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Community-centred congregational ministry in South Africa: a plea for renewal[1]

ABSTRACT

In this paper the author advocates a new approach in the endeavour of local congregations and the church in general to become meaningfully involved in the challenges of community development and social transformation in South Africa. Proceeding beyond a charity mode of thinking and practice will mean that congregations and Christians first of all need to take a critical look at their own theology, worldview and values. This introspection should lead to a new double movement in which the imperative of transformation is no longer directed towards the poor exclusively and is as much directed towards the (capitalist) life world of the rich and powerful, of which congregations and Christians are very much a part. On the basis of such a double movement a new praxis should evolve in which congregations and Christians will become involved in the emancipatory struggles of the new social movements, exert themselves for local (or small-scale) economic alternatives, and engage in larger ecumenical, solidarity and research networks.

1. INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGE TO RENEWAL

It would be wrong of me not to start this paper on a positive note. It is hugely encouraging that the organisers of this conference on "Responsible Renewal" have put the issue of community development and the socio-economic needs of our communities towards the top of their list of themes.[2] This signals a growing awareness among South African Christians of a new *kairos* moment for God's people and church. It signals a new moment in which South African Christians want to say: enough is enough! We are alarmed by the growing sea of poverty and suffering around us. We believe this is a gross distortion of God's creation and the purpose of Christ's incarnation,

1 This is a revised version of the opening paper that the author presented at a church conference on "Responsible Renewal" held at the Fontainebleau Community Church in Randburg, 29-30 October 2002. A report on the paper was also written for the Sunday newspaper *Rapport*: "Sou ryk Christene tevrede wees met sulke liefdadigheid?" (English: "Would rich Christians be content with such charity?") (*Rapport*, 3.11.2002).

2 See footnote 1 again. This conference, which was presented by the Fontainebleau Community Church, Randburg, in collaboration with the Bureau for Continued Theological Education and Research (BUCTER/BUVTON) at the University of Stellenbosch, consisted of four plenary papers and twenty workshops. The goals of the conference were: i.) to conscientise participants about what can be done to alleviate social need; ii.) to identify ways and locations where people of faith could become involved in the alleviation of social need; iii.) to develop a perspective on the involvement and interaction between congregations and communities; iv.) to develop insight into the development of responsible leadership.

namely that all God's children "might have life – life in all its fullness" (Jn 10:10). Therefore, we believe that the time has come for us to engage very seriously in the task of community transformation – because the coming of God's Kingdom is for us not only a matter of the life hereafter, but also a matter of here and now. In terms of the overarching theme of this conference, we see it as our inescapable responsibility to take up the task of responsible renewal, a profound renewal also of the larger world around us, as God demands this from us.

The essence of my argument is that there can be no complacency amongst Christians about the church's past and current involvement in the broader renewal of our society, in community development and transformation; hence, we will have to adapt to new paradigms and modes of engagement if we are going to contribute to responsible renewal on a broader scale. In this paper, therefore, I want to make a plea for *renewal* regarding the ways we have hitherto thought about the church's involvement in the social and economic problems of our communities, a plea for renewal regarding the ways we have hitherto approached the problems of poverty and attempted to solve them. My argument is based on two critical points:

Firstly, I take the side of those critical thinkers in the Christian ecumenical tradition who believe that the churches have reached an *impasse* in their endeavours to make an impact on broader society and promote development, in fact, that such an impasse has existed for quite some time now.[3] Generally speaking, I believe that the churches and their congregations find themselves locked in what we may call *works of charity*, works of social relief.[4] Christians and their churches are locked within a charity mode of thinking and practice and they do not know how to go beyond such mode. This is what the churches have always done best and what they continue to do best. But this is not responsible community renewal. Our attempts to reach out to our fellow human beings in need, to relieve social need, are not changing this world for the better. They cannot, because they are only works of relief, works of charity.

