

Climate change – The coming decade of truth for God’s household

1. Climate change on the agenda of Christians in South Africa

Background and purpose of the document

This document emerged from a number of ecumenical consultations and conferences on Christianity and climate change in the Southern African context. It follows on a series of similar theological statements on social issues emerging over the last few decades from within the (South) African context – including the *Message to the People of South Africa* (1968), the *Belhar confession* (1982/1986), the *Kairos Document* (1985/1986), the *Road to Damascus* (1989), *The Land is Crying for Justice* (2002), the *Accra Declaration* (2005) and the *Oikos Journey* (2006).

This document seeks to complement similar ecumenical processes and documents on climate change from other regions of the world. It builds on documents emerging from within the World Council of Churches on climate change, including *Accelerated climate change: Sign of peril, Test of faith* (1993), *Solidarity with victims of climate change* (2002) and *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE)* (2005). It draws from statements in the context of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), including the *African Church leaders’ statement on climate change and water* (3-5 June 2008) and the call from the AACC to the UN Climate Change conference, held from 13 to 19 December 2007 in Bali, Indonesia, entitled *Responsible church leadership to reverse global warming and to ensure equitable development* and a report on an Ecumenical Consultation on Climate Change (Africa), held in Nairobi, 3-5 June 2008. It should also be understood against the background of a resolution adopted by the 2007 triennial national conference of the South African Council of Churches on climate change.¹

This document emerged through a process of reflection, discussion and education amongst Christians in South Africa concerned with the many challenges posed by climate change, especially within our context. It is the product of ongoing consultations over a period of more than two years following a conference on climate change held at the University of the Western Cape in November 2007. Since then portions of the document have been discussed in numerous meetings of local church councils, interest groups, Bible study groups and various conference sessions. Since March 2009 a sub-committee of the SACC in the Western Cape accepted ownership of the process of producing the document. It was thus channelled through the official structures of the South African Council of Churches.

The document is primarily aimed at lay and ordained leaders in various church structures and in

¹ The SACC resolution reads as follows:

Whereas:

We who worship a creator God believe God has charged us to care for, look after and nurture creation, to “keep it” (Genesis 2:15) for future generations.

We therefore believe that ensuring a sustainable future for our children is a primary responsibility.

We recognize that climate change and environmental degradation is a critical threat to sustainability.

We believe that in order to ensure sustainability, we must establish justice for all.

We therefore:

1. Call upon government to:

- a) Introduce regulatory legislation that will sufficiently reduce CO₂ emissions to ensure that global warming remains below a 2° C rise;
- b) End all subsidies to fossil fuel and nuclear energy generation;
- c) Subsidize and promote at all levels – community, city, provincial and national – the development and building of renewable energy generation, achieving at least 15% by 2015; and

2. Urge our churches to:

- a) Lobby for the above changes; and
- b) Develop and disseminate resource materials and support training which encourages energy efficiency, the use of renewable energy and raises awareness about climate change.

We make this call in our response to God and for the sake of future generations who should not be disadvantaged by our irresponsibility.

local Christian communities. The purpose of the document is to assist Christians in Southern Africa to assess what is at stake in the challenges posed by climate change and to respond to such challenges from the perspective of Christian faith and practice. The aim of the document is therefore to offer prophetic witness, to recognise the signs of the time; but its focus is also educational, pastoral, confessional and practical. It calls on Christians to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2), for a transformation of our perceptions, thinking, visions, attitudes, orientation, habits, priorities, practices and institutions.

This form of prophetic witness is primarily aimed at churches and speaks to the wider society only on that basis. This is not a form of prophecy that safely allocates the blame elsewhere and that merely reiterates a call to do something – which those in government or corporate business may not even hear or read, let alone listen to or respond to. It is aware of the temptation to speak as if Christians can occupy some moral high ground, especially on the issue of climate change. Instead, this document recognises that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, that it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart and that it pierces through our own practices, habits and institutions (Heb 4:12).

This is a form of prophetic witness that gives weight to the voices of the many victims of society and of climate change. As is widely predicted, climate change will hit those of us who are already vulnerable the hardest – the poor, rural people, the elderly, the sick, women and children. Moreover, climate change will also affect numerous other forms of life that do not have a voice in human decision making processes. In continuity with other forms of prophetic witness emerging from within the South African context we therefore wish to listen to the voices of the victims in our own midst, including the theological questions that are raised in the process – on suffering, on God's promises, on God's care and on God's faithfulness. At the same time, some of us also need to recognise the temptation to speak on behalf of others (especially the victims of society, including other species) too eagerly, too confidently, too assertively. To be able to verbalise one's thoughts quicker than others may be pretentious and does not necessarily imply that one is right.

On this basis, this document seeks to discern God's word for our times and to assist Christian communities, within the larger household of God, to respond appropriately to the challenges ahead. In doing so we are aware of the dangers of shallow, distorted or biased social analyses that cannot come to grips with the situation, of speaking without a sense of continuity with our fathers and mothers and our sister and brothers in the Christian faith and of dressing up social analysis as if that would by itself amount to the Word of God.

In terms of the method followed, the document assumes a tension between action and reflection and offers theological reflection on the responses of churches to climate change. It is structured in terms of the ongoing spiral of acting, seeing, judging and acting anew. Thus it describes current responses by churches (acting), it investigates what is at stake (seeing), it discerns the roots of the problem from the perspective of the Christian faith (judging) and it seeks to deepen a Christian response (acting anew).

The term "action" is used here to describe the worship (*leitourgia*), proclamation (*kerugma*), fellowship (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) of Christian communities in South Africa. For this reason, a need was also recognised to produce, alongside the document, appropriate resources for Christian worship, Bible study, Christian education and guidelines for appropriate practical responses to climate change from within local Christian communities. Such resources should be available in a wide range of genres, including posters, lyrics, DVD's, colour in books, etc.

Climate change as a challenge for Christians

We as Christians in South Africa often find ourselves in two minds when faced with the challenges posed by climate change:

- On the one hand we are called to embody a spirit of hope; on the other hand we often share a sense of gloom over the many ills of our society, our continent and the planet.

- Although some Christians recognise the seriousness of the challenges posed by climate change, this is often dwarfed by numerous other social concerns in our context. It is often hard to know what should receive the priority and how to energise action.
- Some fear that they will become the victims of climate change and other forces well beyond their control, some recognise their involvement and guilt in contributing to the problem, while many others are ignorant or not all that worried about the threats of climate change, probably since these often seem to remain invisible and long-term.
- As citizens of a so-called emerging economy (in South Africa) we have no immediate obligations in terms of international treaties to reduce our carbon emissions, but we also recognise that our industries are heavily polluting and that our carbon emissions per capita are far above the global average.
- Some Christians are beneficiaries of the consumer society and the many advantages that come along with that, while the majority of Christians in Southern Africa find themselves marginalised by the forces that control the global economy. Some Christians form part of what may be termed the “consumer class”, while most others desire and aspire to follow a similar lifestyle. We recognise that this lifestyle lies at the heart of the culture that brought about climate change, that this lifestyle cannot be followed by all people in a sustainable manner and that it will be crucial to address the inequalities in this regard.

In reflecting on the challenge of climate change from a Christian perspective there is another tension that has to be addressed. Those countries that have contributed most to climate change are also countries that are associated, at least from an historic perspective, with (Western) Christianity. As citizens of a southern country on the African continent, which has historical ties with both the North-West and the North-East, we may wish to distance ourselves from responsibility for the impact of industrialisation on climate change. Yet, we are also the direct or indirect beneficiaries (and victims) of such industrialisation. Moreover, as Christians in dialogue with people of other living faiths we cannot distance ourselves from our Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world. Indeed, Christianity is as much part of the problem underlying climate change as it may become part of an appropriate response to that. Likewise, during the 1980s there were many church leaders in South Africa who dedicated themselves to the struggle against apartheid, but who belonged to churches that failed to do that. As church leaders they could not quite distance themselves from responsibility for what their brothers and sisters did, even though that would have been the easy option.

There is an even deeper ambivalence that characterises prophetic witness on climate change. The “prophets” who are typically issuing warnings about climate change do not do so in the name of Christianity or even from a religious perspective. Those who have taken the lead and who have called for moral vision and moral leadership include scientists, consultants, politicians and journalists. Their work is being undermined by (religious) prophets of doom and destruction who typically evoke fear, not hope, leading to an inability to confront the stark challenges. Christians in South Africa and elsewhere in the world therefore find themselves in an uncomfortable position where they are being addressed in a prophetic mode instead of exercising their own prophetic responsibility.

Moreover, as many churches have had to admit, climate change seldom receives a priority on the social agenda of the church. This implies that Christians can scarcely speak about climate change with any degree of moral authority. Unlike Christian witness from within the South African context in the past, we have to recognise that we do not occupy the moral high ground and cannot speak from such a position. Any form of Christian witness in the context of climate change will therefore be to wield a two-edged sword.

Climate change as a moral, cultural and spiritual challenge

The content of the message coming from the scientific experts on climate change is no longer

ambiguous. There can be no doubt that climate change is by far the most threatening environmental concern and that it will affect almost every aspect of our lives in the coming decades. It is therefore not only an environmental issue – which only some activists need to be concerned about. At stake are the very foundations of industrialised civilisation and indeed of life on this planet. What is required to address climate change is a fundamental reorientation of the entire global economy. What needs to be changed are the sources of energy on which all economic activities rely – away from fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas towards sustainable alternatives. Moreover, this will have to be done within four decades (if a stabilisation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is to be reached by 2050) – of which the first decade will be the most crucial. The decision to redirect the global economy has to be taken soon since it will necessarily take a long time to change its direction.

Climate change cannot be addressed merely through more information or planning. It is not a problem that can be resolved only on the basis of advanced forms of technology. The hope for quick technological fixes, that will leave consumerist ways of living untouched, has to be unmasked as false. This is less a problem of know-what or know-how than of know-why and know-wherefore. The crisis that we have to face is not merely an ecological crisis, but also a cultural crisis that concerns all aspects of everyday life in the consumer society. Indeed, it is a deadly sign of cultural failure. This indicates that the values underlying the dominant global cultural and economic practices have become bankrupt. The problem lies not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, in our attitudes, aspirations and orientations, in our priorities, habits, practices and institutions.

In the light of these cultural and spiritual dimensions of the challenge, the pervasive culture of consumerism is of crucial significance. As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople has observed: “Climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. To persist on the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is no less than suicidal, jeopardizing the diversity of the very earth that we inhabit, enjoy and share.” This assessment is also expressed in a “Declaration on the Environment” signed by Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope John Paul II on 10 June 2002:

What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.

Climate change as a new Kairos

It is therefore appropriate to see climate change as a new “kairos” – as a moment of truth and of opportunity where our collective response will have far-reaching consequences. For Christians worldwide this poses a similar challenge as the integrity of Christian witness and indeed of the gospel itself is at stake. In the midst of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s Christians in South Africa also spoke of a “kairos” moment. This led to the publication of the *Kairos Document* in 1985. Since then we have been confronted with numerous other challenges – establishing democratic institutions, poverty, unemployment, the lasting legacy of our colonial and apartheid past, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the destruction of morals and family life, violence against the vulnerable, gangsterism and xenophobia, various addictions, crime, and corruption.

