

Covenanting for Justice:

An Introduction to Globalization and the Churches' Response

Reading the signs of the times

The term *globalization* refers to the increasing integration of peoples, cultures, and economies in the world. While migration, trade, and cultural exchange have long been a part of human history, technological advances have increased many people's access to information, travel, communication, and goods. The shape globalization is taking in our world emanates from our institutions, systems and societies. Increasingly people around the world are recognizing as morally untenable forms and systems of globalization that contribute to the exploitation of people and degrade the planet. This study piece introduces the work of the Covenanting for Justice movement supported by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). The letter that follows was written at the conclusion of the 2004 WARC General Council meeting in Accra, Ghana as a way to communicate with people of faith around the world who are part of the Reformed tradition. It encouraged prayerful consideration of our own role, responsibility and accountability in the midst of a world full of inequality, oppression and environmental crises.

Letter from Accra: message of the 2004 WARC General Council

From the delegates gathered from throughout the world in Accra, Ghana, at the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the congregations of all those churches belonging to this fellowship, greetings. We have met as 400 delegates in this Council from July 30 to August 12, 2004, worshipping, studying the Bible, deliberating on urgent issues facing God's world, and participating in the rich life of local churches in Ghana. We write to share with you what, on your behalf, we have discerned and experienced. Grace and peace to you from our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our most moving and memorable moments came from our visit to Elmina and Cape Coast, two "castles" on the Coast of Ghana that held those who had been captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over brutal centuries 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died. On this trade in humans as commodities, wealth in Europe was built. Through their labour, sweat, suffering, intelligence and creativity the wealth of the Americas was developed.

At the Elmina Castle the Dutch merchants, soldiers, and Governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door ("For the Lord has chosen Zion..."). And we imagined Reformed Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and horror of those dungeons. For more than two centuries in that place this went on.

In angry bewilderment we thought, “How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?”

Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation. Those who are Reformed Christians have always declared God’s sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forbears of Reformed faith deny so blatantly what they believed so clearly?

Yet, as we listened to the voices today from our global fellowship, we discovered the mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those whose blindness we decried. For today’s world is divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world’s economic injustice and ecological destruction who still suffer and die.

We perceive that the world today lives under the shadow of an oppressive empire. By this we mean the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces throughout the globe that reinforce the division between the rich and the poor. Millions of those in our congregations live daily in the midst of these realities. The economies of many of our countries are trapped in international debt and imposed financial demands that worsen the lives of the poorest. So many suffer! Each day 24,000 people die because of hunger and malnutrition, and global trends show that wealth grows for the few while poverty increases for the many. Meanwhile, millions of others in our congregations live lives as inattentive to this suffering as those who worshipped God on the floor above slave dungeons.

In our discussions in Accra—indeed in the past seven years of reflection since we last met in General Council at Debrecen, Hungary—we have come to realize that this is not just another “issue” to be “addressed.” Rather, it goes to the heart of our confession of faith. How can we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord over all life and not stand against all that denies the promise of fullness of life to the world?

If Jesus Christ is not Lord over all, he is not Lord at all. That is why we find in the Bible a constant criticism of idolatry, emphasized in our Reformed tradition. To declare faith in the one true God is to reject divided loyalties between God and mammon, dethrone the false gods of wealth and power, and turn from false promises to the true God of life.

We know that this does not come easily for any of us. Yet our hope lies in confessing that the power of the resurrected Christ can overturn the idols and the modern gods that hold the world captive to injustice and ecological destruction.

Therefore we invite you, in Reformed churches throughout the world, to take this stance of faith, standing against all that denies life and hope for millions, as a concrete expression of our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

What is the Accra Confession?

The Accra Confession was adopted by the delegates of the World Alliance of Reformed

Churches (WARC) 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana (2004) based on the theological conviction that the economic and environmental injustices of today's global economy require the Reformed family of churches to respond as a matter of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Accra Confession calls upon Reformed Christians around the world to address injustices in the world as an integral part of their churches' witness and mission. (include web address for Accra Confession)

Why does the church need the Accra Confession?

1. Justice is a matter of faith. The Accra Confession states that matters of economic and environmental justice are not only social, political, and moral issues: they are integral to faith in Jesus Christ and affect the integrity of the church. Being faithful to God's covenant requires that individual Christians and the churches take a stand against current economic and environmental injustices.
2. The unity of the church is critical. Unity is concerned with togetherness, however divisive the issues confronting the confessing body may be. While the complex realities of globalization have not led to a full consensus, the global Reformed family addresses the problematic nature of today's global economy in the Accra Confession.
3. The church stands in solidarity with persons who are suffering and struggling. Following the justice traditions of the biblical prophets and of Jesus in the Gospel narratives, the Accra Confession views the current world (dis)order by "looking through the eyes of powerless and suffering people." It calls the churches and society to hear the cries of the people who suffer and the woundedness of Creation itself, over-consumed and undervalued by the current global economy.

