciences, I am qualified, I was working in my country."*

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The lives of the poor are being sacrificed for the gain of the rich.

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Young refugee woman from Burundi at Pastoral Refugee Centre, central Durban:

"I left Burundi because there was war. ... The life [here] is not good, it is too hard to find food, a place to stay, everything, you know we are girls, we need a lot of things. (Qn: are there also poor people in Burundi?) *Yes, in all countries, the rich and poor, our country is not poor and not rich, we are half. ... If there is peace we go back, but here refugees have many problems. ... when I look for work, sometimes they say you are a foreigner, you cannot have the job, only the people from here."*

A member of the study group also interviewed people in rural areas in February 2006. These are two of their stories.

34-year-old unemployed volunteer in a community project from Nomponjwane:

"I am mother of five. There are no jobs, high rate of illiteracy. Elderly people have no IDs to access pension. They have grandchildren to look after. Government is doing nothing about this. Some of these children have opted to sell their bodies in order to have something in their stomachs. I don't want to talk about this because it makes me feel so bad."

Man from Njomelwano village, 20 km from Melmoth:

"I run a project from my home, I have been waiting for a long time to get something from the department of agriculture. We have been waiting for the proper roads to be constructed. We have been waiting for the mobile clinics that were promised to us. We have been waiting for food parcels to give to our home-based care givers to feed child-headed homes: nothing has been received yet. Nothing is paid to the volunteers who sacrifice their time and energy to climb mountains to reach those who are sick."

Many times you have to pay from your own pocket to ensure that those orphans get something to eat. Many times I go to schools to negotiate with angry principals on behalf of these orphans so that they are exempted from paying school fees. I am not going to vote this time."

The *Oikos Journey* is dedicated to these and all the other people living in poverty in the first decade of this new century. The poor deserve better. The church needs to ask why so many are still in poverty and then to accept the clear challenge to take action in the name of God and of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who came that everyone may have life in all its fullness.

Chapter Three

Looking around us

The world economy

Every economic era has an ideology behind the policies and practices that benefit the dominant interests of the time.

We are living in a world where policies have been adopted globally to create a competitive world market for capital and goods – the well-known process of economic globalisation. Many call the ideology that underlies, promotes and seeks to legitimize these policies *neoliberalism*.

By definition, globalisation includes everyone: all nations should be brought in. Although the process is not totally complete, it is the main focus of all economies, though in different degrees, and with increasing resistance from some "third-world" countries. "Third-world" economies – including those of African countries – were brought into this global competitive process at a low level of development, putting them at an obvious disadvantage when competing globally.

The introduction of the global competitive market gave immediate and permanent advantage to owners of capital. If capital could come and go between countries –

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***Centred on capital,
neoliberalism transforms
everything and everyone
into a commodity for sale
at a price.***

”

unlike people – its owners have the advantage of demanding the terms on which they are prepared to stay – with their money. Governments, fearing declining employment, have almost universally adopted low tax, low regulatory and low wage regimes in order to please capital owners. This increases the proportion of world wealth that flows up to capital.

Similarly, the private sector, required to compete in a global free market, is forced by that market to reduce labour costs by all means – replacing labour with technology and reducing wages. Otherwise they do not survive to provide enough profit to keep their shareholders rich. Huge companies take over smaller ones in various countries and often close them down, creating further unemployment.

Nations compete to attract capital by reducing labour costs. Those costs are people's wages. Nations which used to have thriving industrial sectors outsource the production of their goods to nations where workers are paid a pittance. The result of these dynamics is poverty and inequality. They are both built into the private sector system.

Secondary effects of the competitive global market include the necessity for the private sector to seek new markets, and hence permanent growth through trade. Unrestricted capital that reduces wages also reduces demand for its own products, so the growth of new markets is imperative for a return on capital.

The threat of climate change is one consequence of ignoring the dangers of perpetual growth. As the era of cheap energy through fossil fuels nears its end, the growth imperative becomes increasingly dangerous.

The end result of this system is an inability of capital to invest in job-creating production. The only place for surplus capital is interest-bearing, speculative investment in money-creating institutions and stock exchanges, in the pursuit of more capital.