At this moment in history we are again called to recognise what is at stake in discerning the signs of our times. This is even more difficult than in the past. Although communities in South Africa are already experiencing the negative effects of climate change (often not recognising that as such), its full impact will become more visible only in coming decades. This will cause severe suffering for those who are already most vulnerable, including the urban and the rural poor. Moreover, there are

many other forms of life that will be threatened as a result of climate change. Our actions in the decade that lies ahead will have long-lasting implications for many generations to come. On this basis we speak in this document of the challenges related to climate change as a “coming decade of truth for God’s household”. It is a challenge that will require from us repentance and a fundamental change of heart, attitude and action, in short, a form of ecological conversion (*metanoia*).

2. Christian responses to climate change (Acting)

Recognising the role of attitudes and perceptions

In understanding what is at stake with regard to Christian responses to climate change, it is important to start with people’s perceptions and attitudes towards climate change. This is indeed a crucial part of the problem.

There are probably very few literate adults in South Africa who have not heard about climate change. Although there remain some sceptics who doubt the accuracy of the scientific reports, most of us know intuitively what is at stake. It is not difficult to see why it has struck such a deep chord amongst ordinary people, including the very poor amongst us: we all like to talk about the weather and we all observe changes in weather patterns. And we wonder why this is the case.

It is probably true that climate change is nowhere near the top of people’s agendas in terms of what is wrong and has to be addressed in South Africa. Crime, unemployment, poverty and HIV/AIDS are far more obvious and immediate concerns. When one is faced with so many immediate needs, there is little room to even consider something that still seem so distant and far into the future. There are many of us who do not know whether and how they will be able to feed their children tonight or tomorrow. They know the meaning of the prayer: Give us today our daily bread”. Surely, in such a context, climate change seems very remote and not an immediate concern. Many would therefore ask whether it should really receive a priority on the agenda of churches in South Africa.

Nevertheless, many of us would also admit that climate change evokes some silent but pervasive fears for the future. Most of us wonder what kind of world our children and grandchildren will inherit from us. While some may be excited about technological progress, climate change has placed a damper on any easy sense of optimism. We fear living on a hotter, drier, heavily polluted planet, under a more dangerous sun, with more people to feed, more refugees and more conflict over ever-scarcer resources. Such concerns over the future have a bearing on how we see and live our lives as such uncertainty undermines almost everything else. When we are fundamentally uncertain about what tomorrow will bring, it is very difficult to know what to do today and to find the energy to do anything. In this way climate change influences us more deeply than we may think.

In the process of consultation that lead to this document it was especially striking to hear from the youth, from diverse sectors of the South African society, that they intuitively recognise the significance and the gravity of the problem – which is one that they would have to cope with in their own lifetime.

Yet, South Africans respond to media reports about climate change in very different ways. Most people probably fall under one of the following four categories:

- Many of us are or will become the victims of climate change. In South Africa this will be related to environmental refugees from elsewhere in Africa, increased competition for jobs, changing weather patterns in particular parts of the country, a lack of potable water resulting from that, diseases such as malaria becoming more widespread, rising food prices and transport costs. While the affluent may have the resources to overcome challenges in terms of food, health, housing, transport and security, the poor amongst us will be unable to attend to even our most basic needs. Those of us who are vulnerable therefore intuitively fear what climate change will bring. We know that we will be hit the hardest. We admit that we are scarcely in a position to worry about other forms of life – plants and animals on the brink of extinction – that are as

vulnerable as we are.

- Those of us who are part of the global consumer class may be tempted to ignore or downplay the threats of climate change. Psychologically we often feel numbed by all challenged that we have to face and all the demands on our attention, including all the media reports on climate change. We may take some modest steps such as switching our light bulbs. However, our rampant consumerist desires usually trump any reduction of our carbon footprint. We compare ourselves with those who are wealthier than us and desire to have more – better salaries, bigger houses, smarter cars, more luxurious holidays, more air travel, more financial security, exotic foods and restaurant meals. Even though we may realise that each of these items will tend to enlarge our carbon footprint, we find it easy to rationalise that on the basis of societal pressures. We regard our spending as necessary to cope with the tempo of life. We seldom remember that not every human being on earth would be able to adopt a lifestyle comparable to our own – which would cause runaway climate change. We are sometimes more concerned about the impact of climate change on “nature out there” – where we enjoy to go to for holidays – than about those who are vulnerable much closer to our homes.
- There are many of us who grew up in relatively poor households. After the transition to democracy in 1994, we obtained better access to education and health services. We, or at least our children, therefore sense opportunities for better jobs, a higher income and a more comfortable lifestyle. In our neighbourhoods we experience a strong upward social mobility. If we are not yet part of the middle class, we have realistic hopes of becoming that soon. When we hear reports on climate change we feel deeply cheated. It seems unfair that everyone cannot be as affluent as the consumer class, because, we are told, it would simply not be sustainable. Some of us have not been able to afford a car before, but we hope to have one in future. Why do we have to qualify the sense of an upward social mobility and why do we have to do it just now – when we are able to entertain hopes for a better future for the first time?
- Some of us are deeply angered by the responses to climate change of those in decision making positions in the global economy. We just shake our heads when we hear about wastefulness, injustices and the failure to recognise what is at stake. Our anger is perhaps a righteous anger but we may well be angry with ourselves. We tend to have a guilty conscience about our own environmental impact and our carbon footprint. We recognise the need for repentance and for a fundamental change of heart, mind and lifestyle, but we find it hard to change, partly because of decisions we have already made in terms of housing, transport, food, education and financial security. We are confronted with limits to what can be changed and what can be changed rapidly. We do not live from the joy of God’s forgiveness and therefore anxiously and frantically seek to save the planet through our own efforts – through conscientising others, through practical innovations or through activism.

All of us probably recognise that there are such differences amongst South Africans. We know all too well that our country has been marked by stark inequalities. However, most of us experience an inability to change that. The societal pressures and structures are so vastly complex that it is difficult to know how to address such inequalities.

Recognising inadequate theological responses

Environmental concerns such as climate change may not have been a top priority on the social agenda of churches in South Africa. This should not blind us to recognise the ways in which we have indeed responded to such concerns through our perceptions, attitudes and practises. Indeed, it is impossible not to respond as no response is also a (not so adequate) response. Moreover, we need to recognise that some Christian responses have been governed by theological assumptions that can only worsen the situation.

We wish to highlight the following inadequate theological responses. In each case there is an element of truth which has to be recognised. However, where such a kernel of truth becomes

isolated from other aspects of the Christian faith and disconnected from the context in which such Christian witness is situated, such expressions of the Christian faith soon become radically distorted. Such a theology may well become heretical. As we recognise such heresies in our own midst and in our own hearts, we call on others to recognise and resist such theologies as well.

- *Mastery theology*: This theology is typically based on the divine command in Genesis 1:27 to “subdue the earth” and to “rule over it”. It also builds on Psalm 8 which portrays human beings as the “crown of creation”. Accordingly, this theology suggests that God has created the entire universe for the sake of human beings. We may therefore use natural resources for our benefit as we deem to be appropriate. Sometimes such a mastery theology is softened towards a theology of dominion or stewardship in order to emphasise our human responsibility to use such resources wisely and frugally. However, a position of immense power and authority is still attributed to human beings. We entitle ourselves to rule over others, especially other species. Often this is associated with male power and authority. Although there can be little doubt about the need to exercise such human responsibility, especially given the impact of human-induced climate change, the way in which the place of humanity in God’s own creation is understood is arrogant, makes little cosmological sense and is easily abused to endorse unsustainable practices.
- *Escapist theologies*: There are many Christians who would resist the reduction of the Christian faith to the social agenda of the church. Accordingly, they emphasise that which is spiritual more than that which is material, the soul more than the body, heaven more than earth, the life to come more than this life. This leads to a form of escapism where present realities are not addressed in the hope for the proverbial “pie in the sky when you die, bye and bye”. The Christian message of redemption in Jesus Christ is understood as salvation *from* the earth and scarcely as the hope for the salvation *of* the whole earth. At worst, such Christians are little concerned about climate change since they expect the destruction of heaven and earth on religious grounds. They read reports on imminent catastrophes as ways of hastening the return of Jesus Christ to rescue the elect from this earthly “vale of tears”. The looming threats of climate change, tipping points and nuclear disasters have provided ample images for such language. Such a message of doom and destruction typically elicits fear and not hope. Those who play of the fears of others are culpable and only strengthen the worst suspicions against Christianity amongst outsiders. Fear alone leads to an incapacity to confront the challenges, while Christian hope also provides inspiration to Christians to work for the coming of God’s reign on earth, as it is in heaven.
- *Cultural Christianity in the context of consumer societies*: Christians are not called to eschew that which is worldly. They may embrace various expressions of culture as given by God. This is especially the case in South Africa where African cultures were so often portrayed by churches as inferior. In such a context there is a need to affirm culture. However, Christians also need to be vigilant to guard against any easy identification of the gospel with a particular culture. When churches become a carbon (!) copy of the consumer society in which we live, this would be to lose the critical edge of the gospel in a context of climate change. It is extremely easy to adapt the gospel to fit a society geared to meet the needs, wants and desires of religious consumers. We will return to this aspect below.
- *Pleading to be innocent victims*: The Christian notions of sin and of forgiveness of sins are sometimes criticised for being generalised. All are equally guilty and the gospel of forgiveness is therefore proclaimed to all. This fails to see the ways in which domination in the name of the differences of gender, race, class, education, sexual orientation and species are so deeply embedded in our society. In response, many Christians have suggested a distinction between those who are sinners and those who are sinned against. Jesus of Nazareth called sinners to repentance but showed mercy to the victims of society. This is particularly important in the context of climate change where those who will be the likely victims in the African context have contributed little if anything to the problem. This is worsened by the economic inequalities that characterise the South African context. Nevertheless, there is an unhelpful tendency to view such victims as purely innocent, to always attribute problems to forces from the outside, beyond our control

(“blame it on colonialism, imperialism, racism and apartheid”), never to accept responsibility for the ills of society. All too often people are both victims and perpetrators (as in the case of gangsterism and marriage trouble). In the face of climate change we have to accept collective responsibility as a species for the damage that we are causing. In the context of consumerism we have to be aware of the ways in which our rampant desires have fuelled the economy and have spiralled beyond control. Although the consumer class have led the way in this regard, sadly, the lower middle class and the poor also desire that which they do not have. When it comes to a love of money, it may well be true that those who have it the least, love it the most. Here some pastoral sensitivity is clearly required not to heap guilt upon the innocent or to induce feelings of guilt (that can only inhibit an appropriate response), but also to fathom the secret corners of the human heart with honesty and integrity.