Include suggested discussion questions for the above "reading the signs of the times" section. This is a lot of material to cover just by reading aloud or silently.

Show the video "*Coffee, Corn and the Cost of Globalization*"

People in North America can eat tropical fruit in winter and buy clothing made in Asia. Around the world, people exchange goods, information and technology at a faster rate than ever before. But not everyone benefits from having the world within reach. This video raises some questions about economic globalization through the stories of two communities in Mexico. In Tilapia, families who depend on income from coffee now face a devastating drop in world coffee prices. In Zaongo, changes to age-old corn farming practices and less expensive imported corn have cut deeply into people's ability to support themselves. Explore how we as Christians have a responsibility to our global neighbors whose lives have been profoundly affected by this race to accumulate wealth.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the positive aspects of globalization? What are the costs of globalization?
2. What biblical basis can we find for a just global economy? How did Jesus respond to the economic inequalities he saw in the first century?

3. Why have coffee prices plummeted around the globe? How could the coffee producers in Tilapia make a living selling coffee? How can North American Christians act in solidarity with the coffee producers in Tilapia?
4. Why is Mexico importing corn from the United States? Why are Mexicans buying it? How do subsidized agricultural crops affect farmers both in the United States and in other countries?
5. What values are needed to have a more just economy? How can we develop these values in ourselves and encourage these values in our institutions, government, and representatives?

Adapted from the Study Guide for Coffee, Corn and the Cost of Globalization produced by the Mennonite Central Committee

Confessing Our Faith

Exodus 32:1–6 (NRSV)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

Revelation 18:10–13 (NRSV)

They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, “Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.” And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.

Reflection

In biblical times the people of God turned away from God and made gods for themselves by taking gold rings from people, pouring the gold into a mould, casting an image of a golden calf and worshipping it in place of God, their liberator. In the biblical time, the merchants of the earth greedily bought and traded cargoes of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron,

and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human souls.

Five hundred years ago people of God turned away from God, took lands not their own, stole resources, and traded not only resources but human beings created in God's image in order to dominate and to benefit from them. Lamentably, our Reformed ancestors were involved in this slave trade. Today, in the name of capitalism, people have erected a bull in front of banks, stock markets and economic centers, and worship mammon in place of the God of life. They globalize markets and commodify nearly everything God has granted freely. We pursue an economy of empire in which the economic and political power of the few leave the majority of the world's people in poverty. Do we realize that when we benefit from a corrupt system we too are complicit? Do we too worship mammon instead of God? Can Christians and churches compromised by the comforts and benefits of economic globalization chart a different course? The Accra Confession and the Covenanting for Justice movement are invitations to participate in finding a more faithful path.

1. What would you identify as the idols in your life that prevent you from truly being in relationship with God?
2. What does it mean to pursue an economy of empire? How are North Americans and North American churches complicit in empire building that exploits the Global South?
3. What can we resist the empire of which we are a part?

Adapted from the WARC Worship Book for the 24th General Council

Covenanting for Justice

Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth is working to build a movement of churches, communities and individuals who offer a beacon of hope for life in fullness for all. We invite you and your faith community to become active in the struggle for justice and peace and to consider ways you might engage and covenant for justice at local, regional, national, and international levels.

Locally

- lead (or participate in) a study of the issues of globalization and justice using this curriculum or the materials suggested at the end of this study guide
- get involved with community-based groups in your area working to promote affordable housing, immigrant and refugee rights, anti-poverty initiatives, living wages, and so forth
- recruit other members of your faith community to join you and others in this work
- begin to develop a partnership with a church in another country or on the other side of town to develop a long-term relationship with a Christian community that may experience the global economy very differently from you and your church members.

Check with your denomination to find out which global partnerships it is involved in and what programs it may have that facilitate your involvement

Regionally

- find the councils of churches in your area and see how you can get involved in helping to address issues of economic injustice in your locality and region
- organize an ecumenical or interfaith study and work project with other communities of faith in your area, talk about the issues together and develop a project in which you can work together to strengthen your local community

Nationally

- educate yourself about issues of economic and environmental justice and question political candidates about their plans to address these issues
- lobby your national political leaders to address injustices

Internationally

- learn from individuals and partner organizations overseas, especially in developing countries, about their challenges and ask whether practices and policies in North America are contributing to these. Check your denomination's website for more information.
- identify, support and/or work with groups within and outside your denomination that have a track record of effective advocacy work with North American governments, corporations and multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and United Nations agencies

Closing Litany

a) Call to worship

The Lord says, This is the fast I choose;

This is what is acceptable to me:

**To loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the yoke of oppression
and let the prisoners go free;
to share our bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into our house.**

Give dignity to those who have nothing
and do not turn from your own families.
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn
and your healing shall well up like a spring.

Your justice and your glory will surround us,

**You will answer when we cry for help;
You will say, O Lord, "Here I am!"** (*Isaiah 58:6–9a*)

Let us worship God.