The pursuit of growth also means governments are exhorted to privatise services that were provided as basic rights to citizens, so that they may provide another source of profit. Poorer people are therefore required to pay for such basic necessities as water, health-care and education. Lack of these basics not only reduces well-being, it also reduces the stock of effective "human capital."

Further effects of the global market include the reduced effectiveness of democratic processes. Electorates are weaker than global capital, which means that governments perceive that they have to please capital. Competing political parties these days offer little choice to electorates as far as the economy is concerned. Political cynicism sets in.

Two very different societies are emerging world-wide. The high-technology revolution and breathtaking advances in automation that are eliminating so many human beings from the economic process are likely to exacerbate the growing tensions between rich and poor and further divide nations into two incompatible and increasingly warring camps.

In summary, low wages and unemployment, essential services that must be paid for, and a democratic system that cannot respond to the poor create a political economy in which some people are considered less than others, all the results of the influence of a global economy.

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***The myth of "unfettered",
"unregulated",
"uncontrolled" market
capitalism must be
directly challenged. The
reality is that markets
and capital are highly
controlled to secure
maximum benefits for the
owners of capital.***

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The South African economy

South Africa's economy – like that of all nations, can be usefully described only within the context of the global economy. Poverty and inequality have many faces. The majority of South Africans are affected by poverty in various ways, or they are confronted with ongoing vulnerability to becoming poor.

Before the era of colonialism, the values of the African subsistence economy were sharing, mutual support and bartering. Then came South Africa's long history of conquest, colonialism, industrialisation and discrimination based on racial capitalism, which destroyed much of the previous ethos. More recent was our history of a political economy based on apartheid and the creation of pseudo-independent satellite states to which the poorest were removed. All this is key to understanding the particular nature of poverty in a newly-democratic South Africa, and its overwhelming occurrence among certain groups.

Our past has been shaped by social and environmental injustice. The interests of the few have been served best by creating structures to keep the many in abject poverty. Our future viability as a nation depends largely on meeting the basic needs of millions of poor people, while simultaneously safeguarding our country's scarce water resources, yet astoundingly rich heritage of biodiversity.

The newly-elected democratic government came into office in 1994 and there were high hopes that, in spite of the massively disadvantaged situation it had inherited, it would be able to put into place the pro-poor

policies developed and advocated by its own economists and sociologists – policies designed to ensure that first priority was given to redressing the grossly unequal economic order.

However, the world imperative for a market economy prevailed. Within two years economic policies were changed to fit in with global capital's requirements.

Pro-poor priorities in relation to such basic necessities as water and sanitation, health provision, housing and education were pursued, so that millions of people received access to water for the first time in their lives, low-cost housing schemes mushroomed across the country, clinics and schools were built. But with pressure from the global economy to follow the market rules, people were supposed to pay for their basic necessities. Millions of people with no income, in a society without a universal social security net, are simply unable to follow the rules and pay for these services. Clinics and schools remain with insufficient, or in some cases no, staff; water and electricity are cut off.

Almost half the households in South Africa fall into the official government definition of indigent. This means they have no regular access to income, food, clothing, energy sources: they are effectively excluded from social participation.

The pandemically high percentage of people affected and infected with HIV/AIDS exacerbates the situation of poverty, while the situation of poverty means that proper attention is not paid to their needs.

Poverty is not gender neutral: it affects women more than it affects men, and women suffer disproportionately the effects of an unjust economic system. They are less likely to be able to find employment for decent wages, and become dependent on men for their livelihood. The fact that traditionally women have more responsibility for child raising lessens their opportunities for economic activity. Most women do unpaid

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Neoliberalism's concern with material wealth above human dignity dehumanises the human being and sacrifices life for greed. It is an economy of death.
”

household work in addition to any economic activity they may be able to participate in: in the case of rural households this is often in addition to caring for fields and vegetable gardens. Legislation has in the past discriminated against women in terms of education and economic opportunities, and culture continues to do this. The majority of women remain on the margins of society economically.

The creation of small and medium-sized enterprises is officially encouraged, but with no asset base people are unable to access banking services and credit facilities.