- *The prosperity gospel*: The prosperity gospel flourishes on an element of truth, but also systematically distorts that. The element of truth at stake here is that of God’s blessings – including very concrete and material blessings such as enough rain on time, today and tomorrow’s bread on the table, protection on the roads, success with one’s studies, deliverance in times of crisis and enough income to live from. In certain contexts money can indeed be the way in which God would bless people. For those trapped in a culture of poverty refraining from alcohol and drug abuse, visiting prostitutes, borrowing money and gambling, doing honest hard work, spending money frugally, and a commitment to the needs of one’s family may well lead to increasing prosperity in a material sense of the world. Who would wish to argue that this is not a concrete sign of God’s blessings? Moreover, the prosperity gospel may easily be employed to legitimise a sense of “upward social mobility”. There are many people, for example on the Cape Flats, who are entering the (lower) middle class in South Africa for the first time. They realise that they themselves may not have received a good education, but that there are opportunities available for their children. If they can escape from the temptations of a culture of poverty, with some hard work and dedication, they can make it in life. They may soon be able to live in a suburban flat or house of their own, buy a car and perhaps become part of the consumer class. Pastors in such areas typically support such a sense of upward social mobility. They emphasise the role of talents and opportunities for education and training and speak of grabbing such possibilities as being God’s will. Although the lifestyles of the consumer class is not sustainable for all on earth, this theological undergirding for a sense of upward social mobility is again quite understandable, to say the least. It inspires church members within their local communities to aim higher, to believe in themselves and therefore to work harder so that they can reach the top (whatever that may mean). However, the prosperity gospel may also be used to encourage overt forms of affluence. In many cases the underlying assumption is that, if you give your best for the Lord (and for the coffers of the local congregation), you will receive rich blessings from God. Thus such blessings become signs of the authenticity of one’s faith (and of the pastor’s leadership role). There is something wrong with your faith if you do not receive such blessings. In such contexts the prosperity gospel becomes heretical and often abusive. The portrayal of the gospel in terms of success, prosperity and wealth will become increasingly influential in the South African context, especially given the growth of forms of Pentecostalism where the prosperity gospel is preached, the role of paid television channels, tele-evangelism and the broadcasting of religious programmes derived from American sources and styles.

Recognising existing Christian responses

There may be some who suppose that climate change is scarcely on the agenda of the church, that Christians are “silent” on climate change and that virtually nothing is being done in this regard. Such assumptions are probably valid in many respects, also in South Africa. However, this is simply not true in all cases. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to defend Christian engagement on issues of climate change here. It may be helpful, though, to articulate what Christians have been doing in order to fathom the strengths and the limitations in this regard.

- Many congregations have introduced earthkeeping concerns in their worship services and in various aspects of the liturgy. Some are celebrating Environmental Sunday (closest to World Environment day on 5 June) on an annual basis while others have introduced a Season of Creation in the church calendar (more or less in the six weeks after 1 September). There is already a wealth of material available for the liturgy, preaching, hymns, prayers and catechism. Such liturgical innovation may not have an immediate impact on an issue such as climate change, but in the long run this will be crucial. The liturgy helps us as Christians to gradually learn to see the world through God’s eyes – with infinite compassion. On that basis it may lead to a fundamental reorientation of all other aspects of our lives. Admittedly, one also has to consider the direct impact of the liturgy on climate change – in terms of transport to the church, the environmental footprint of church buildings and the paper consumed.
- There is new movement toward the notion of an “eco-congregation”. This is especially strong in the UK but the notion is also being adopted and adapted by some local church structures in South Africa. This signals a commitment to introduce environmental concerns in the liturgy, to address the environmental footprint of the congregation, to raise an environmental awareness through teaching and to promote specific environmental projects appropriate to its context and capabilities.
- Christian organisations and/or church groups have introduced a whole range of local earth-keeping projects. These include tree planting projects, water harvesting projects, organic vegetable gardens, recycling projects, indigenous church gardens, “living graveyard campaigns”, outdoor youth and family activities to promote the love of nature, nature conservation projects focusing on habitat, wildlife or indigenous plants, job creation projects in the field of applied technology, the development of teaching material, networks to communicate such work to others, and so forth. Admittedly, these projects remain all too few and far between, the organisation is often hampered by administrative and financial problems while the impact of the projects themselves on climate change (e.g. in terms of transport) are often not accounted for.
- Christian organisations and church structures at various levels have grappled with economic injustices and inequalities. Some have focused their energies in assisting the poor in very practical ways. Others have worked for the upliftment or “development” of local communities. Yet others have addressed the structural causes of poverty in terms of the policies, institutions and systems that contribute to the problem. Such work cannot be separated from concerns over climate change since the same processes that reinforce economic inequalities are also contributing to human-induced climate change.
- By far the most significant contribution that Christians can and do make to address environmental concerns is in the form of the work of the laity – individual Christians acting in responsible ways wherever they live and work. There are numerous Christians in Southern Africa with a wealth of expertise and sometimes significant influence in each and every sector of society. There can be no doubt about the huge responsibility that Christian farmers, politicians, administrators, engineers, town planners, architects and teachers – to mention only a few professions – have in this regard. This is not to discount the inputs of farm workers, mine workers, factory workers, transport workers or office workers who exercise some responsibility in countless daily decisions, for example in their use of energy.
- As important is the way of life adopted and promoted by Christian families – where they live their daily lives. Here one may consider practical decisions made on issues such as housing, food, shopping, lighting, electricity, transport and so forth. It is in Christian families that virtues such as gratitude, frugality, simplicity, temperance, justice and above all wisdom are cultivated and embodied. It is also here where children can learn to love God and to enjoy and appreciate the good gifts of God’s creation.
- Some Christians have offered courageous prophetic witness to address environmental damage and various forms of pollution. However, it has to be admitted that environmental activists have

more often than not embarrassed Christians through their vigilance and commitment. It also has to be acknowledged that too many Christian resolutions, on climate change or on other matters, have called on others to act from a safe distance with no costs involved for those who offer such prophetic witness. It comes as no surprise that such witnesses are easily ignored and have little impact. Often such documents are not even read within the churches where they were produced.

- There is by now a wealth of Christian literature available on environmental concerns, including climate change. Such publications include educational material, teaching resources and theological texts. Numerous church and academic conferences have been organised, papers produced and books published. This is certainly also true of the South African context. Such work has undoubtedly helped to raise an environmental awareness and has assisted Christians to relate their faith to earthkeeping practices. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that such theological reflection and academic work has actually led to lifestyle changes or to a reduction of carbon emissions. One is left to wonder what the net carbon footprint of such work is – for example if air transport to conferences and meetings and the use of paper are factored in against the reductions that such conferences may perhaps prompt.

Addressing climate change is a task that has to be addressed through a global effort. Politicians, business leaders, scientists, analysts, educators, journalists, community leaders and religious leaders alike will all have to make contributions to tackle the problem. Churches can only play a minor supporting role here. Nevertheless it is important *to raise the question whether the existing responses are really in line with the gravity and the global scale of the problem*. Although these responses may be sincere and the commitment shown admirable, will this really be enough, even if everyone (or all Christians) were to follow such examples? Or is this, yet again, a matter of doing too little, too late?

It is important for Christians to recognise what is at stake in this question. Those of us in the urban middle class find it difficult to adopt a lifestyle that is not harmful to the environment. We may take some modest steps to address climate change – such as recycling, reducing the use of electricity, water, transport, chemicals, re-using resources, etc. Such steps are highly appropriate to challenge consumerist habits and demand considerable effort and dedication. However, a guilty conscience and a 10% reduction in resource usage would not nearly be sufficient given the scale of the problem. By contrast, those of us who are poor lack the resources to alter our squalid living conditions and to steer away from the (comparatively little) environmental damage that we do cause. We naturally desire to obtain more of the wealth that we see around us – but we can scarcely be concerned about the impact that what we desire but do not yet have (and perhaps have little hope in getting) would have.

This question obviously requires some clarity on the causes, the scope and the scale of imminent climate change. In the next section on “seeing”, these aspects will be investigated in more detail.

3. Investigating what is at stake (Seeing)

Seeing the analyses of experts on climate change

There is no need here to repeat the analyses and predictions of scientists and other experts on the scope and the potential impact of climate change. There is a wealth of literature available on that – in the media, in books and pamphlets and on the internet for those who have access to that. As Christians in South Africa we have the duty to familiarise ourselves with such material and keep ourselves updated according to our context and level of education. We therefore refrain from including any such information here, also because we cannot claim the expertise to do so. We recognise that the widely endorsed reports of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are considered to be the most reliable source of information in this regard. If anything, these reports would underestimate the extent of the problem since only well-established scientific evidence is taken into account. In addition, we need to warn against the danger of giving equal

weight to the positions of climate sceptics compared to for example the IPCC reports – presumably in the name of adopting a balanced position. As is often argued, such climate sceptics attract more attention from the media (due to the hype associated with that) than from the scientific community.

Seeing the recommendations of policy makers

As Christians in South Africa we also have to take into account the recommendations of policy makers and analysts. It is crucial for us Christians to familiarise ourselves with such recommendations. These generally cover two themes, namely 1) ways of reducing the greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere (“mitigation”) and 2) assisting those affected by climate change (“adaptation”):

a) Mitigation

Firstly, there is by now considerable consensus in secular literature on climate change as to what appropriate targets for addressing climate change would amount to. In layperson's terms, one may say that there is a widespread recognition that climate change is induced by human lifestyles and that global heating is more or less inevitable as a result of the greenhouse gases already emitted into the atmosphere. If the mean surface temperature of the earth would rise by more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, this may have catastrophic consequences. In order to prevent that, the levels of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere have to be stabilised below approximately 450 particles per million of carbon dioxide or its equivalents. The current level is 430ppm (380ppm for carbon dioxide itself) and this is rising at more than 2ppm each year. In order to achieve such stabilisation, the global greenhouse gas emissions have to be reduced by 2050 by at least 50 percent compared to 1990 levels. In order to allow impoverished countries to increase their use of fossil fuels, industrialised countries will have to cut their emissions by around 80%. Such a reduction will require quite drastic measures within the first decade already.

It is difficult for any one of us to comprehend the scope of this enormous challenge. In short, this will require the global economy to move away from fossil fuels such as oil, coal and natural gas as the main source of energy in order to find more sustainable alternatives. This has to be done within only a few decades. In the section on “Renewed Acting” below, we will return to what the church may be called to do in response to this challenge.

Within this global picture, South Africa's position is ambiguous. Since we are classified as a “developing” economy, we have some freedom to expand our carbon footprint under current international proposals to address climate change. However, at the same time, carbon emissions in South Africa are very high. According to the latest *Human Development index*, South Africa contributed 436.8 million tons of CO₂ emissions in 2004. [These figures are for carbon dioxide emissions only, i.e. emissions stemming from consumption of solid, liquid and gaseous fossil fuels as well as from gas flaring and the production of cement.] This is 12th on the list of CO₂ emissions by country. It translates into 9.8 tons of CO₂ per person, up from 9.1 tons in 1990 and compares with 20.6 tons per person in the USA and 0.2 tons in Zambia. The share of the income and expenditure of the most affluent 10% of South Africa's population (47.5 million people in 2004) is 44.7%. On this basis one may calculate their annual CO₂ emissions to be in the region of 41.1 tons per person. This has to be compared with the global average of 4.5 tons. We are told by scientific experts that carbon emissions of approximately 2 tons per person (on the basis of the 1990 world population) would be sustainable since the earth's biosphere would be able to absorb such greenhouse gases, for example through processes such as photosynthesis. Since 1990 the world's human population has increased from 5.2 to 6.7 billion.

This difference between the current global emissions per person and sustainable emissions lies at the very heart of the challenge that we are faced with. Although such emissions may be personalised on a per capita basis, it is important to recognise that emissions take place in direct and indirect ways. We are directly responsible for such emissions through electricity consumption and for fossil fuels used for transport (in private cars, taxis, trains, aeroplanes). We also need to take into account

the energy used to produce (involving mining, farming and manufacturing), transport, sell, store, consume and recycle the products that we purchase. The so-called “embodied energy” of every product is at stake here. The full life cycle of each product has to be considered. Moreover, emissions also take place in the public sphere on our behalf. Consider the construction of roads, street lights, shopping malls, sports venues, airports, government buildings and educational facilities. Here, too, the consumer class benefit from and make use of such facilities more than the poor do.

