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Living together in the household of God: **Thinking theologically about economics**

by Rev Roger Scholtz (on behalf of DEWCOM)

Part 1

Background

The MCSA is currently facing a number of economic issues that hold the potential of shaping the kind of church we are to become. Some of these issues include:

- The manner in which the MCSA will respond to the ongoing challenge of poverty in the countries of our Connexion.
- The manner in which the MCSA will give tangible expression to its commitment to be a church in solidarity with the poor? (*Laws & Discipline*, 2007, p.238, para. 1.52)
- The manner in which ministers' stipends should be paid as the MCSA seeks a stipend policy for mission, healing and transformation.
- The allocation of human and financial resources that will optimise the church's ongoing mission.
- The long-term sustainable funding of ministerial training.

It is acknowledged that there are many pragmatic factors that need to be considered carefully by the church in its thinking on crucial economic issues like these. However, pragmatic considerations should never be allowed to take priority over sound theology which should undergird every decision the church makes. For this reason DEWCOM offers this series of articles in the hope that this will better enable the Methodist people to think more theologically about economics. It is further hoped that this will make some contribution to establishing firmer theological ground on which these and other issues of an economic nature can be debated and explored within our church.

Moving beyond our subjective reactions

It would be fair to say that economics affects us all - the poor and the rich; the young and the old; those who understand economic theory and those who don't. The precise manner in which each of us is affected by any particular economic issue may well vary, but that all of us *are* affected is certain. For example, when interest rates are raised, it is bad news for the young homeowner with a mortgage, but is good news for the pensioner who lives off the interest of her fixed cash investments. Clearly, our reactions to economic matters are influenced to a large degree by how we are personally affected.

Given this reality, what is needed for people to move beyond their subjective (and often kneejerk) reactions to economic issues based on how they are personally affected? How can people of faith and communities of faith, in particular, be helped to approach economic issues theologically, so that our responses to these issues reflect principles that are honouring of God and the values of God's Kingdom?

A theological definition of 'economics'

The English word 'economy' is derived from two Greek words: *oikos* - meaning house or household; and *nomos* - meaning law, or rules, or requirements. Thus the word 'economy' could quite literally be translated as 'the rules of the house' or the 'management of the household'. In antiquity, the term 'house' or 'household' was freely used to express the various ways in which

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people shared life together, from families to clans to tribes to nations. In those ancient times economics referred quite simply to the way in which households behaved and were managed that impacted upon the well-being of everyone in the community as a whole.

This understanding rescues economics from being viewed as an inaccessible, technical and chiefly academic discipline and thrusts it directly into the realm of theology - for the well-being of people is one of God's primary concerns. Indeed, **God is not a neutral bystander when it comes to economics, but has passionate convictions about how our life together should be shared.** Thus, to think theologically about economics is simply to allow God's passionate convictions about the right ordering of "households" (in the broadest sense of that word) to inform our understanding and shape our actions around our common life together.

Living together in the household of God

In the series of articles that will follow, the metaphor of 'living together in the household of God' will be used to consider what exactly it means for us as people to honour what God requires of us economically. We've all heard the expression, commonly used by an exasperated parent to a rebellious teenager, "So long as you stay under my roof you will live by my rules." God deals with us more graciously than that, but in a similar way lays before us 'house rules' that God knows will make for life at its very best, and boldly invites us to live by them.

By contrast, the 'house rules' of the economic systems of our church and world largely reflect a vastly different picture, indicative of our fallen human condition. These economies, often filled with injustice, selfishness, fear and greed, reveal the ravaging nature of sin – personal, corporate and structural – and our desperate need for redemption.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the life we share in the church and world need not be defined by our fallen human condition. The hope we are called to proclaim and bear witness to is that healing and transformation is possible here and now. This is true not just for individuals, but for families, communities, organisations, churches, corporations, security exchanges and the entire global economy.

Such economic healing and transformation is arguably the most pressing need of our time. Perhaps, like never before, the faithfulness of the church's witness and its effectiveness in offering the hope-filled alternative of God's Kingdom to the world, depends on our willingness to allow God's economic priorities to order our life in a radical way. Over the next few months we'll consider what this means for us practically as we explore a number of economic themes theologically.