Indeed, this inability to move beyond a relief mode is clearly illustrated in the new theological and church debates about poverty in our newspapers. And here I want to become more specific by referring to the group of people and the church that I know best: the Afrikaner and the Dutch Reformed Church. White Afrikaners, it would appear from the many reports and articles in the Afrikaans press recently, have clearly become aware of the fact that poverty today is no longer only a black problem but also a white one. As suggested by recent reports and articles in the Afrikaans newspaper *Beeld* on the growing poverty in areas such as Vanderbijl Park and the larger Vaal Triangle, white Afrikaners find themselves increasingly in a situation similar to that in the 1930s. Many of them are becoming jobless and desperately poor (Swanepoel 2002; Tempelhoff 2002c; 2001; 1998). And they can expect little help from any institution or group, with the

3 I developed this thesis about an impasse in my doctoral dissertation, *The Churches and the Development Debate: The Promise of a Fourth Generation Approach*. Basically I argued that the churches and Christian theology had not taken seriously enough those critical writers in the ecumenical development debate who called for a new mode of theological and ecclesiastical engagement in development. As a result the churches have made little lasting impact in development and have been unable to think about their contribution to development other than in terms of their works of charity or so-called community projects (Swart 2000:94-99; see also 2001:148-150; Biéler 1980; De Santa Ana 1980b; Elliot 1987; Kurien 1974:195-209).

4 I have, for instance, come to this conclusion with regard to the Dutch Reformed Church's involvement in "development'' in post-apartheid South Africa (Swart 1997). See also the important publication by scholars from the ecumenical movement, *Separation Without Hope: The Church and the Poor During the Industrial Revolution and Colonial Expansion*, in which a similar conclusion was drawn with regard to the churches' historical involvement with the poor in the North and South (De Santa Ana 1980a).

exception of the church perhaps. The Dutch Reformed Church and its ministers have once again become spokespersons for these people, speaking and intervening on behalf of them. The Dutch Reformed Church, if only because this is the plight of its own people, has been aroused by the new poverty at its doorsteps (Tempelhoff 2002a; b; d).

Yet the point that I want to stress is that I hear and read nothing new and innovative in the way Afrikaners and their church approach the new poverty problem. It seems all too familiar: donations for immediate relief, food parcels and soup kitchens. Certainly, these are commendable measures in the immediate context of suffering, but it is only charity. It will not change our communities for the better. It is not responsible renewal.

Secondly, the church – generally speaking and not only the Dutch Reformed Church – currently does not have the make-up and tools to break through the current deadlock in thinking and action about charity. To be quite frank, we cannot be guided by the Bible and our theology alone in our search for answers to the complex problems of poverty, in our search for an innovative community involvement and renewal.[5] The Bible is indeed God's Word for us, the authoritative source in which we discover the nature and will of God *par excellence*, in which we discover the principles and broad guidelines on which we ought to build our lives as the people of God. The Bible reveals to us that the living God is a God of love and justice, that he also demands justice and stewardship from us, his church, to work actively for the coming of his Kingdom here and now – which means nothing less than a world in which all people can flourish and fulfil their potential as God's highest creatures.

The Bible, in essence, provides clear principles and guidelines that are relevant to *all* spheres of life: economic, political and social. But the Bible is not a handbook that provides direct answers and solutions to today's complex problems of poverty. We cannot use the Bible as our only source of reference, if we are really serious about addressing the systemic nature of poverty and suffering in our communities. Neither will it be sufficient to keep on writing books and guidelines for action from a purely theological point of view. This point needs to be stressed, namely that it is absolutely imperative that disciplines, ideas and people outside the direct realm of Christian theology and the church will enrich our theology and thinking. We need to begin discovering the rich corpus of ethical, social and economic writings and ideas outside of Christian theology. Our theology and search for guidelines towards a better world may be greatly enriched by these writings and ideas. Certainly, it should not be regarded as a renunciation of our Christian faith if we were also to start reading the works of renowned religious and social thinkers outside the Christian tradition, thinkers such as the Dalai Lama and Gandhi[6], for instance. At the same time the past contributions from inside Christian theology on the issue of economic and social renewal should not be underplayed. Many of us come from a tradition that was inimical to a broader ecumenical movement within the Christian church. Yet it is in this broader tradition that we may find ideas and perspectives that could greatly stimulate our own thinking in economic and development matters and our search for authentic social renewal.[7] Apartheid theology and a narrow-minded Reformed