Over the last two decades there have been very significant international efforts to address the challenge of mitigation. Such efforts are symbolised by the work done at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, the Bali Summit in 2007 and the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 15) planned for December 2009. Again, Christians are called to follow such developments and to exercise prophetic vigilance according to their position in society and level of education. We will return to this aspect in the section on “Renewed action” below.

b) Adaptation

Secondly, churches worldwide have been in the forefront of emphasising the need to assist the victims of climate change. At an international level, structures will have to be put in place to respond to more frequent requests for emergency help and to rising tides of environmental refugees. This will require budget reserves and appropriate plans to prevent disasters from occurring with the same devastating effects. It will also require strategies for adapting to changed climatic conditions.

Such assistance and emergency measures are often thwarted when powerful institutions face an economic, financial or military / security crisis. Then the tendency is to attend to one’s own interests first. Thus, in a time of financial crisis as was experienced in 2008, politicians tend to be more worried about the standard of living of their voters than about the global poor. Likewise, when security threats emerge – as is increasingly likely due to conflict over scarce resources – these tend to override any concerns over sustainability. It is in such a context that churches can and have played a crucial role in assisting the victims, including the victims of climate change. We will return to this in the section on “Renewed action” below.

Seeing beneath the surface: The structural causes of climate change

For Christians it is not enough to merely hear what others are saying and doing about climate change. The task of “seeing” also requires from us to see what is beneath the surface, to gain deeper insight, to understand the structural causes of climate change. One may say that these causes are economic (given the environmental impact of the global economy), but also cultural (the ways of life that people have adopted that stimulate the economy). In both cases this has been deeply distorted by various forms of what we as Christians would call sin – violence, greed, pride, selfishness, domination and alienation. We need to recognise that climate change is a function of a) the production, b) the distribution and consumption and c) the various ways of understanding wealth.

a) The production of wealth

The enormous *production* of wealth in the current global economy is based on a number of factors, spurred on by the rise of capitalism as an economic system. Each of these factors is deeply influenced by historic injustices and the legacy of imperialism, colonialism, classism, racism, sexism and cultural elitism. These include the following: 1) energy (consider the availability and use of fossil fuels), 2) natural resources (access to cheap sources was a driving force behind colonialism and remains crucial for many industries), 3) land / property (consider the conquest of land through war and imperialism), 4) labour and employment costs (consider the role of slavery, the exploitation of cheap labour, the tendency towards outsourcing labour costs, the impact of trade unions and the replacement of labour through technology), 5) knowledge and skills (consider the role of research, ingenuity, education and training), 6) the means of production (including various

forms of technology), 7) the formation of strong institutions such as business corporations with efficient management systems (which allow for the sharing of risks and give some groups a competitive advantage over others), 8) cultural values and virtues (consider the emphasis on entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation, dedication, diligence, productivity, efficiency, innovative leadership), 9) the availability of capital to finance large new projects (based on previous profits and interest on sometimes lucrative investments but also on being deemed “creditworthy” by financial institutions) and 10) access to viable markets to sell products (influenced by legislation and trade agreements) and the stimulation of consumer demands through advertising.

This analysis is crucial to comprehend the factors driving climate change and the difficulties experienced in addressing it. The same factors that have led to economic inequalities have also led to climate change. We need to emphasise that the wealth that has been created, is necessarily based on a mix of all these factors. Some of us may wish to emphasise the role of cultural values, suggesting that those who are poor are relatively lazy, stupid, slow, corrupt or unlucky. By contrast, those of us who emphasise injustices will typically focus on access to the means of production or unfair trade relations. The decisive factor in climate change is obviously the use of fossil fuels, but since this is itself a valuable commodity, it is shaped by all the other factors. It should be clear that climate change can only be addressed by changing the ways in which wealth is produced. Here those involved in economic production have a huge responsibility. However, such economic production is driven by consumer demand for economic products. This implies that climate change is a cultural matter; it is shaped by what and how much we buy, by our use of energy at home and at work and by our modes of transport.

b) The distribution of wealth

It will be impossible to resolve the problem of climate change without dealing with economic inequalities. While those with a (neo-liberal) capitalist mindset have emphasised the production of wealth as a key to more wealth for all, socialists often take such production of wealth for granted but call for a more egalitarian *distribution* of wealth through government intervention (including taxation).

While climate change thus far has resulted mainly from the carbon footprint of the consumer class, the attempts of others to copy this lifestyle will worsen the problem in years to come. Climate change is therefore deeply related to the skewed distribution of wealth. It is quite understandable that those of us who are poor and in the so-called middle class would desire to share in the wealth that is so visibly portrayed in our society and through the media. This merely illustrates that the lifestyles of those of us in the consumer class are unsustainable since it cannot be copied by all. Moreover, in years to come those of us with low carbon emissions will have to suffer the consequences of the economic activities of those with higher emissions.

The levels of consumption enjoyed by the affluent (in South Africa) therefore raise serious questions of global justice. It can only be sustained at the expense of others – the poor, coming generations and other living organisms. It would simply not be possible for the planet’s entire human population to replicate the lifestyle of the affluent centre. The solution cannot be a system of consumer apartheid that upholds affluent binge habits but denies the poor a decent standard of living. The affluent who wreaked environmental havoc so that they might attain a comfortable and healthy lifestyle clearly cannot caution others not to seek a comparable standard of living because that would jeopardise ecological sustainability.

In the global context, it may be true (and for many quite scary) that countries such as China and India may soon equal or surpass countries in Europe and North America in terms of total greenhouse emissions. However, those Western countries that have traditionally been predominantly Christian would scarcely have the moral authority to require from Asian countries to reduce their per capita carbon emissions to levels that are significantly lower than their own.

c) The redefinition of wealth

This analysis regarding the production and the distribution of wealth indicates that there is a need, in the global as well as in the South African context to reconsider *our very understanding of wealth*. This has been emphasised in circles of what is called the “new economics”, in opposition to both capitalist and socialist thinking. In such circles it is generally accepted that definitions of wealth in terms of the Gross Domestic Product are grossly inadequate. It seeks to measure wealth in terms of what we produce, purchase, consume and own. It seems to assume that what economists cannot count does not really count. In response, wealth may be redefined in terms of other assets, including available resources, skills, relationships between family members and friends, support structures and community structures. Indeed, the value of love, friendship, children and companionship can scarcely be expressed in monetary terms.

In traditional societies in (South) Africa wealth was measured in terms of the size of one’s land, the number of cattle that one owned and the number of one’s adult children. In our present context, as many have observed, wealth is indicated by certain status symbols: the house in which you live, the cars in your parkway, the clothes that you wear, the apparatus that you use and other even more luxurious material objects such as boats, holiday mansions or private jets. Others may prefer less tangible, more hidden but equally material indicators of wealth such as money in the bank or shares on the stock market. Yet others who recognise that money is not everything prefer to focus on things that “no one can take away from you” (in a crime-ridden society). They therefore explore stimulating experiences such as luxurious holidays, expensive restaurant meals, wonderful concerts or even escapades with drugs, sex or occults. Sadly, those of us who are poor tend to follow the same pattern. We still place our hopes and desires on what money can buy and are keen to display small symbols of increasing wealth (such as better clothes or cell phones). Even though we have little, we would love to have much more.

There is no doubt that those around us who are deprived of access to nutritious food, adequate housing, health services, education and public transport would need to increase our consumption of energy in order to adopt a decent and humane way of living. However, there are many indicators that, once one’s most basic needs are met, one’s well-being is not determined by increasing income or expenses. The factors that contribute to well-being are well-known: they include satisfaction with family life, especially marriage, followed by satisfaction with work, leisure to develop talents, and friendships.

There is an urgent need in Christian communities to redefine wealth along such lines. Nevertheless, we need to admit that it is easy to preach that to others, but more difficult to follow because there are always felt needs that we still hope to meet. Even the very rich and famous easily fall into that trap: they long for more security and more privacy and seek financial means to ensure that. This also illustrates the need for renewed discussions on the distinction between basic human needs and unsustainable desires.

In the Bible and in the history of Christianity there are rich resources to explore and to embrace an alternative notion of wealth. Some call for frugality, others for temperance. Some seek wisdom, others adopt an ascetic way of life as a temporary corrective to the excesses of consumerism. As Christians in South Africa we are guilty for all too often condoning economic inequalities. We, those who are affluent and those who are poor, are guilty because we tend to conform to the culture of consumerism around us. We are also guilty in that we fail to use the resources in our own traditions to adopt such an alternative notion of wealth.

Discerning the interplay between the production, distribution and redefinition of wealth

There can be little doubt that the three aspects discussed above, namely the production of wealth, the distribution of wealth and the need for a redefinition of wealth, stand in tension with one another even though most people would recognise the need to attend to all three these aspects. The ways in which Christians and others deal with such tensions are quite different.

Here we need to be very honest. Those who retire with a more or less adequate pension can easily talk about the need for a redefinition of wealth and can adapt their lifestyles accordingly. However, this is based on the production and accumulation of wealth over a lifetime (or even on the basis of an inheritance). Poor Christians seldom talk about the need for a redefinition of wealth. Those who speak on behalf of workers can call for a redistribution of wealth, but that remains rather facile when they are not responsible to ensure the sufficient production of wealth. It is therefore not surprising that, when confronted with the tensions between these three aspects, people in positions of power tend to emphasise the production of wealth more than the other two aspects.

People emphasise the need for the production of wealth both individually and collectively. Thus parents in the consumer class are quite willing to sacrifice quality time with their children in order to obtain a better income – ironically often in order to look after the needs of the family (and to send children to good schools). Many feel the need for a double income in order to maintain their standard of living. Parents who are employed, but who have a low income, often work away from home or spend long hours using public transport. Likewise, economic policies tend to emphasise the production of wealth more than the other aspects. The hope is that, if the size of the proverbial economic cake can be enlarged, everyone will eventually receive a larger share of the cake. Accordingly, there will be a trickle down effect so that everyone will benefit from that in the end.

The problem though, as we saw above, is that such an emphasis on the production of wealth is not by itself able to address the other two aspects. In fact, this tends to increase economic inequalities. A 10% increase on a salary of R30 000 per year means R3000 extra but on a salary of R300 000 it means R30 000 extra. Baking the cake is therefore one thing, cutting the cake is another. As this is often stated in ecumenical circles, the rich are becoming richer while the poor are becoming poorer. Many would add that the rich are becoming richer precisely at the cost of the poor – in terms of using their labour, monopolising the available resources, controlling the markets through trade regulations and advertising and selling processed products to the poor at a higher price. The problem is that, even where unskilled workers may be able to increase their standard of living (and thus their carbon footprint!), they tend to fall further and further behind in terms of their education and skills. Moreover, many remain unemployed and after decades some have become unemployable. It should also be noted that such an emphasis on the unequal distribution of wealth thus underplays the significance of creativity, diligence and effective management and administration in producing wealth (which are emphasised by those in positions of power).

In the context of climate change it needs to be stated again that such production of wealth is not sustainable. Infinite economic growth on a finite planet cannot be sustained and is simply not possible. It is by now quite evident that this is the case as far as the use of fossil fuels for energy is concerned. We cannot increase the use of fossil fuels in the same way as we have done over the previous century. It would simply not be possible in terms of the available resources. It would also not be possible in terms of the destructive impact that climate change would have on such economic activity in the long run.