Meanwhile some sectors of the economy are booming. The financial services sector – banks, insurance companies and asset managers – holds 50% of South Africa's total asset value, arising from capital accumulated through profit increases, and through large salaries and bonuses paid to those at the top of industry and commerce.

The percentage of South Africa's national income that goes to company profits continues to grow, while the percentage going to wages continues to fall, as factories and mines close down and the pool of unemployed grows. Many who once had full employment with its benefits such as pension and medical aid schemes have had their employment status

converted to that of casual, temporary or part-time workers, with the loss of these benefits. Increasingly people who are employed can only find this kind of work.

All of South Africa's economic growth of the past few years – and more – has gone to pay company shareholders. In spite of the success of black empowerment schemes in creating a wealthy black middle-class, recent research has shown that the vast majority of shareholders are still white, and male.



An economy based on cooperation, reciprocity and solidarity is an economy of life.



A burgeoning informal economy is increasingly being faced with demands for formalisation, with the requirements of control, bureaucracy and tax implications involved.

Likewise, pressure has built up on the environment, with floods and drought intensifying as a result of climate change; more restricted access to fuel; money being spent on armaments and on research into pebble-bed nuclear reactors instead of into environmentally-friendly and healthy energy sources; and the profit motive driving indiscriminate, unmonitored production of genetically-modified food and other products.

Under these conditions, in spite of all efforts of government at national, provincial and local levels, restlessness and resistance to payment for services to which people feel they are rightfully entitled increase, and mass action threatens the social order, in South Africa as in other countries of the South.

What economics does to us

Is the suffering of the poor part of a natural order, regrettable but inevitable? Does that natural order ordain that some people are born to suffer, others to rejoice? Does it in fact deem some people less worthy than others – less deserving of dignity, happiness, ease and fulfillment? If so, there is very little we can do about it.



Many environmental and feminist movements have placed the demand for ecological justice at the centre, remembering that economy and ecology represent two interrelated perspectives on God's household of life - oikos.



But it would not be accepted by any religion or spiritual tradition – whether the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed, the Buddha, the Jewish prophets, African Traditional Religion, the practice of *ubuntu* or the universalists of the “new age”. No-one would accept that any human being is intrinsically less worthy than any other.

If this is true, poor people’s apparent inferiority must be the result of something else. It shows itself in inferior access to the resources of this world. And this is the outcome of a system that regulates that access. This is the political economy, which defines how people relate to each other about resources.

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Like others before them, each new economic theory must be vigorously tested against the standards of God’s justice and the system’s actual impact on the lives of the poor and on the well-being of the earth community - and it must be rejected if it fails this test.

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Poverty is spoken of as a phenomenon of our time as though it were tolerable. But it is not. It is not tolerable to live constantly with fear. It is intolerable to have to grovel to others for help through no fault of one’s own.

Poverty is just about tolerable when it is general and shared. It is intolerable when it is experienced in an economy that can pay one person a salary of R59 million per year; where homes change hands for tens of millions; where food is thrown away and people get sick from over-eating; where the media glorify ostentatious wealth as a worthwhile aspiration.

Economics is currently defined as a science in which there is only one way to do things, and that way has the unfortunate by-product of poverty, plus enormous wealth for a few.

But in fact this system undermines the powers of democratically elected

governments to regulate the way that business operates, relentlessly centralises and concentrates wealth, and marginalises the poor. The competition imperative ruthlessly overrides the needs of the natural environment as well as people’s need for community and co-operation, and has no place for vulnerability of any kind.

Indeed, the very rich are themselves victims of this system – with certain compensations. They are trapped in a protected but frenetic environment that they cannot afford to abandon, even if they knew how.

So economics cannot be seen as a technical matter, or a science that can be left to the experts. And the effects of unbridled profit-seeking on the environment cannot be seen as the price everyone has to pay for progress.

There are alternative ways of organising the economy and dealing with the environment. Economics – meaning the way that people relate to each other over resources – matters a great deal and profoundly affects what kind of society we have, and therefore how people behave and develop.

Chapter Four

God's economy

To the attentive and concerned observer it is clear that fifteen years after the demise of communism, the victory of capitalism has not brought the promised increase in freedom and prosperity for the citizens of the world. In fact, for most people in the global South life has got worse, not better.