5 This point was also clearly made in the earliest debates on development in the Christian ecumenical movement (see e.g. Abrecht and Land 1969:137-138; Biéler 1980:6-7; Rendtorff 1970:212).

6 The creative influence of the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi on matters of economics and development in Indian Christian theological thinking may serve as an important example in this regard (see e.g. Das 1987:205-208).

7 In what may broadly be called the Christian ecumenical movement we find a long tradition of sustained critical theological-ethical reflection not only on the issue of development (see e.g. Dickinson 1991; Van Drimmelen 2003) but also on the issue of economics (see e.g. De Santa Ana 1991; 1985; Mulholland 1988).

theology have done us a great disservice. We are today greatly impoverished on the level of ideas and are in need of exposure to our greater circle of brothers and sisters.

But my plea is furthermore that our theologians, churches and congregations will reduce the church-world or religious-secular divides. My plea is that we as believers will become less distrustful, less sceptical of the secular sphere, the worldly sphere, and that we will begin to discover the richness of ideas and commitment to be found also in this sphere. On a personal note, I have in the last ten years or so of my own research in the field of theology and development been very inspired by what I have read and learned outside the field of theology. Few other books have made such an impact on my thinking on society and economics as Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. It is books such as Schumacher's, but also many others[8] that I have discovered through my research, which have changed my understanding of this world and in which I have discovered a profound commitment towards a different and more just world. We need to become far more *interdisciplinary* in our theological thinking, open also to insights and ideas outside our theological and spiritual writings. I dare say that only then will we be able to overcome the charity mindset that we find ourselves locked in and achieve our ideal of responsible community renewal.

2. DIMENSIONS OF RENEWAL

To recapitulate my argument up to this point, I have basically tried to say four things so far:

- That there can be no room for complacency when we take stock of our past and present endeavours as Christians, churches and congregations to alleviate poverty and promote development;
- That we should start to problematise our endeavours up to now by looking critically at the concept of charity. This is the concept that defines our socio-economic practices and outreach best. But we need to investigate whether it implies responsible renewal in any way;
- That our churches, congregations and theologians currently lack the tools and make-up to break out of their current charity mode of thinking and practice and move on to modes of thinking and practice that might really contribute towards responsible renewal in our communities and our society at large;
- That we need exposure to the ideas, wisdom, knowledge and experiences of others outside of our own confined traditions, especially those in the world of secular ideas and practices, who are as committed to the ideals of an alternative, more inclusive and better world as we as Christians claim to be.

Now participants in this conference may well be disappointed with what I have said so far. Perhaps they want to argue that I have not said much so far. I haven't spelled out a more practical path that could help our congregations to engage actively in responsible community renewal practices.

Yet my counter-question would be whether this is not exactly part of our problem, that in our haste to become practical we are not looking critically at *ourselves* first of all. Perhaps we should start considering the possibility that it cannot be merely a case of getting involved in our communities, but that a longer process of reflection and introspection is necessarily called for in

8 Schumacher's book (1973) has clearly become a classic in alternative thinking about economics and development. Recent publications that have built on Schumacher's ideas are Joseph Pearce's *Small is Still Beautiful* (2001), and in a South African context, Margaret Legum's *It Doesn't Have To Be Like This! A New Economy for South Africa and the World* (2002).

which we should first of all start to look at ourselves, our thinking and our practices. In my mind we are speaking about something very serious and profound here when we use the slogan "responsible renewal" to define a new kind of community ministry by our congregations and churches.