Would it be possible to increase the size of the global economy and the global use of energy if more sustainable energy sources (solar, wind, water) are employed? Here some discernment is required. Economists have argued that, except for fossil fuels, non-renewable sources are still widely available and not likely to be depleted soon. The more serious problem is, somewhat surprisingly, the sustainable use of renewable resources. This has to do with the problems of soil erosion, the depletion of soil fertility, sustainable forestry, over-fishing and the maintenance of biodiversity. Even if we can find alternative energy sources, it could still be disastrous to enlarge the global economy in terms of the impact that this may have on the sustainable use of renewable resources in other sectors of the economy. Even more serious than the need for non-renewable resources or the sustainable use of renewable resources is the absorption of waste products in the earth's biosphere. The biosphere has a remarkable ability to recycle waste products, but this ability is limited and takes time. The most serious example here, as indicated by climate change, is indeed the absorption of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We are currently emitting more greenhouse gases (4.5 tons per

person per year) than what the biosphere is able to absorb (roughly 2 tons per person per year on the basis of the 1990 global population). Similar problems include municipal waste management and the recycling of toxic and nuclear forms of waste. Alternative sources of energy may not solve this problem as solar energy, for example, will create serious problems around the recycling of batteries. Similar problems plague electricity generated from nuclear sources.

Understanding the significance of the production of wealth

Despite such an emphasis on the distribution and redefinition of wealth it is important to understand that an emphasis on the production of wealth is not merely motivated by the interests of the affluent and the powerful. Given the current human population of 6.7 billion people, the expected rise in the human population towards 9 billion people by 2050 and the needs of the hungry and the destitute, we can ill afford to neglect the factors that contribute to the production of wealth. This is illustrated by every economic recession and by the recent global financial crisis. Those who are hit the hardest are those who are already vulnerable and those who stand to lose their jobs and their houses as a result of the shrinking of economic activity. This applies, for example, to the automobile industry in South Africa and elsewhere in the world where job losses leading to a downward spiral in terms of economic activity is evident. Those of us who call for a redefinition of wealth may, for a moment, wish to rejoice in the closure of such industries that are major contributors to climate change. We may call this “a blessing in disguise”. However, we would then need to accept responsibility for the devastating impact that this may have in the lives of millions of families that are affected by that.

It should therefore be clear that the transformation of the global economy needs to take place in a well-structured manner in order to ensure the sufficient production of wealth (especially food) in the transition period. A purist position on the redefinition of wealth is therefore ill-advised. It may be attractive to dream of an agrarian, pre-industrialised lifestyle, but that may arguably only be possible for a global human population of less than two billion people. Likewise, any calls for a redistribution of wealth have to consider assumptions with regard to the production of such wealth. Perhaps the first required step is to inhibit wasteful economic activities (e.g. gas-guzzling cars) through taxes and appropriate incentives.

These comments illustrate the tensions between an emphasis on the production, distribution and redefinition of wealth. Discernment and ethical judgement are here extraordinarily difficult. Perhaps the task of Christians could be to emphasise the aspect that is underplayed in a particular context. Given the dominance of the neo-capitalist economic order, it is crucial to call for a redefinition of wealth as this is so often neglected. As we will suggest below, Christians have much to contribute towards an alternative vision in this regard. However, in other contexts it may be equally important to emphasise the need for a redistribution of wealth. In the Jewish-Christian tradition there is a long tradition of prophetic critique against economic inequalities and expressions of solidarity with the vulnerable, the marginalised, the poor and the oppressed. Even then, it would undermine the credibility of Christian witness if we fail to recognise the need for the production of sufficient wealth to feed the world’s 6.7 billion people, to provide at least basic housing, means of public transport in urban areas and resources for health and education. In many rural contexts in southern Africa the production of sufficient wealth amongst impoverished communities remains the primary responsibility.

4. Discerning the roots of the problem (judging)

Judging the inability to offer an alternative economic vision

Climate change has been on the global agenda now for at least two decades. Nevertheless and despite significant international efforts, greenhouse emissions have not yet been reduced. In fact, all indicators are that carbon emissions will increase over the next decade or so. Why is this the case?

Current initiatives to address climate change are thwarted by at least four factors. Firstly, there is a

need to recognise that levels of consumption and the use of energy, also of fossil fuels, are still rising amongst the consumer class alone. Affluence leads to apathy and a voluntary simplification of lifestyles seems to fall outside the desire of those of us in the consumer class. Secondly, the global human population is predicted to rise from the current 6.7 billion to around 9 billion in 2050. In 2008 alone 139 million babies were born while 57 million people have died, so that the population increased by 82 million. Thirdly, the rapid expansion of the economies of China and India can scarcely be halted. Fourthly, the hope and aspirations of the world's poor are to attain the standard of living that they observe amongst the affluent.

Moreover, it is important to see that any reduction in global emissions and subsequently in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is made difficult by accumulated decisions of the past. Here one needs to mention scientific data indicating the complex cycles of carbon in the biosphere – which implies that carbon dioxide emitted now will continue to have an impact for decades to come. More significant, though, are decisions regarding town planning, architecture, power plants, roads, public transport and other forms of infrastructure. Such decisions necessarily have long-term implications. For example, the expansive suburban areas virtually require from the consumer class to have private modes of transport to get to work, schools and churches. This requires a network of roads that make public transport difficult. Houses can be better insulated but this is not always easy given the ways in which they are designed. To build new houses or to refurbish old houses will also have a significant environmental impact. Coal-fired power plants are expensive to build and cannot be replaced overnight. Further examples can easily be multiplied. The point is that social engineering, that is, changes to social structures (not to mention the entire global economy) are always slow and cannot be done overnight. There are limits to how quickly societies can respond to a challenge such as climate change. This raises a moral challenge, namely to respond now already to an imminent catastrophe that is already evident, but that will become increasingly clear only in decades to come.

To grasp the extent of the problem, it is important to see that the necessary information on climate change is readily available on the basis of numerous scientific reports. Moreover, technological solutions are available to curb human-induced climate change. There has been no lack of appeals to take the necessary steps. The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have received maximum media coverage. It has now become clear that to address climate change will demand far more than what science and new technologies may offer.

This poses another set of crucial questions: How would it be possible to muster sufficient political will from all over the world to address climate change? Such political will is only possible on the basis of voter support and pressure. In forming the opinions and attitudes of voters a far more widespread reorientation in civil society will therefore be required. Here the role of civil institutions (including churches), role models and the media will be crucial. How, for example, can the media's support for economic growth on the basis of a plethora of advertisements be re-orientated towards sustainable goals? How can consumer resistance against higher energy prices be addressed? How can the consumerist habits, attitudes or aspirations of the world's 6.7 billion people be re-orientated?

That the problem is highly complex becomes apparent when one realises that even those of us who have developed an acute environmental awareness often find it difficult to translate such an awareness into appropriate forms of action. All too often environmental problems seem so daunting and overwhelming that it is difficult to know where to start. There is a lingering gap between knowing that we face serious ecological problems and acting on this knowledge in our personal, political and social choices. Many of us therefore do little more than to conscientise others about the gravity and the scope of the problem – through sermons, talks, publications, workshops and conferences. That somehow makes us feel that we have done something, although our actual carbon footprint remains roughly what it was.

The underlying problem is clearly not just a lack of information or planning. It is a liberal fallacy to assume that information and education is sufficient for moral action. Likewise, even though South

Africans are generally well-informed about HIV/AIDS such awareness seems to be insufficient to stop the rampant spread of HIV-infection. This may help us to see why human-induced climate change points in the direction not merely of an *economic* or an *ecological* crisis but towards a deeper *cultural* and *spiritual* crisis. The problem is one that has to be addressed through moral *formation* and not merely through more *information*. It is not simply a matter of agreeing with a memorandum spelling out some common values and listing desired actions either. Since moral formation typically takes place within faith communities, this implies that the ecological transformation of religious traditions is critical to the emergence of an ecological ethos.

We suggest that at a deeper level the problem may be one of *a lack of moral imagination, moral will and moral leadership*. It is a matter of moral vision. We need to envision alternatives to the current global economic order that has caused climate change – alternatives that will be able to *generate* sufficient wealth, that will be able to *distribute* such wealth more equitably and that will help to *redefine* our very understanding of what wealth entails. Such a vision needs to be attractive enough to motivate millions of people, to energise and mobilise action. Or to put this in other terms: The question is whether “a different world is possible” – as the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Allegro famously professed.

Several observers, including secular observers, have recognised the potential of the world’s religious traditions to offer the necessary inspiration, spiritual vision, ecological wisdom, ethical discernment, moral power and *hope* to sustain an ecological transformation. Religious traditions can offer the mystic motivation and enthusiasm for earthkeeping projects that no other secular or government initiatives can muster on such a wide scale. Religious traditions can provide what science cannot: they promise not only meaning, but also survival power, deliverance, healing, well-being. Religions help to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and sub-conscious ways. Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.

Can the world’s religious traditions muster sufficient moral power and vision to turn the tide, to show a path out of the downward spiral of environmental degradation? Indeed, can religion really make a difference? It seems clear that this will require nothing less than a transformation of each tradition (preferably in terms of each tradition’s own heritage and particularity). Given the complexity of Christianity in the crisis that we have to face globally, it should be clear that Christians will have to and may play a crucial role in coming to terms with the deepest roots of the crisis.

A lack of moral vision amongst Christians in South Africa?

The struggle against apartheid in South Africa required clarity on an alternative vision for society. In order to replace a political dispensation based on racial segregation many of us worked for a non-racist, non-sexist democracy in a unitary state. This political vision inspired us to resist apartheid policies. Christians offered their own interpretation of such a vision, typically based on notions of human dignity, justice and solidarity with those in need. Others portrayed this in terms of the Christian hope for the coming of God’s reign.

This begs the question whether Christians can uphold an alternative moral vision in a world faced by the threat of climate change. We live in a time that lacks a compelling moral vision, even though most businesses and institutions talk about their vision and mission. It is deeply worrying that we as Christians, too, so often seem unable to portray through our witness and action the kind of alternative that is required. This is strange because the Jewish-Christian tradition has such a strong heritage in this regard.

In fact, many Christians have been supporting a vision that is now proving to be destructive. We have placed our faith and trust in human ingenuity, scientific progress and technological innovation. We believe that knowledge and education (or more specifically suitable qualifications) will offer us and especially our children a ticket to prosperity. We have followed the secular dreams of increasing prosperity and economic development. We have come to follow a lifestyle (or to hope to be able

to adopt a lifestyle) that is not sustainable and cannot be adopted by all others. We have been captured by the lure of what could now be described in terms of the ideologies of consumerism, hedonism or materialism. This means that the focus of our hopes, trust and enjoyment is to gather wealth, to be able to buy and consume whatever our hearts desire, and to look for a life of pleasure.

Those Christians who have come to see that present economic practices and the lifestyles of the consumer class are not sustainable have often become despondent. Some have grappled with a sense of fatalism and nihilism where there is little hope of embodying an alternative vision.

What we need is therefore a new vision, a new way of seeing. The key to the renewal of our minds, our hearts, our attitudes and our practices lies in perceptions. We need to see but not with our eyes only. We need to identify what is at stake sharply; we also need to see beneath the surface in order to develop deeper insight; and we need to read the future with the necessary foresight. Such foresight should include the scenarios of scientists and policy makers but should also go beyond that. It should be based on the future that God envisages for the whole of creation. Such a vision is difficult to obtain when one is blindfolded by one's own immediate interests and by the structures of violence in which we are trapped by our collective sins. Here the Christian liturgy and Christian proclamation based on the biblical roots of the Christian tradition will be crucial to open our eyes. Through Christian worship we may again learn to look at the world around us through God's eyes – with mercy and compassion.