In South Africa, in spite of the progress made since the first democratic government came into power in 1994, poverty still stalks the land, conspicuous consumerism and high debt mark those moving out of poverty, and the gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to widen.

This has a clear impact on the life and livelihoods of the people who come to church on Sunday.

How, then, does the church respond? Sadly, to a very large extent the church responds with much-needed welfare programmes but is silent about the causes of people's poverty, rooted in economic policies and practices.

Mainly this is because churchgoers feel that the sphere of economics lies outside their competence. Even though Jesus spoke more about money than he did about prayer, we continue to propagate the error that the Christian faith does not deal with economics, but only with 'spiritual' matters.

Yet we can and must think theologically about economics. To do so is becoming more and more crucial as we try to offer God's perspective to the people in South and Southern Africa, and in the world, who are suffering the effects of what is known as neoliberalism.

In a context of a pandemic of HIV/AIDS and massive inequality, we can and must talk about poverty – and so we can and must engage with economics.

The meaning of *oikos*

One approach that can help us gather the necessary biblical and theological resources to engage the world of economics from the perspective of the God whom we worship is to focus on a Greek word in the New Testament: *oikos*.

Literally, *oikos* means 'house', 'household' or 'home'. It becomes a powerful term for us because it is the root for three significant words – economy, ecology and ecumenical – and therefore points to the interconnections between the church, God's creation and economic justice.

The English word 'economy' comes from two Greek words: *oikos-nomos*, meaning the rules of the household. In seeking to understand God's economy, we must step back from a limited notion of 'economics' meaning a specialised academic subject understood only by experts, and return to these original, basic roots. To speak of God's economy is therefore to speak of the rules

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Economics and economic justice are always matters of faith, as they touch the very core of God's will for creation.

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that God has established for our household, the world in which people live, work, struggle, flourish and die.

This earth that God created, this sphere that spins through space, this globe, the household in which humanity lives and seeks meaning, our only home – this must be the place where we start to think theologically about economics.

For millions of years God has shepherded the earth into existence so that it can sustain life. To do so requires a delicate balance between human life and other life; between life, death and rebirth; between production, consumption and waste; between the needs of the current generation and the needs of the many generations still to come; and between our creative ability to shape and reshape nature, and our sinful desire to do so for selfish ends.

From God's perspective therefore, economy – *oikos-nomos* – is directly related to ecology – *oikos-logos*. Both concern the earth as our *oikos*, our home. God's economy concerns how the bounty of the world in terms of earth, water, air, plants, helps human life to flourish. It cannot be separated from ecology, from the intricate web that sustains life on the planet.

Since the advent of science, technology and the industrial revolution, however, the economy and ecology have split apart. Economy now means generating wealth, using the earth as natural resources or as a receptacle for our waste.

The world economy has to do with seeing everything as a commodity to be bought and sold, removing the role of governments in supplying basic needs to their people by

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**Social justice has been
at the centre of
ecumenical ethics in the
past decades.**
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handing this duty over to private companies, and making maximum profit out of every single transaction that happens. It no longer sees the relationship with ecology, with keeping in harmony with the wider rhythm of the earth. And in so doing, it no longer seeks to keep in harmony with fundamental biblical principals to do with God's economy.

A third word that comes from the root *oikos* is 'ecumenical'. In this case it is from the Greek word *oikoumene*, meaning the 'whole inhabited world'. The idea of the house or household of God here refers to the church – fellow-citizens in the household of God – and provides the grounding for the ecumenical movement of Christian unity.

The word 'ecumenical' carries with it some of the meaning of both economics and ecology. God has created this 'house' and is busy at work seeing to justice and equality, reconciliation and the flourishing of all creation. The church, the 'household of God' is called to be a community of faith showing God's purposes in creation as a sign to others, through seeking not just the unity of Christians, but of all the people of the earth.

Down through the centuries, the church has turned to the bible in the context of crisis, to find meaning and a way forward. So now, we turn to the bible.