Integral to my plea, and with this I hope to give further structure to my paper, is that our urge for praxis, for practical involvement, will be preceded by a process of introspection, which involves *three* dimensions in particular, namely our theology, our worldview and our value system.

- *Our theology*: Our introspection should crucially start with a critical look at our theology. What kind of theology guides our orientation and action? Is it a theology that could challenge our charity practices and mind-set and steer us toward new forms of critical and sophisticated social thinking and action? Or is it largely an otherworldly theology that confines itself to the spiritual well-being of individuals and has little relevance and concern for our larger social reality? Is it a theology that is so defensive and closed to the outside world that it cannot learn from others and expose itself to critical ideas and insights outside its own ranks? Is it a theology that is so entrenched by a modern-day prosperity gospel (see e.g. Gilford 1989) that it cannot challenge the self-centred spirituality and life-styles of Christians and steer them towards more frugal and sustainable life-styles that would be far more sensitive to the environment and social suffering of human beings? On a very basic level: how comprehensively do we read the Bible? What is the content of our sermons? Do they contribute towards a wider and more critical social consciousness?
- *Our world-view*: Our introspection should also involve a critical look at our worldview. Thus, can we in any way imagine the possibility of a different kind of world, structured differently and governed by different kinds of institutions? Or are we such slavish adherents of current systems, institutions, rules, regulations and ideologies that we cannot even remotely imagine the possibility of a different kind of world operating under different rules and regulations? Are we such stern followers of Western (or for that matter also African) ideologies and structures that we cannot imagine a different kind of world? Is there the slightest possibility that our own initiatives toward responsible community renewal could challenge the reigning ideologies and structures of this world? Could our own initiatives subsequently contribute towards new kinds of organisations, structures and communities, which will operate by rules and regulations different to those that are governing our lives at present? Can we imagine the possibility of our communities and world functioning within economic and market structures that are different to the present ones? Can we consider the possibility that the current market economy is not a God-given reality with absolute rules, but merely a creation of human agents? Why should we be content with this human creation when it is now becoming very clear that it cannot and will not accommodate the economic and social aspirations of a very large segment of the world's population?[9]

9 These questions raise important further questions about the Christian churches' relationship to a clearly visible global citizens or social movement (George 2002) that is today campaigning for an alternative economic system on the basis of moral conviction. In the words of Susan George, the movement is multi-focused and inclusive. "It is concerned with the world: omnipresence of corporate rule, the rampages of financial markets, ecological destruction, maldistribution of wealth and power, international institutions constantly overstepping their mandates and lack of international democracy." (George 2002:110; cf. Swart and Venter 2002)

- ❑ *Our value system*: Our introspection should, finally, not overlook specific questions about the values that we embrace as Christians and churches. Whereas the question about our values is strongly reflected in our theology and world-view – the two dimensions for introspection that I have already identified – I specifically have in mind here questions about our institutional affiliation. To explain myself I would once again like to take as point of reference the group of people and the church that I know best: the Afrikaner and the Dutch Reformed Church. My understanding is that we as a group and church have historically had little feeling for that sector that we may call "civil society", especially not in the apartheid era, but to a large extent also not in the post-apartheid era.[10] Certainly, as a church and people we have by and large emancipated ourselves from the fatal relationship that we had with the state in the apartheid era. We can no longer be typified as a state church and a people who uncritically embrace the values and ideologies of the state.