A failure to proclaim and embody a vision of hope

It is perhaps still understandable that we as Christians have been trapped by the lure of wealth. However, it is especially worrying that we are all too often interpreting and proclaiming the gospel accordingly. This leads to a form of cultural Christianity that fits all too snugly with the consumer society in which we find ourselves. Here we need to identify the following ways in which the gospel has been compromised in our own midst:

- In a context where there is a wide variety of churches available, we tend to look at churches as places where our needs can be met. We Christians thus select a church that will cater for our needs, where we can find our preferred mode of worship and where we can associate with people with whom we feel at home. We tend to go shopping for a church where our felt needs will best be met and where we can “Pick & Pray” as we would like to. Then churches are branded to suggest subtle differences in style more or less in the same way that soap powders are branded and marketed.
- Where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, churches become vendors of religious services and goods. A commodity-orientated church is in competition with other churches to deliver the best goods and to deliver that in a more digestible form than its competitors do. Religious service providers have current and potential customers and compete with other firms seeking to serve that market. Accordingly, the clergy are the sales representatives of the church, the gospel, church doctrines and various ministries are its products and proclamation its marketing techniques.
- Churches that do, in fact, manage to attract a large attendance complain that many worshippers are not members of the specific local church, that they come only when their needs are satisfied and that they are easily lured elsewhere. The pews may be full but not with the same people from one week to the next. As a result the worship team needs to do its utmost to ensure religious brand loyalty and to market its own product. Those leaders of religious communities who are able to attract a significant market segment may even enjoy celebrity status.
- Preachers find themselves competing with other local churches to attract a larger attendance for “their” worship services. Indeed, in a competitive market only the “fittest” churches will survive. The pastor has to become a manager, a marketer and a marketable asset for the congregation, one whose appointment can be financially justified.

- The gospel has all too often been portrayed as a consumer product which has to be marketed. Accordingly, this product should be packaged in a way that would be attractive to religious consumers. Advertisers marketing their products have often adopted the evangelical fervour of Christian proclamation. Ironically and tragically, in a consumer culture the gospel may well be marketed by adopting strategies through which advertisements evangelise us with the “good news” – even the salvation – that consuming a particular product would bring. Meeting people’s spiritual needs is thus just another form of therapy, another way of “satisfying the consumer”. Thus churches cater for the ministerial needs of their members in the same way that other agencies are eager to identify and address needs.
- The Christian faith itself is understood as a form of self-gratification rather than as service. Aspects of the Christian heritage that may be less attractive for consumers, such as divine judgement, justice, sin, discipleship, self-sacrifice, are often toned down. By contrast, aspects of the Christian tradition that could be attractive are emphasised through soft-selling techniques (for example divine affirmation, grace, fellowship, love). Indeed, an experience-based form of religion (spirituality) can be a very marketable product. The market for such religious products (including gospel music, books and so forth) is quite sizable, also elsewhere in Africa. There seems to be a large market for cheap religious products, but only a small niche market where the costs of discipleship are high.
- All too often churches reflect management structures derived and adopted from the corporate world. On this basis local churches require a needs analysis, business plans and growth models adopted from corporate models. The business of the church should be under firm control of management (prompting questions about the guidance of Word and Spirit) and the objectives in the business plan should be measurable, even numerically measurable.

As a result the ethos of all too many churches merely reflects a consumerist ethos. This constitutes yet another example where the church is tempted to bridge the gap between itself and the world by becoming more like the world – and losing its distinct message as a result.

In the light of these observations it is now becoming clear that climate change is more than an ethical issue. It is also a matter whether the content and the significance of the Christian faith is at stake. In the past we have failed to see how the gospel is being compromised within a consumer culture in the ways we mentioned above. The economic inequalities and the ecological destruction caused by the current global economic order call for prophetic witness and resistance in order to express concerns over justice, peace and a sustainable society. However, where the gospel itself is being compromised, more than prophetic witness is required. Then it becomes a matter of Christian confession and of resistance against the heresies that continue to thrive also within our own midst. In the past we could see with clarity that any theological defence of the apartheid system amounted to heresy. The very purpose of this document is to confront and expose new ways in which the Christian faith is being distorted in our own midst.

In search of an alternative vision of hope

The Bible is filled to the brim with images of hope. One may consider the images of the return from exile, the new Exodus, the reinstatement of God’s law, the hope for a new Davidic ruler, the coming of the Messiah, God’s just judgement over the evils of history, God’s peace (shalom) on earth, a new Jerusalem, the resurrection of the dead, indeed a new heaven and a new earth. Such hope is not based on a sense of optimism or on signs of development or progress. It is a hope that emerges despite present realities on the basis of faith in the promises of God. In the words of the prophet Habakkuk (3:17-19): even though the fig tree may not blossom, even though there may be no grapes on the vine, even when the olive produce fails and there is no cattle in the kraal, I would nevertheless rejoice in the Lord, my strength. Such a hope can continue to inspire and sustain us however serious the threat of climate change may become in the decades that lie ahead.

How is such hope relevant in a time when we are faced with the looming disaster that is constituted

by climate change? In ecumenical discourse since the Nairobi assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 especially three concepts have been employed to express an appropriate vision, namely justice, peace and a sustainable society. In each case this also indicates an appropriate social agenda for churches. These three concepts remain as relevant as ever before in the context of climate change. It is important to see how these apply to climate change, how these are radicalised due to climate change, what the deepest significance of these expressions of Christian hope is and how they are related to each other.

a) Justice

The ecumenical vision of justice is usually related to the economic inequalities and injustices that prevail in the current globalised (new-liberal) economic order. In numerous ecumenical documents such injustices are pointed out, while the processes and institutional structures that tend to aggravate such inequalities are subjected to prophetic critique. It is not necessary to repeat such prophetic critiques here. Such inequalities and injustices are at the very heart of current international debates on climate change. In short, such economic inequalities underlie the consumer culture of the affluent and the relentless consumerist desires of the consumer class, but also of the middle class and the poor. The rising levels of consumption, together with the production processes that are necessary to meet consumer demand for such products may be regarded at one level as the root cause of climate change. In a world where we are so acutely aware of such economic inequalities we seek to defend what we have or strive to gain as much as others may have. Climate change therefore simply cannot be addressed without coming to terms with the tendency towards increasing economic inequalities.

In addition, climate change will also aggravate current injustices. Some countries and some sectors of the population have a relatively high carbon footprint and therefore contribute far more to the problem than others. Some have done so for a century or more, while others have recently begun to add to the global carbon footprint. As we pointed out above, South Africa's position is ambiguous in this regard since our national carbon footprint is more than double the global average, despite our position as a "developing" economy. Moreover, the stark and still increasing economic inequalities in South Africa tend to hide the discrepancies between the carbon footprint of the consumer class and that of the poor within our country. By contrast, it is well established in climate change discourse that the human victims of climate change will typically include those who have contributed least to the problem. This also applies to the African continent as a whole and to South Africa itself. This is an obvious case of gross injustice.

Christians are therefore right to regard this situation primarily as a matter of justice. Here Christians may find numerous allies from other faith traditions, in civil society and in other interest groups around climate change. In the context of such common witness we need to realise that the authenticity of our position on justice will be tested in years to come by our willingness to act in solidarity with the victims of climate change. We will have to answer new questions not only *about* our neighbours but also *from* our neighbours about the meaning of neighbourly love.

As the World Council of Churches pointed out in a publication entitled *Solidarity with the victims of climate change* (2002) this will not be easy. As resources become scarcer, as conflict over such resources emerge and as countries defend their own interests, there is a distinct possibility that, under difficult circumstances, "love will grow cold" (Matt 24:12). In such a context we as Christians need to abide by our faith in God alone, in our hope despite visible success and in our love for the other.

There is even more at stake here: in the context of injustices Christians may hope for God's judgement over our situation, our lives and our culture. We may hope for God's just reign, on earth as it is in heaven. This is expressed in the Hebrew word *mishpat*. In Christian communities in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, divine judgement is often regarded as a source of fear and trepidation, not hope. In the context of climate change this is understandable. Our tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of prevailing economic inequalities, our consumerist lifestyles and aspirations and

indeed our entire industrialised civilisation will be confronted by God's judgement, not merely by shallow human judgements. We have to examine ourselves to discern what would survive such judgement. However, divine judgement is for Christians actually a source of hope. The victims of history cry for a just verdict in the face of inequalities, injustices, oppression and extermination. In the context of climate change such victims include numerous other species whose habitats have been devastated through urban expansion and commercial agriculture.

Moreover, the long-term scenarios portrayed in discourse on climate change provide ample illustrations that such judgement over our lives, our economies, our cultures, may become frighteningly realistic and vividly concrete. How may Christians discern the benevolent judgement of the triune God in such predictions? Here there is ample room for prophets of doom and destruction to proclaim a message of fear. The challenge to Christians is to discern God's justice in such a way that it will elicit fresh hope – for the many victims of society and for the perpetrators. That may certainly help us to revise our notions of the basis and content of Christian hope. We will have to learn again what it means to trust in God alone.

b) Peace

The ecumenical vision for peace on earth should be understood in the context of various forms of violent conflict that continue to attract headlines in the media. It is important to list the full range of such conflicts – which include war between countries, acts of terrorism and war on terrorism, civil war, ethnic and religious conflict, political conflict sometimes leading to civil war, organised crime and mob violence, gangsterism and street violence, domestic violence, include wife battering, rape and violence against vulnerable women and children.

It is widely recognised that the key to peace is justice. Without justice there can be no lasting peace. In this sense justice has a certain priority over peace. Moreover, in order to sustain a lasting peace it is also important to ensure the participation of as many people as possible in decision making processes that may affect their lives. This is expressed in political views on democracy but also in ecumenical discourse on a “participatory society” – as expressed in the motto of the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975. It should be noted, though, that other forms of life typically do not have a voice in such human decision making processes – even though their habitat and their very survival may be dependent on that. As someone said in jest, if there were to be a parliament of all creatures where each would have one vote, its first decision may be impose sanctions on human beings given their threat to the survival of all others.

The vision expressed in Christian hope is not only for *peace* but also for *peace making*. This is far more complex. In the secular world this is addressed in terms of categories such as mediation and conflict resolution. One may also refer to movements towards what Ghandi called *satthyagra*, or resistance against oppression through methods that show solidarity with the victims, that also honour the dignity of the oppressors and that therefore refrain from violence.

In a Christian context there is a need to go further than that, namely to explore what reconciliation in Jesus Christ entails. In human terms reconciliation is incredibly complex and includes aspects such as recognition of guilt, repentance, signs of remorse, confession of guilt, forgiveness, accepting forgiveness, embrace and appropriate forms of restitution. It is not necessary to explore these here in any detail. It is at least important to see that doing injustice always include an element that can never be undone. Although restitution is often possible and necessary, there will always remain a deficit that cannot be addressed by the perpetrator due to the flow of time. For example, one can express remorse over a word that offended another person so that the impact of such a word could be minimised, but once such a word has been spoken, it can never be cancelled. In other cases, for example rape or murder, the deficit between the harm done and what can be restored through acts of punishment or restitution will be much more significant. Such a deficit can be used as a weapon for revenge but it can also be tolerated, condoned, forgotten or forgiven. This also implies that full justice, giving everyone exactly what is due to them, is never possible. In this sense of the word peace and reconciliation surpasses the quest for justice. In history there are many

examples of people (including parents, community leaders and martyrs) who have demonstrated a willingness towards reconciliation despite the injustices done to them. To forgive someone is to maintain that the continuation of a particular relationship is deemed to be more important than the harm that was done to oneself.