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Part 2

Summary of Part 1

The departure point of this series of articles is that the MCSA is currently facing a number of crucial issues of an economic nature that hold the potential of shaping the kind of church we are to become. First and foremost of these is the MCSA's response to the problem of poverty in the countries of our Connexion. Others would include the optimal utilization of our human and material resources for mission, and the way in which ministers should be paid as we seek a stipend policy for mission, healing and transformation.

Issues like these are particularly prone to subjective reactions based upon people's perceptions as to how they might personally be affected. This highlights the necessity for firm and rich theological ground to be established upon which such issues can be debated, and out of which faith-filled and life-giving economic decisions might emerge that are honouring of God and the values of God's Kingdom.

To think theologically about economics requires the fundamental recognition that God is not a neutral bystander when it comes to economic matters, but has certain passionate convictions about how our life together should be shared. These passionate convictions could be thought of as the 'house rules' (literally the *oikos-nomos* – from which the word 'economy' is derived) that God lays before all who would live in God's household.

In this article and the others to follow, we will consider some of the 'house rules' that will make our living together in the household of God the rich and abundant experience for all, that God intends it to be.

1. House Rule # 1 – Community is non-negotiable

1.1 In the household of God we are all one family created to seek the common good and to live in solidarity with one another.

In the eyes of God the people of the world all share a common heritage and origin that make us one family. Being created in the image of God is the defining characteristic of who we are as people (Genesis 1:26-27). Therefore, as members of the human race we are, in essence, a global community living together in one household – under "one roof" as it were.

This has profound implications for the life that we share: The principle of **the common good** recognises that because we are inextricably bound together in community, the only way we can truly advance our own interests is by seeking to advance the interests of the community as a whole. The principle of **solidarity** recognises the ongoing necessity to identify with the needs and concerns of others, particularly the poor and marginalised, lest our common identity be forgotten.

In the broadest sense this is true of the entire human family. In a sharper sense this is especially true of the family of faith, which is the church. In the eyes of God the church, as the body of Christ, is one organic entity in which all its constituent parts are intimately interconnected. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12:26). This sense of community is a non-negotiable part of what it means to live together in the household of God.

1.2 In the fallen economies of the world we have lost our sense of community and are alienated from each other.

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One of the great ironies of the globalised world in which we live – with its ever-expanding capacity for communication and connection – is the loss of community and the heightened sense of alienation experienced by many. More and more, people are being defined exclusively in economic terms – either as partners, competitors or consumers – in an increasingly competitive and unforgiving global economy structured around the pursuit of national and corporate self-interest.

As a direct consequence of this disconnection, evils such as nationalism, racism, sexism, militarism, xenophobia, discrimination, materialism and self-serving individualism have become commonplace in our world. Many people have lost their sense of responsibility for the plight of others and have become hardened to the needs of the weak and the vulnerable. The concern for self has replaced the concern for others and the community at large. All this enables economic choices to be made that are selfish and harmful to others.

1.3 The gospel proclaims the hope of reconciliation and the forging of radically inclusive communities.

The promise of the gospel affirms that in Christ every alienating barrier is shattered. Accordingly, radically inclusive communities of faith can be forged that can heal every division of class, race, age, sexual orientation and gender, and affirm the fundamental unity that is ours in Christ. As in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the discovery of one's connection with and responsibility towards others, and the willingness to act on that discovery, is none other than the experience of salvation. "Today salvation has come to this house." (Luke 19:9).

1.4 Implications for the MCSA

The ecclesiological structure of the MCSA affirms our interconnectedness as a Connexional community of faith. This is one of the great gifts of the common life we share as Methodists and is reason for gratitude and celebration. But pointed questions remain:

- How is this sense of Connexional community embraced, expressed and experienced at every level of our church's life?
- How do the principles of the common good and solidarity influence the economic choices we make in our Societies and Circuits?
- What are we doing to break down the alienating barriers that still exist within our church, and between us and people of other faiths and traditions?
- How committed are we to forging radically inclusive faith communities where diverse groups of people, and especially the rich and the poor, can find one another and discover their common humanity?

God's first house rule is this - community is non-negotiable. It is an *intrinsic* part of what it means to live together in the household of God. When this truth is embraced and continuously reflected in the choices we make, we will begin to savour more and more of the sumptuous feast that God graciously lays before us all.