Seven biblical principles about God's economy

1. *The earth is full of grace and love*

We begin with the recognition that God created this earth because God is a God of life. And this means that the earth is not a hostile place, but is our home. It is full of God's grace and love.

The Psalmist tells us that "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1), and this is a statement of faith about the God who cares for

and provides for life on earth. We pray in the Lord's Prayer that God would "give us this day our daily bread", because we understand that God is the source of food and strength, and that our ability to survive – like the escaped slaves in the desert – depends upon the grace and love of God.

Because of this our human economic systems, which begin from a fundamental premise of private ownership and the control of scarce resources, set us immediately on a collision course with God's economics.

2. Labour is both a blessing and a curse

The bible clearly shows the ambiguity of human labour in God's economy.

On the one hand, God calls us to be co-labourers with God, giving us the land to keep and to till (Genesis 2:15). It is a great honour to be able to express this creative power, and the bible suggests that it is part of what makes us human. Yet on the other hand, in a world of sin, of injustice and oppression, labour can become alienated and a curse (Genesis 3:17). We see this most clearly when people no longer own the produce of their own labour, and when the wage they earn is not enough to buy the very thing that their own hands have made.

Seen from the perspective of God's economy, this is fundamentally wrong because it splits apart human being from human doing. It is a sign of sin, and is something that God's economy seeks to overcome.

3. Sabbath is the fundamental rule of God's economy

In our world of shopping malls and conspicuous consumption, we have forgotten how radical the fourth commandment is: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God: you shall not do any work." (Exodus 20:8–10a).

There is something fundamental to God's economy in this

commandment, significant enough that God placed it before all the other ethical commands that God gave the Israelites as they entered the promised land. It makes a direct link back to God's own creative labour, and it makes a direct link between the economy and ecology, between labour and the land. This commandment does not make sense in our modern economy which no longer sees the biblical connection between labour and rest, or human labour and human dignity.

In this context, the sabbath is part of God's redemptive plan – it is God's way of putting the *oikos-nomos* and *oikos-logos* back together again.

The special sabbath is the Jubilee, when the Israelites were commanded every fifty years to free all slaves, remit all debt and return all land to the family to which it was originally allocated (Leviticus 25:8–17).

If the sabbath was intended to remind people that they have a dignity beyond just being 'units of production', then the Jubilee, the sabbath of sabbaths, is a reminder that in God's economy the system should be subservient to the ethics of justice and equity. The economy must serve all the members of the household, and must not enable some households to be prosperous at the expense of other households.

We only understand the fullness of the Jubilee law when we recognise it is not a way of amending the global economy through a little bit of debt cancellation. It is in fact God's alternative to the global economy.

4. Shared prosperity is the goal of God's economy

God is a God of prosperity. God wants people to have sufficient to eat, to be well-clothed

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The impact of neoliberalism on the earth gives urgency to the call for a just interaction between creation and humanity.

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and to live in good housing. This is the biblical vision of *shalom*, of well-being and goodness in a land flowing with milk and honey. This is the direct link between the gracefulness of the earth and God's concern for God's people.

But in God's economy this prosperity is always a shared prosperity, and never the prosperity of one sector of the population over and against another sector (the heresy of the "prosperity gospel"). The great Old Testament prophets focussed on the way wealth was shared, which is a matter of justice (Isaiah 58, Amos 5, etc.).

Thus the expected Messiah is always understood to be the one who will bring *shalom*, justice and good things to the little people. The *Magnificat* which announces the coming of Jesus is clear: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52–53).

The prosperity of all depends on equitable access to the bounty of God's creation. Likewise the biblical image of *shalom* always has reference to the fruitfulness of creation. Once again the strong relationship between economics and ecology in God's economy is seen. For God, economic justice is also ecological justice.

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The biblical tradition includes some safeguards designed to prevent and correct accumulation of unjust power and the misuse and abuse of creation.
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5. We cannot serve both God and Mammon

The Ten Commandments begin with the affirmation of God as the only God: "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3) Jesus recognizes that the idol we are most likely to bow down and worship is money, and clearly shows the difference

between God's economy and the economy of Mammon: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Matthew 6:24)

Prosperity has its limits. Shorn from justice and equity, prosperity becomes its own all-consuming god.