How is this relevant in a context of climate change? Here it is crucial to see that climate change is likely to aggravate numerous conflicts over scarce resources, especially water and oil. It should also be clear that climate change is likely to worsen the polarisation that is already there – between East and West, North and South, Christian and Muslim “worlds”, the consumer class and the poor, (over)-industrialised and so-called “developing” economies, gated communities and (environmental) refugees, previous and coming generations (ancestors and the unborn) and between the interests of humankind and otherkind. One may therefore suggest that the threats posed by climate change can only be addressed on the basis of some form of reconciliation which would facilitate cooperation between people from different continents, cultures and religions. That this is crucial should be evident from the observation that, wherever violent forms of conflict erupt in the world, this tends to take precedence over any other social concerns. In the South African context we were scarcely able to address social concerns over housing, education, health and the HIV/AIDS pandemic before the end of the apartheid era and the multiple conflicts that characterised that.

What message of reconciliation could Christians then offer in the context of climate change? There can be no easy answer to this question. Firstly, those countries which have a proportionally high per capita emission of greenhouse gases are also those countries where Christianity has historically been influential. Indeed, Christianity has been as much part of the problem as of the solution. Secondly, Christians with a large carbon footprint face other Christians with a small carbon footprint across the table. While Christianity is associated with the affluent West, at least historically, in (South) Africa most church members are indeed poor and the likely victims of climate change. The problem is that such Christians typically come to the table of international dialogue on climate change without having been reconciled with one another at the Lord’s table.

Such observations may leave one with the impression that Christian views on reconciliation have little to offer in the face of climate change. That may well be what non-Christian dialogue partners would suggest. In international negotiations on climate change talk about quotas for carbon emissions, trading and taxes may be more appropriate. Here forgiveness certainly cannot imply condoning the ways in which some contribute to the problem at the expense of others.

Yet, the immense complexity of the problem may also help us as Christians to finally realise that this is a situation way beyond our own power, that we are caught in the trap of a web of guilt, in what may be called structural or systemic violence, that we cannot escape from the sins of the past, that our own good intentions remain deeply flawed and that the impact of our actions may prove to be highly ambiguous. In this context it may become appropriate for Christians, especially those of us with a large carbon footprint, to confess our indebtedness to Godself and not only to our victims. We may reach a point where *we may also need God’s forgiveness*. This is the point where we may discover that what is required here is something beyond our own initiatives but not beyond God’s mercy. Here we need to realise the distinction between the church’s ministry of reconciliation and what Christ has done outside us and on our behalf and not only in us and through us, once and for all (Rom 6:10). This is where we may recognise that we need not be burdened with doing God’s work, that what holds the ecclesial community together is not common moral activity, that there is a fundamental asymmetry between divine and human action, an unbridgeable gulf between the work of Christ through which God reconciled the world to Godself (2 Cor 5:19) and our ministry of reconciliation.

The question is whether those of us with a large carbon footprint can indeed sincerely claim to be forgiven by God? Or is this perhaps the deeper reason why it is so difficult to confess guilt in this case – because we sense that we are not (yet) forgiven, not by ourselves, nor by others with a smaller carbon footprint and perhaps not even by God? How can we continue with our consumerist lifestyles if we know what the long-term impact of that will be? Clearly, we cannot assume that

forgiveness by God will follow such confession more or less automatically. Because we cannot live from God's forgiveness, as was noted above, we anxiously and frantically seek to save the planet through our own efforts – through conscientising others, through practical innovations or through activism.

c) A sustainable society

In 1975 the World Council of Churches included the term “sustainable society” in describing its vision and social agenda in terms of “Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society”. At that stage this was a new term that indicated an emerging understanding of the notion of “limits to (economic) growth”. In 1983 at the Vancouver Assembly of the WCC this was rephrased in terms of “the integrity of creation”. Since then the concept of “sustainable development” came to be used throughout the world in order to recognise the need for “development” in some parts of the world, but also the need for such development to be sustainable. Since the meaning of such “development” is disputed, this led to an ongoing debate on what on earth “sustainable development” could mean.

In the context of climate change such reflections on issues of sustainability have become more urgent than ever before. It indicates that economic production and consumption simply cannot go on as it used to. Why not?

- Firstly, we need to recognise the limited availability of some natural resources that provide us with energy. This is especially the case with oil, but also with natural gas, with uranium and eventually also with coal. We will require alternative sources of energy sooner or later. It is unfair towards future generations to deplete such resources within the space of one or two centuries.
- Secondly, such resources are being depleted more rapidly than in the past due to a growing world population and rising levels of consumption per person, also amongst the consumer class.
- Thirdly, there is also an emerging recognition that *renewable* resources should be used in a sustainable way. This applies to the use of land for agriculture, the fishing industry and the use of indigenous forests and plantations. These renewable resources will no longer sustain human beings (and other animals) if we use them in such a way that the ecosystems would eventually disintegrate. The concept of “carrying capacity” and “environmental footprint” is often used to calculate how many hectares of farmland are needed per person to sustain a particular lifestyle in terms of the use of organic resources (for food, timber, paper, cotton, etc). Indications are that we are already exceeding the carrying capacity of the land – which may have disastrous consequences. This may be likened to a rescue boat. It is always possible to add another person to a boat but beyond a certain point (called the plimsoll line) the boat will become more and more unstable in turbulent waters. Eventually, it will necessarily sink if more weight is added.
- Fourthly, there is a need to recognise the limited ability of the earth's biosphere to absorb the waste products of an industrialised economy. Here one may consider anything from tin cans to plastics to nuclear waste. Everything can be recycled through natural processes, but in the case of nuclear waste it would take thousands of years. It is precisely here that climate change is relevant because the underlying problem is the biosphere's limited ability to absorb greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (an otherwise harmless substance). It can be recycled, for example through photosynthesis, but we are adding carbon dioxide quicker than it can be absorbed.
- Finally, there is also a need to recognise the limited ability of societies to change quickly. In the case of natural disasters (flooding, fires, earthquakes) we are forced to change quickly. However, social transformation is necessarily a slow process. The large ship of the global economy can change direction but not overnight. This is precisely the challenge, namely to shift the energy basis of the entire global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives. This will require an immense process of restructuring. This has to take place within a period of 40 years – of which the first decade will be the most crucial. Nevertheless, the decision to begin changing

direction can be taken in a much shorter period. The *kairos* moment when the global human community needs to decide upon that is this year (2009) – in the light of the Conference of the Parties to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009. Only on the basis of such a definitive decision (with clear targets) can the necessary steps be outlined and implemented to change the direction.

What does this have to do with the Christian faith? Christians have always recognised God's providence, nourishment and sustenance. This is not merely a statement about the availability of resources. It is a deeply Christian confession of faith in God who has remained faithful to God's own creation even though we as a human species have not remained faithful to God. For Christians, the symbol of God's faithfulness is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God cares for us even when we do not care much about God. God continues to provide in our needs despite the impact of a consumer society with expanding needs where there never seems to be enough wealth for everyone. We demand more even though God's grace is abundant.

In a context of climate change this faith in God's provision and sustenance is being tested. Will God remain faithful to the children of Noah even when we engage in activities that threaten to destroy the ecosystems from which we live? How long will God have patience with us? How long will God's mercy sustain us? How can we learn that God's mercy is sustained by God's justice? What about God's judgement over our lives, our ways and standards of living, our cultures, our civilisations? Is God's judgement not also a way in which God's mercy is sustained? When will God begin to use the forces of chaos to destroy that which is no longer sustainable in order to start anew, to bring forth something that is creative, surprising and a source of wonder and amazement?

These questions may help us to see that the most important question in reflecting on sustainability is not how something can be sustained or whether it is sustainable, but what exactly is being sustained. Natural processes, the cycles of life and the thrust of evolutionary processes will continue with or without human interference. The real question is whether industrialised civilisations can continue along more or less the same lines for another century or so. As many have recognised, what is at stake is the very foundations of our notion(s) of civilisation. Embedded in this are questions about the sustainability of many aspects of contemporary society that those of us in the consumer class have become so used to: suburban housing, the tourism industry, air travel, mega-sports events, educational institutions, structures of governance and economic systems. What should be abundantly clear is that the sharp inequalities that characterise the global economy cannot be sustained indefinitely. Not only would it be impossible for the global poor to adopt the standard of living of the consumer class. In a world with scarce resources the societal tensions associated with such inequalities cannot be sustained. It will put an unbearable strain on local, national and international social services – for poverty relief, humanitarian aid, the handling of millions of refugees, disaster management, health services and education facilities.

d) How are these three visions related to one another?

We need to recognise that these three aspects of an ecumenical vision are not always in harmony with one another. In fact, it is quite evident that they are in tension with one another:

- Those of us who emphasise nature conservation and wilderness preservation and who are concerned about environmental issues may be inclined to emphasise the integrity of creation above issues of justice and peace. We argue that we need to care for the earth so that the earth can care for us. We insist that no economic activity will eventually be possible if it cannot be sustained in the long term.
- Those of us who are primarily concerned about economic inequalities and economic injustices are afraid that global environmental concerns may shift the focus away from the plight of the poor and the destitute. We notice that those who are concerned about environmental issues and climate change all too often come from the consumer class. We tacitly feel that nature conservation is a luxury that those who have time and energy to attend to that can worry about. It

is far more urgent to attend to people's immediate needs for food, shelter and medication now than to worry about climate change decades from now. If life becomes a struggle for basic survival, as is often the case in Africa, it becomes increasingly difficult to resist environmental destruction. While the rich may see beauty and grace in the movement of an animal, the poor may regard it as a source of food. At the same time, we recognise that it is the poor who suffer the consequences of environmental destruction and that they (we) will become the first victims of climate change.

- Those of us in decision making bodies at a local, regional and national level recognise the potential for conflict over scarce resources. We also see how various interests play a role in different strategies proposed to address climate change. We are deeply worried that such conflict will become ever more urgent and that a failure to address that now will make any collective efforts to address climate change (which would be the only way forward) impossible later. In times of violent conflict (such as war), handling such conflict takes precedence over anything else. Then it becomes a matter of survival on a daily basis so that long term survival seems trivial.

The tensions between these agendas also indicate that the one cannot be addressed without the other. One further observation is important here, namely on the use of "survival language". This is used in each of the perspectives. Long-term survival is only possible on the basis of sustainability. The lives of many poor and destitute people in South Africa are indeed accurately depicted as a basic struggle for survival. Amidst violent conflict one's survival and meeting one's own immediate interests necessarily receives the priority.

At the same time such "survival language can easily be abused. Even those of us in the consumer class often slip into a mode of "survival" by trying to protect what we have at all costs— amidst the real threats to life, property and employment security. We also struggle to cope with the demands of life and the tempo and competition of an industrialised urban society and often just try to "survive".

In such a context it seems that we will need to learn anew how mercy and loyalty, justice and peace are intimately connected. In the words of Psalm 85:10-11:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. (NRSV)

A biblical analogy

A biblical analogy may be appropriate here. There was a time during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, when drastic reforms were seen as the only way that a looming catastrophe could be averted. This stimulated a return to the Torah, to an understanding of how God's just and merciful laws have to be reinterpreted in the context of that time. That created the environment for the emergence of the Second Law – Deuteronomy.