However, I am critical today of our people's embracing of another kind of totalitarian value system, namely that of *global business*. And here I do not want to be misunderstood; Afrikaners are today great business people who can play a very important entrepreneurial role in South Africa and Africa in future. We certainly need good business and business that can create jobs. My disappointment, rather, lies with the fact that I see very little interaction on the level of *ideas* between Afrikaners and church people, on the one hand, and that part of civil society that is today challenging the unbridled profit-making and materialistic culture of the world of business. This is very clear to me when I study our newspapers and media. We are stringent followers of the global market and we obey to its rules and values rather slavishly. We believe in its "invisible hand".[11] For us any call for alternatives to the global capitalist system smells too much of a reversion to communist or socialist ideology. We are relentless profit-seekers ourselves and we uncritically embrace the materialistic culture, the "good life", of the new capitalism.

If this is our identity and affiliation today, my critical question is: what kind of help and service do we really want to give to the poor and destitute? What will be the nature of our outreach? What do we really mean and understand by responsible community renewal? To apply Jesus' directive here that we should do for others what we want them to do for us (Mt 7:12) raises the question: how far do we want to go in our compassion for the poor? Do we wish the same privileges for them, the same living conditions, the same wages, the same "good life" as we have? What do we do if our present capitalist system will not allow this, if there is no place for the poor in the system, if it is really impossible for us to go so far? Seen from our own privileged positions, would we be content with the limited help, the hand-outs, the limited opportunities, the low wages, the low-cost housing that we are able or willing to give to and obtain for the poor? Should our quest for responsible renewal not start at exactly this point, that we begin *to do for others what we want them to do for us*? Does this not mean that we should start to look critically at our capitalist world, our values, our life styles and ourselves? Does this not in fact mean that we should start exerting

10 This neglect is in stark contrast with the new lively interest in and recognition of the importance of "civil society" in the Christian ecumenical movement. See, for example, the various articles in the special issue of *The Ecumenical Review* (Vol. 46, No. 1) on the theme (e.g. Batista 1994; De Santa Ana 1994; Ichiyo 1994; Raiser 1994).

11 This is the famous concept introduced by Adam Smith in 1776 to capture the paradox of a free (laissez-faire) market economy. It is further defined by Paul Samuelson and William Nordhaus (1989:975) in their glossary of economic terms: "The invisible-hand doctrine holds that, with each participant pursuing his or her own private interest, a market system nevertheless works to the benefit of all as though a benevolent invisible hand were directing the whole process."

ourselves to create a new kind of world operating under the kind of alternative economic values and practices that will also allow the poor and destitute to start flourishing and live quality lives? Is this not exactly the meaning of *sustainable development* – that those who are more privileged and who want to engage in responsible community renewal will begin to change their *own* worlds in ways that are not only economically far more inclusive but ecologically also more sustainable?

3. QUEST FOR A DOUBLE MOVEMENT

I have come to the very essence of my argument. I began by pleading that we should start to look critically at our works of charity, our hand-outs, our short-term projects of immediate relief, our soup kitchens, our donations. These actions remain important gestures in an age of hunger and unemployment, but they certainly do not contribute towards responsible community renewal. But very importantly, I have furthermore argued that our urge for renewed practical involvement, for action, should first be constrained by such a critical look at our works of charity. To rephrase my point here: our desire to engage in responsible community renewal should mean that we would *not immediately once again shift our focus to the poor and those in need.* Hence, we should not now once again start with the poor and the needy. We should not first of all start with the question of projects that we want to launch on behalf of the poor and those in need. Rather, we should start with *ourselves*, by looking critically at our theology and spirituality, our worldview, our ideologies and values. Essentially, such a comprehensive critical look at ourselves should mean that we take the *ideologies, values, structures and institutions of our current capitalist world as the critical point of reference of our newly found actions for responsible community renewal*. This must be considered as the greatest challenge to those Christians, churches and congregations who are serious about responsible community renewal. It is necessary first to engage in and initiate activities, processes, projects and programmes that will start to challenge the exclusions and totalitarian ideologies and structures of our current capitalist world, to bear witness through these initiatives that viable alternatives are possible by which far more people could flourish socially and economically than what is presently the case. Ultimately, I want to propose that from this starting point the more privileged Christians, churches and congregations should once again reach out to the poor and destitute to form new partnerships and processes of mutual learning.