6. God's economy is a matter of discipleship

In confronting the rich young man (Matthew 19:16–22) and in many other of his teachings and parables, Jesus shows us that God's economy is not a theoretical construct, but is a concrete calling in the world. It certainly has to do with structures and systems, but it is at the same time a way of discipleship, about how we as individuals live our lives.

The church, as the 'household of God,' is the community of faith demonstrating to others the sign of what God wants for the whole earth, the wider *oikos*. Being a Christian means being in tune with God's economy, God's management of the household of the earth – *oikos-nomos*.

This is the message to those who are not poor. In this time of affluence and wealth over against such great poverty, the Christian virtues of frugality and simplicity may well prove to be crucial.

7. We are called to "live long in the land"

Finally, God's economy is one that has a view to the coming generations. Shared prosperity is not just for the current generation, but for our children and our children's children. For God, equity means living now in such a way that we and our children will live long in the land. This is a constant refrain in Deuteronomy: "You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that

you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess." (Deuteronomy 5:33; also 25:13–16 and 30:16–18).

This is a recognition that economics from God's point of view is not about living in such a way that future generations shall not be able to live. The whole point of God's economy is to live in harmony with the land and with one another, so that the experience of life is good, and is not cut short. Clearly, if our economic system is to serve this generation and all generations to come, then it has to be in step with ecological wisdom. It has to resonate with God's economy.

Four learnings about economics from *oikos*

Having seen the deep connections between economics, ecology and ecumenism, we can begin to shape some contours of an alternative economic system: one that does not manufacture poverty.

First, we should be reminded again that the heart of economics as *oikos-nomos* – the rules of the house – is indeed the *oikos* – the household. This represents the place where ordinary people, old and young, male and female, sick and healthy, are engaged in pursuing their livelihoods. It is here that the effects of economics are felt most deeply and it is the livelihoods of these ordinary people – rather than stock markets, inflation targets and the GDP – that should be the key concern of economics.

God's economy seeks to order a world in which people rather than profit will be the central concern.

Secondly, the word ecology from *oikos-logos* – the study of the household – makes a fundamental connection between economics and

the environment. It is clear that the "unlimited growth" strategy of global capitalism is having a disastrous effect upon this earth, and once again it is the poor who find themselves the victims of the greed of the rich.

Thus, thinking of economics as taking place within the limits of the "house" of the earth which God has given into our safekeeping is a vital contribution that theology can make to economics.

Thirdly, the idea of the *oikoumene*, the house in which God is at work – meaning the whole inhabited universe – provides us with a theological alternative to the vision of globalisation. We all know and recognise that there is much positive impact that flows from global connections, in the form of wider communication, information and insight. Yet we are also deeply aware of the way in which economic globalisation has such a destructive impact upon people throughout the world.

The picture of the *oikoumene* helps us see the positive side to global networks of people, and a wider inclusion of all people in the affairs of the world. It does so by recognising them as human beings with dignity and special cultures, rather than by counting them as labourers or consumers to serve the interests of multi-national corporations. A theological perspective on the economy will therefore pit the dream of the *oikoumene* against the nightmare of globalisation.

Fourthly, we must return to the *oikos tou Theou* – the household of God, the church (Ephesians 2:19). We have noticed that *oikos* is an expansive word that can mean a local home, a nation, the whole world, and now the community of faith. This is a special term in the New Testament. As followers of Christ,

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An economy of life is not an end, but a means to make possible the healing and development of persons, societies and the earth.
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we are members of this *oikos* – but this *oikos* is connected to the wider work of God in the world.

The calling of the church is to hold up the radical inclusivity of the household of God, in which all are invited to sit at the family table as equals. In this way, the church is a sign community for the wider household of earth, and should be a constant witness against the economics of exclusion which is hell-bent on ensuring that the wealth generated by human labour and the graciousness of God is the preserve of just the select few.

Chapter Five

Taking up the challenge of the *Oikos Journey*

The challenge confronting the people of God at this time is to re-claim economics as *oikos-nomos*, the management of the household. It is not the preserve of professionals and academics. It is the heart of what it means to live on this earth, and it is at the heart of what the bible has to teach.