**b) Prayer
The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father who art in heaven,
Beloved God, Creator of heaven and earth,
and of all the peoples of the earth,
bring peace and righteousness to all the peoples.
In your grace, may equity grow.
Turn our hearts to you in healing and transformation.

hallowed be thy name.
Be present to all peoples,
that we may open our eyes and recognize you
in our history, in our cultures, in our struggles.
Deliver us from enchantment by the false gods of money, markets
and status.
Help us to praise you in our faith and actions,
that, seeing our loving service in your name,
others, too, may bless that name.

Thy kingdom come;
Where people resist injustice,
live in solidarity,
and seek a more human social order,
help us to recognize the ferment of your kingdom already at work.
Bless those who are poor, those who suffer for the sake of justice,
those who promote and defend human rights.
Bless the children of our countries,
and protect them from terror and oppression.

Thy will be done,
Yes! That your wisdom would be our wisdom!
Deliver us from adjusting to unjust systems,
Move our hearts, and the hearts of women and men everywhere
to act in love,
that we may resist the seductions of power and greed
and may live in right relationships with all.

on earth as it is in heaven.
God, present in every movement of creation,
let us be responsible stewards of your garden of life,

striving for sustainability.
And as the firmament in all its mystery and glory
displays your cosmic will,
so may our lives display the mystery and glory of love,
your will for life on earth.

Give us this day our daily bread,

That no one may be threatened by hunger, malnutrition, scarcity,
give bread to those who have none,
and hunger for justice to those who have bread.
Teach us what is enough for today,
and to share with those who have less than enough,
for in this, it is Jesus whom we serve.

and forgive us our debts

Don't let us lose our lives,
as persons and as peoples,
because of our debts.
Let not the poorest pay for the benefit of the richest,
in unfair demands, punitive interest rates and excessive charges.
But forgive us, and let justice prevail.

as we forgive our debtors.

As we live by your grace and sharing of your very self,
deliver us from systems of aggressive and divisive individualism.
Break our chains of selfishness,
open our hearts to those who need our solidarity,
and deliver us from illusion,
that we might practice what we preach.

And lead us not into temptation,

Deliver us from being bewitched by power,
and keep us faithful to you;
for you are our help, where else can we appeal?
Money will not save us, nor the market, nor our powerful friends.
Strengthen us to resist the false attraction of easy answers,
magic fixes,
abuses of power,
and the delusion that there is any way apart from justice
in which God's justice can be done.

but deliver us from evil.

From every evil that objectifies the earth,
all living beings, and our neighbours;
from every evil that degrades creation
and destroys societies;

from every evil that encourages us to think
that we are God.

So may we learn from you to refrain from judgment,
to accord respect to all God's creation,
and so be privileged to hear the witness
of those the world treats with indignity.

**Because yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.**

Adapted from the WARC Worship Book for the 24th General Council

Additional Resources

Books:

Brubaker, Pamela K., *Globalization at What Price? Economic Change and Daily Life*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001.

Brubaker, Pamela K., Rebecca Todd Peters, and Laura A. Stivers, eds., *Justice in a Global Economy: Strategies for Home, Community, and World*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006.

Peters, Rebecca Todd and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008.

Denominational resources:

Christian Reformed Church in North America—*Shalom Seekers: Living the Call to Do Justice*. www.crcjustice.org.

Presbyterian Church in Canada—*God is Our Refuge: Security in an Insecure World, Part 1*. www.presbyterian.ca/assembly/2003/reports/internationalaffairs.pdf

Report of the International Affairs Committee to the 129th General Assembly, 2003. Acts and Proceedings, pp. 297–309. *God is Our Refuge: Security in an Insecure World, Part 2*. Report of the International Affairs Committee to the 130th General Assembly, 2004. Acts and Proceedings, pp. 310–324.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—*Just Globalization: Justice, Ownership, and Accountability*. General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) PDS#OGA-06-090, 2006. www.pcusa.org/acswp or www.pcusa.org/oga, and the Just Trade website www.pcusa.org/trade.

Reformed Church in America—*Globalization, Ethics, and the Earth*. Minutes of the General Synod/June 2005, pp. 344-364.

United Church of Christ—*A Faithful Response: Calling for a More Just, Humane Direction for*

Economic Globalization. A Pronouncement by the General Synod XXIV, 2003.
www.ucc.org/justice/issues/pdfs/A-Faithful-Response-Callingfor-a-More-Just-Humane-Direction-for-Economic-Globalization.pdf

United Church of Canada—*Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire*. A Preliminary Report to the 39th General Council of the United Church of Canada, August 2006.

Websites:

- Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance: www.e-alliance.ch
- Global issues website: www.globalissues.org
- Oikotree: www.oikotree.org
- WARC Covenanting for Justice website:

warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=796&part_id=28&navi=24

- World Council of Churches—Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology program:

www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology.html