Now, the question might be asked whether my perspective on responsible community renewal is based merely on my own ideas? The answer is, "No." I think that I am in a similar way capturing what a number of serious thinkers in the Christian ecumenical movement have been advocating for some time now. So, for instance, my ideas conform to those developed by Charles Elliot in his seminal book, *Comfortable Compassion? Poverty, Power, and the Church.*[12] In this book, which should be regarded as essential reading on our topic of responsible community renewal, Elliot (1987:9-16) argues along similar lines that the churches have by and large been involved in works of charity and relief. As the title of his book significantly indicates, Elliot typifies this involvement by the churches as "comfortable compassion". This involvement has posed no serious challenge to the unjust power structures of the world (1987:179-180). It has not empowered the poor in any real sense. It has not contributed to responsible renewal.

Elliot (1987:29-50) nevertheless concedes in his book that there may be instances where the churches have gone beyond works of charity and relief and initiated projects that could have

12 For detailed discussions of this book in the context of what may be called the "pragmatic debate" in the Christian theological debate on development, see Swart 2001; 2000:Chapter 3.

contributed to the empowerment of the poor. Yet he ultimately also views these attempts by the churches as problematic. His argument basically is that such projects by the churches still too much present *a one-line movement from the rich and privileged to the poor*. It rather remains "comfortable compassion", since the basic rationale is to see the problem as *out there* and change needs to take place *out there*. In other words, the problem lies with the poor "out there". They (poor people) need to change. They need empowerment. Consequently, there is no consideration of the fact that the problem might also lie with the rich and privileged. There is no introspection from the part of those who initiate the help for the poor. There is no attempt on their part to also start looking critically at their own worlds, to start asking questions about the processes of enrichment and impoverishment, participation and exclusion, *why* some people are rich and others poor (1987:35-36).

The essential point of Elliot's argument is that *a double movement ought to be established in our quest for responsible community renewal*. Indeed, there should be precisely a *movement*, an outreach from the privileged to the poor. Responsible renewal requires that the poor will be helped towards self-discovery and the development of their full potential. But responsible renewal at the same time requires that a movement back to the rich and privileged will take place. They and their life worlds need to become the objective of change just as much because, as Elliot so well argues, it is with them (the rich and the privileged) that the powers of our world lie, the powers that determine our world and make it function as it does (1995:Chapter 7 and 8).

I would like to conclude my reference to Elliot's work by saying that I ultimately see two very important challenges emerging from his argument of a double movement:

Elliot's argument about a double movement firstly challenges us as Christians, churches and congregations with *a radical new concept of mission*. The imperative of conversion, of renewal, of change is no longer reserved for the poor and the foreigner out there only, but it becomes as much directed to the life world of the rich and privileged, of which Christians and churches are very much a part. Ultimately, it implies that rich and privileged Christians will now become open also to listen and learn from poor Christians and non-Christians alike, to begin to understand and experience the world through the eyes of the poor.

Elliot's argument of a double movement secondly challenges Christians, churches and congregations with *a radical new concept of what it means to be a community church*. For the true community church the incentive will be far less to establish community and render services *for* people somewhere else. For such a church the incentive will be far more to become and act as a *new, extended community* itself that will draw people from outside (especially the poor and excluded) to participate and share in its activities of renewal. The ultimate image is that of a church in, through and around which a comprehensive mix of initiatives for enduring spiritual, economic and social renewal will develop.[13]

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE PRAXIS

The purpose of this paper was not to present a step-by-step practical guide for responsible community ministry. The aim, rather, was to point out the road that we have to travel in order to

13 In this regard the model and idea of the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs) developed in Latin American liberation theology serve as inspiration. In the words of Pablo Richard (1988:369), in this model "the Church, especially through the grassroots communities, presents itself as *a place of creativity and life and popular participation*. The CEB in this sense becomes a *formative school for men and women* who are *creative subjects*, who are *creative leaders*, and *responsible citizens*, who are in solidarity with the majority of the oppressed people."