It is here that women in countless *manyano* groups throughout the country share food and prayers with the unemployed and with people in homes devastated by AIDS. It is amongst such circumstances that hundreds of churches throughout our nation are involved in soup kitchens with the destitute. It is here that every church office responds to countless appeals for immediate or long-term financial help for those with nowhere else to turn.

The church does know these things. It has an expertise in economics that is unparalleled in this country, and it must speak, and it deserves a hearing.

We want to continue the journey of finding out and understanding how ordinary

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The ministries of preaching the gospel and celebrating the sacraments can be compromised when churches are complicit with systemic injustice and the exploitation of life.

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people, ordinary Christian women and men are experiencing economic life in South Africa, and how they express that in terms of their faith. We need to listen to pastors and priests about their ministry in the face of such poverty, and uncover the liberating insights of the gospel that keep them active and hopeful.

At the same time, the *Oikos Journey* makes clear that the church has a vision to counter the neoliberal version of globalisation. We need to strip our economic system of its idolatry rooted in beliefs such as an 'unseen hand which guides the market' – as though economics were value-free, and could be left to external forces.

We want to put the ecumenical, the economic and the ecological back together again and assert that God has much to teach us about how we structure our households at a family level, community level, national level and global level.

Three levels of response

As church there are different levels at which we can respond to this challenge:

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Churches need to reflect on how God acts to promote justice in creation and in human society.
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Firstly, we can continue with what the church does daily: that is, an instinctive response of trying to meet people's immediate needs. Offering a food basket for the poor at Sunday services, becoming involved in home-based care of those with HIV/AIDS, having a collection for those affected by local flooding or drought – there are endless ways that local congregations reach out to the suffering around them and in their midst, often supported by the psychological and spiritual support of prayer.

Although crucial and often life-saving, this welfare response has its limitations. There are opportunities to meet and interact with those who are poor as people, rather than as statistics, but on its own this response can create dependency.

Secondly, we can become involved in work and projects that are developmental: that help people grow in skills, gain confidence and empower themselves to find ways to overcome the problems of poverty. We can teach people how to set up and maintain vegetable gardens. We can use the expertise of people in our congregations as mentors for those trying to set up their own small business. We can network with others and lobby local authorities to provide necessary water, sanitation, housing and electricity. We can help people learn to do advocacy with those in power to influence how policies are formulated, so that they are pro-poor.

The empowerment of women is an important developmental factor in poverty eradication. On the whole it is women who are responsible for maintaining the home – providing food and support. Strengthening the position of women helps ultimately strengthen the global household of life.

However, even this developmental response has its limitations in an economic system with the built-in injustices of the present world order.

Thirdly, we can challenge the structural injustices that need conversion before there can be any lasting solution to the problems inherent in the present economic system. We can discover and analyse the root causes of the poverty around us and try to deal with those in the light of the

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We as churches are called to create spaces for and become agents of transformation even as we are entangled in and complicit with the very system we are called to change.
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gospel of Christ. We can work for the conversion of the patriarchal household where women are expected to engage in domestic chores at the expense of full engagement in all aspects of a democratic society, including worthwhile paid economic activity.

This response challenges the church to speak out in the spirit of the biblical prophets: to speak truth to power wherever the state or the private sector is colluding in consolidating an unjust system.

In order to move to the third level and re-activate the prophetic voice of the church, we will need to encourage our theologians to equip the people of God adequately to make an appropriate response.



***Resistance is important,
but it is not enough.
New visions are needed to
support new rules,
articulated by the people
themselves and backed by
ethical challenges
formulated by social
movements and churches,
before there can be
genuine change.***



The values of the *oikos* community

As we continue this *oikos* journey together, we will need to continually return to the gospel of hope on which our church is founded. We will look for places and people in which the values of compassion and sharing, mutual support and equity, above all of justice, are evident – and we will witness to them. We will promote the values of a just society inside the church as well as in society.

And we will encourage our people through our messages and our prayers not to give up hope, but to continue the struggle. We can do no less if we are to be co-creators with God of the society which is God's will – that *oikos* which is good for every person and for all of creation.