However, a few decades later the prophet Jeremiah came to a point where he had to realise that a catastrophe could no longer be averted. The earlier messages of warning were not heeded. The crisis was coming. In hindsight we know what that meant: that everything that was precious to him was lost. The dynasty of David came to an end. The temple was destroyed. The city of Jerusalem lied in ruins. Lament was the only appropriate response.

Yet, when the crisis was at its severest point, Jeremiah maintained a different form of hope. This was not a hope that the crisis could be averted or that he would personally survive the looming catastrophe. Instead, he placed his hope in God alone. He bought a piece of land in a city that was to be destroyed. This signalled the hope that, after the day of judgement, God would remain faithful to God's people and to the land that was laid waste, that God would once again create something new

out of the ruins. Again, in hindsight we know that this actually happened, but only three generations later, namely during the time of the return from exile, portrayed by Deutero Isaiah as a new exodus, indeed a new creation. Yet, this new beginning was itself less spectacular than these prophets had hoped for. They therefore cast their eyes into the distant future, hoping for the coming of the Servant of Yahweh, the Messiah who would bring healing to the land.

The biblical analogy of Josiah would be more appropriate for our times than that of Jeremiah. It is not yet too late. We know that we have only a decade or so to attend to the challenge. This would require a decisive change of direction, in biblical terms a conversion (*metanoia*), a change of heart and mind, towards a sustainable economy and a sustainable lifestyle.

Later, hopefully much later, we may come to a point where our only hope would be that life on earth will again flourish, even if that may mean the extinction of our species. Christians may, through the eyes of faith, actually see such judgement – on our generation’s insane addiction to material wealth – in terms of God’s loyalty to God’s own beloved creation.

In search of appropriate theological metaphors

In reflecting on the content of Christian hope there is also a need for metaphors and theological models to explain the significance of such hope for us today. There are several metaphors that are widely used, each with some strengths but also some limitations. For the sake of clarity and in order to find a way forward it may be helpful to identify some of these metaphors:

- The key metaphor used in the Kairos Document of 1985 was that of *liberation*. This helped to portray God as the liberator of those who are poor and oppressed. In the South African context of political oppression at that time it was a particularly influential metaphor. Some also recognised that there would be no liberation for the oppressed without the liberation of the oppressors. In the context of the economic injustices that characterise the neo-liberal economic order, “liberation” has lost nothing of its power. In the context of ecological degradation one may also speak of the liberation of the whole of God’s creation – to show that other forms of life also need to be set free from human domination.
- In the African context after 1990 several theologians suggested the metaphor of *reconstruction*. This builds on the reconstruction in the post-exilic period in Israel and emphasises the need for African countries to accept responsibility for structuring their own societies. Even though the imbalances and injustices of the global economy still require some form of liberation, it is futile to blame all our problems on domination from the outside. What we need is also a spirit of cooperation, wisdom, energy and dedication in order to ensure good governance in every sphere of society. In South Africa this was of course understood in terms of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Many would see such work as a sign of the coming of God’s reign, on earth as it is in heaven.
- In the mid-1990’s in South Africa many others explored the significance of truth and *reconciliation*, justice and restitution. Of course, this has to be understood in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the need to come to terms with the legacy of the past, the healing of memories, the task of nation building, land redistribution and many other aspects of restitution that are still required. The key metaphor here is probably reconciliation and the need for forgiveness in order to be liberated from the legacy of the apartheid past. It should be noted that the notion of reconciliation has been highly contested – as is for example evident from the ways in which it has been discussed in the Belhar Confession (1982/1986) and the Kairos Document (1985/1986). As we argued above, given the polarisation around climate change issues, there is no hope to address the problem without cooperative efforts that will require some form of reconciliation, also amongst Christians. We still need to rediscover the meaning of our reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ and the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us.
- Around the turn of the century the reality of the HIV/AIDS pandemic became increasingly evident and started to dominate all other social agendas in South Africa. Soon we started to

explore the meaning of health, *healing* and regeneration. We reflected on a theology of life – but also of death. Such healing can easily be extended to consider the healing of memories, healing from demonic possession that is so important for many of us and the healing of the land. Ecological healing in the context of climate change would certainly include a stabilising of the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. For Christians such healing may be ascribed to the work of the Holy Spirit but then on the basis of the healing that we may find in Jesus Christ and his ministry.

- Over the last number of years many have become attracted to the notion of the “whole household of God”. *Oikos* theology is built on the recognition that economic injustices and ecological destruction are deeply related to one another. The power of this metaphor lies in its ability to integrate especially three core ecumenical themes on the basis of the Greek word “oikos” (household) – which forms the root of the quests for economic justice (the *nomoi* or regulations within the household), ecological sustainability (the *logoi* or underlying principles of the household) and ecumenical fellowship (*oikoumene* – participating as members of the whole household of God). One may therefore suggest that the household of God may serve as a metaphor to integrate a number of concerns, including the integrity of the biophysical foundations of this house (the earth’s biosphere), the economic management of the household’s affairs, the need for peace and reconciliation amidst ethnic, religious and domestic violence within this single household, a concern for issues of health and education; the place of women and children within this household and an ecumenical sense of the unity not only of the church, but also of the whole of humankind and of all of God’s creation, the whole inhabited world (*oikoumene*). This begs many further questions regarding the architect and owner of the house (God) and the place of the church within the larger household of God.
- There are of course many other metaphors that may be explored. Some may wish to consider the metaphor of responsible *stewardship* – often emphasised by those in positions of power. Although this metaphor has been widely criticised and has become somewhat sterile since it cannot elicit a vision of hope, there can be no doubt about the need to exercise a sense of responsibility, depending upon one’s sphere of influence in society.
- Another important metaphor is the notion of divine *wisdom*. This may draw on the Hebrew notion of wisdom portrayed as a woman, on the Greek understanding of Sophia, on the Christian recognition that Wisdom has been incarnated in Jesus Christ (the Logos), in the Spirit of Wisdom that will lead us to Truth, on parallels in the wisdom literature of other religious traditions and on indigenous knowledge in the African context. There is an obvious need for considerable wisdom in the decision making processes around climate change. Such wisdom is best understood when born from a recognition of the limitations of human wisdom and a sense of wonder when contemplating God’s wisdom in creation and history.

It is not necessary to choose between these theological metaphors. In the context of climate change we will probably need a whole array of such metaphors to help us to discern the challenges, to guide us in our decision making and to inspire us with a vision of hope.

5. Responding to this vision (renewed acting)

Skeleton document (as proposed in November 2007)

Preamble

- Climate change as a new kairos
- The need to discern God's word for our times
- A theological methodology based on action and reflection; involving an ongoing spiral of

Stories of Christian earthkeeping (Acting)

- Some responses to the threat of climate change have slowly emerged, also within the Southern African context
- Liturgies: A Season of Creation
- A range of local earthkeeping projects
- Examples of Christian lifestyle (including joyous living, asceticism, simplicity, the cultivation of various virtues)
- The ministry of the laity: where people live and work
- Institutions that have been established to address environmental concerns
- Theological writings, education, raising an environmental awareness
- Prophetic critique against economic injustices, violent conflict and unsustainable practices
- Is this enough – given the scale and the scope of the crisis? This calls for further reflection

Investigating what is at stake (Seeing)

- Looking at people's varied responses to climate change
 - Experiences of suffering
 - Experience of silent but pervasive fears for the future
 - Rampant and extravagant desires of the consumer class
 - Feelings of being cheated amongst those experiencing some upward social mobility, hoping to obtain affluence but realizing now that this would not be sustainable
 - An incapacity to change amongst many
- Looking at the predictions of scientists and other experts on the potential impact of climate change
- Looking at the suggestions of policy analysts
- Looking deeper at the structural causes of climate change (social analysis): The lasting legacy of colonialism and new forms of colonialism
 - Climate change is a function of the production, distribution and consumption of wealth
 - *Production*: The production of wealth is based on a number of factors, many of which are deeply influenced by historic injustices
 - Energy (use of fossil fuels)
 - Natural resources (colonialism)
 - Land / property (imperialism, the conquest of land)
 - Labour (slavery and cheap labour)
 - Knowledge and skills (research, education and training)
 - Business corporations (allowing for the sharing of risks)
 - Cultural values and virtues (entrepreneurship, innovation, dedication, diligence, productivity)
 - Capital (a function of the above, allowing for new projects)
 - The wealth that has been created is based on a mix of these factors. Some tend to identify only the role of creativity, while others point out the injustices
 - *Distribution*: The crucial problem in resolving climate change is related to (increasing) economic inequalities. This creates a situation where those with low carbon emissions will have to suffer the consequences of the economic activities of those with higher emissions. At the same time they desire to share in the wealth; that will entail a similar but unsustainable level of carbon emissions.
 - Industrialised and developing countries?
 - Affluent and poor? / Consumer class and the destitute?
 - North and South?
 - It is especially helpful to analyse the structural relationships between those occupying the centres of economic power and those on the periphery – in global terms but also in national, regional and in metropolitan terms.
 - *Consumption*:
 - The human need for consumption
 - Rising levels of consumption (resources, energy)
 - A consumer class of 1.7 billion people (over-consumption)

- The need for the poor on the economic periphery to increase their consumption towards a decent way of life
- Controversies over the very nature of “wealth”

Discerning the roots of the problem (judging)

- The problem is one of moral imagination, of finding an alternative vision, a different way of life, an economy that would be structured on the basis of sustainable principles
- The dominant vision is not sustainable, is unjust and is based on greed. It defines human beings in terms of what they lack. Instead, Christians may focus on gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon us by God.
- What is especially disconcerting is that so many Christians have been supporting a destructive vision:
 - We have worshipped Mammon
 - Consumerism
 - Hedonism
 - Faith and trust in progress in human ingenuity, in technology
 - A sense of fatalism amongst some
 - Apocalypticism allowed to flourish
 - The heresy of the gospel of prosperity: An alternative vision is needed
 - At the core of this ecumenical vision is an ethos based on economic justice, participation and sustainability
 - A vision of an economy based on grace and gratitude, sharing and sustenance
 - Biblical roots of this vision
 - The roots of this vision in various Christian traditions
 - Indigenous roots of this vision
 - Common human and religious roots of this vision: wisdom
 - A range of theological metaphors expressing this vision
 - Liberation for the whole of creation; victory over the powers of destruction
 - Reconstruction
 - Reconciliation
 - Confession of guilt and forgiveness
 - Following Christ in a consumer society
 - Torah, wisdom
 - The significance of the whole household of God (oikos) as a theological root metaphor; its roots in the divine economy (the narrative of the work of God through creation, evolutionary history, the emergence of humanity, sin and providence, redemption, church and mission and the completion of God’s work)

Responding to this vision (enhanced acting)

- Liturgical innovations: Learning to look at the world through God’s eyes: with compassion
- Practical steps by individual Christians where they live and work
- The cultivation of virtues
- Lobbying for change (prophetic critique): within churches, companies, various levels of government
- A confession of guilt by Christians in the consumer class
- A confession of guilt to people within other faith traditions (e.g. in Bangladesh)
- Solidarity with the victims of climate change
 - What this means in terms of adaptation, emergency aid, the availability of relief funds, etc.
 - What will happen if love grows cold in times of crisis and of conflict, when resources become scarcer?

Doxology

- This is God’s Earth
- The land belongs to God

Suggestions from the SAMS conference

The need for posters, songs, lyrics, DVD’s etc

What about poeisis

Human beings and other species

Role of penitence, repentance.