start practising a community ministry that could truly contribute towards the responsible renewal of our communities and the larger world. I have been arguing that our quest for praxis, for appropriate practical involvement, has to be preceded by a profound, critical look at ourselves first of all, by a quite radical change in the ways that we as Christians, churches and congregations have conventionally approached the complex social and economic problems of our communities. I have in this regard not only pleaded for a new openness to ideas and insights from outside our own ranks, but have also identified three terrains for fundamental critical introspection, namely our theology, our worldview and our values. I furthermore also pointed to the notion put forward by Charles Elliot, writer of the book *Comfortable Compassion*, of a double movement as an appropriate summary of my own argument on responsible community practice. I ended by arguing that Elliot's notion of a double movement – which determines that the quest for responsible community renewal should be directed to both the outsiders, i.e. the poor, and the insiders, i.e. the rich and privileged – challenges us simultaneously with a radical new concept of mission and community church.

At this point I could well stop and say that it is the task of our congregations and churches to conceptualise and devise the praxis, the programmes of action, which should proceed along the road towards renewal that I have spelled out. What ought to follow will be based on our own creativity. Yet, it is at this point that I nevertheless want to give some direction with regard to the kind of praxis that I envision for the route that I have outlined.

My vision for an appropriate praxis towards responsible community renewal would be strongly based on the proposals for action that the well-known German theologian from the University of Heidelberg, Ulrich Duchrow, has made in his book, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action*. In Duchrow's (1995) book, as the title suggests, we find not only the same critical overtones on global capitalism that have been evident in this paper. We also find proposals for practical social and economic action that are developed along the lines of the double movement that I have emphasised along with Charles Elliot. The following are only three categories of action that Duchrow develops is his book:

Firstly, a central passage in Duchrow's book addresses the churches by saying:

> [F]irst of all we must realise that all over the world, many people have actually got together in new social, environmental and democratic movements: women's movements, homeless movements, farmers' movements, indigenous movements, environmental movements, peace movements, and so on. Some have already formed international networks. They often work in close cooperation with the old social movements – workers' movements and trade union movements … Working in cooperation with social movements – as was the case with the prophets and the (peasant) farmers' movements [in the Biblical tradition] – churches and communities must convince their members of the need for this … struggle on the basis of their faith. If they expressed dissent, symbolic difference and a clear identification with the social movements, churches and congregations would gain credibility, and so enjoy untold opportunities to prophetically challenge the power structures (1995:281-282).

I do not want to say too much about this rich passage except that it perfectly defines the new kind of outreach that churches and congregations need to become involved in.[14] Duchrow also confirms

14 Duchrow's emphasis on the new social movements can be favourably compared with a similar emphasis in the well-known work by people-centred development theorist, David Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*.

here that there must still be an outward movement. Christians, churches and congregations must have their eyes fixed on the needs and struggles of others and become involved with them. At the same time, however, our style and approach should be different than before. We will no longer determine the agenda, or what will be done and how it will be done (cf. Batista 1994:19). We will become involved in the struggles of others, we will be lead by *them* in how we can assist, how we can strengthen and participate in their movements and agendas for a better life and society. As representatives of the privileged and rich churches, we will now reach out to our brothers and sisters of the less privileged and poor churches and listen and learn from them how we can make ourselves available for service. "Solidarity with others" now becomes the key phrase.

A second category of action that Duchrow develops in his book concerns the second dimension of Elliot's double movement, namely the movement back to the rich and privileged churches, the transformation that ought to take place in our own societies and our world at large. It is indeed a very radical challenge that Duchrow poses to Christians and their congregations and churches. Duchrow's plea is that Christians and their churches will actively start to work for *alternatives* in the world of micro-economics, small-scale alternatives that will address especially five areas of our economic and social life*: consumption*, *labour*, *technology*, *land* and *money* (1995:251-252). His plea is furthermore for the development of five types of organisational alternatives in these areas, alternatives that will actively begin to illustrate that a fairer, more sustainable and inclusive world is possible: 1. *Alternative companies and company networks* (1995:253-255); 2. *Economic organisations built on sustainable technologies* (1995:255-256); 3. *Alternative land use / sustainable agriculture* (1995:256-259); 4. *Alternative micro-financial systems / alternative banks* (1995:259-266); 5. *Alternative (fairer) trade / markets* (1995:167-268).

Finally, a third category of action from Duchrow's book that needs to be highlighted is his emphasis on *networking*. We could well say that this category represents the full articulation of the double movement in our envisioned new kind of social ministry. Duchrow (1995:274-277) emphasises that the small-scale alternatives of congregations and communities should not be conceived of in isolation, but in networks of co-operation and sharing. Thus the image should not merely be that of the individual community church around and through which the kind of creative initiatives mentioned above would come into being. As Duchrow eloquently puts it, "(b)ase groups working towards an alternative economy and democratic self-organisation visit one another, exchange information, support each other, strengthen each other through positive stimuli, and form loosely – or tightly – organised networks: ecumenical networks, solidarity networks of all types, and research networks … What unites them is the concept of a just, peaceful and environmentally friendly co-existence" (1995:275).

Participation, co-operation, sharing and community development through networks, then, become a key challenge for the true community church. This is how new and extended sustainable communities will be built, when the social and economic alternatives spoken of are created in and around networks of congregations and communities who collaborate and form partnerships. A special feature of such networks, moreover, should be the way in which they will give opportunities to poor congregations and communities to participate and flourish economically and socially. Through such networks the dividing lines between rich and poor communities will be dissolved. And the ultimate ideal and hope is, as Duchrow (1995:278-315) points out, that such local networks will link up with networks at regional, national and even international level and so begin to support the larger struggles for social and economic alternatives.

Is this too radical an agenda for action, too far-fetched, ridiculous even? For many church people in South Africa it may well be. But for some it may well also not be. I observed at some stage in this paper that I find nothing new and innovative in the way Afrikaners and their church approach the poverty problem. But perhaps this is not totally true. Being a regular listener to the

church actuality programme "Kollig op die Kerk" ("Spotlight on the Church") on Sunday mornings on the Afrikaans radio station, *Radio Sonder Grense*, I was inspired some time ago by an interview with an Afrikaner Christian, Dawid van der Vyver, on the programme. In this interview Van der Vyver told listeners about a new Christian organisation named *Acros*. *Acros* represents an initiative by a group of Christians in the George area who have become disillusioned with our conventional approaches to solve the poverty problem.[15] They came to the conclusion that we are just moving in circles, that we are not making any real progress to solve the poverty problem. They therefore decided that the time has come for something radically new. They subsequently embarked on a learning process and came across, among other things, the Mondragon initiative in Spain, an economic initiative that was started in 1941 by a Roman Catholic Priest and empowered a whole region.[16]

What has followed is a similar kind of initiative in the making. The group of Christians from *Acros* is today also engaged in processes to develop business co-operatives that will empower groups of poor people economically and socially. The model is alternative and radical, as it will give poor people equal and full ownership in the businesses. They will share in the profits and borrow money from a people's bank on an interest-free basis. Indeed, these initiatives in the making may not all be perfect and there may also be failures. But it is these kinds of initiatives that ought to give us hope for the future. They represent a glimpse of the alternative communities and church that we should be dreaming of.

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15 For a more detailed background of *Acros* and its search for alternative economic approaches to address the poverty problem, see www.acros.co.za.

16 For an informative theological discussion of the Mondragon initiative, see John Cort's article, "Is Mondragon the way?", which was republished in the book by M. L. Stackhouse *et al.*, *On Moral Business* (1995).

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