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Part 3

A key question that this series of articles is seeking to address is this: How can people of faith be helped to think about economic issues theologically, so that our responses to such issues reflect God's passionate convictions about how our life together should be shared?

The image of 'the household of God' is one picture of how our life together can be shared. Within this household we discover that there are certain 'house rules' (literally *oikos-nomos* – from which the word 'economy' is derived) that God declares are necessary for us to observe if we are to experience the kind of abundant life that God intends for us all.

The first 'house-rule' that was explored in the last article was this:

1. House Rule # 1 – Community is non-negotiable!

Community is an intrinsic part of what it means to live together in the household of God. The deepest truth of our human identity is that all people have been created in the image of a communal God. We are thus all part of one family, created to seek the common good and to live in solidarity with one another. However, in the fallen economies of the world we have lost our sense of community and are alienated from each other. This is most commonly expressed in selfish economic choices that are harmful to others. The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims the hope of reconciliation and the forging of radically inclusive communities in which, amongst other things, our sense of economic connection with and responsibility to one another is joyfully rediscovered.

A second house rule is this:

2. House Rule # 2 – Share what you have!

2.1. In the household of God there is abundant provision for the needs of all.

God's vision of shalom for all the people of the earth is a vision of well-being and peace that comes from everyone having enough and no-one having too much. A fundamental aspect of this vision of God is that abundance, rather than scarcity, better describes the true nature of the world that God has created.

This primary home with which we have all been blessed – the earth – is a home of rich and breathtaking abundance. The resources of air, water, land, seed, vegetation, animals and minerals are the abundant provision of a generous God who intends these gifts of the earth to be shared by all in order to meet the needs of all.

In God's economy the earth with all its riches is enough. Coupled with human industry and social responsibility, the resources of the earth are more than sufficient to meet the needs of all. In God's economy poverty, in any form, is unnecessary and can be eradicated. This should not be dismissed as idealistic naïveté, but can be confidently affirmed as the pragmatic possibility that has always been part of God's original intention for the earth and the peoples who inhabit

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2.2. In the fallen economies of the world, the twin oppressions of poverty and excessive wealth are rife.

The unequal distribution of wealth is one of the most obvious characteristics of many of the economic systems of this world. We live in a society where there are those who have a great deal, and others who have very little. This disparity is so common that it is accepted as the norm - an inevitable fact of human existence. This is in stark contrast to the biblical witness. The experience of the Israelites in the wilderness, for instance, is a compelling example. As they relied on God's abundant provision of manna for their physical sustenance we read that "...those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered little did not have too little. For everyone gathered as much as they needed." (Exodus 16:18)

The massive inequalities so evident in the economies of the world (and often the church) lead to two distinct, but interconnected oppressions – the oppressions of poverty and excessive wealth. They are interconnected insofar as they feed off each other, but they operate in opposite ways:

- Those living under **the oppression of poverty** are typically *aware* of this oppressive condition which severely limits their choices. Yet they often discover a remarkable degree of connection with others similarly oppressed, and typically have a far sharper understanding of the gift of community.
- Those living under **the oppression of excessive wealth** are typically *unaware* of their oppressive condition. Although they have seemingly limitless choices, they often experience isolation and alienation in the living of their lives, and typically miss out on the gift of community.

2.3 The gospel challenges the vast disparities between rich and poor, and offers the hope of economic liberation for those living under the oppressions of poverty and excessive wealth.

Every situation where some do not have enough and others have too much violates the intention of God's household, for God's abundant provision has been given in order to be shared by all to meet the needs of all.

The gospel of Jesus Christ challenges these disparities rigorously. It expresses a special concern for the poor, and makes particular demands upon the rich, so that both might experience economic liberation. As the rich share their material abundance, and the poor share their understanding of community, there can emerge a new experience of reconciliation that is one essential aspect of what it means to be 'in Christ'. Read from an economic perspective, the familiar text from 2 Cor 5:17-18 throws rich light on this gospel dynamic: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation..."

2.4. Implications for the MCSA

The church is called to bear witness to the radical alternatives of God's kingdom. This has particular relevance in the manner in which the church manages and shares the resources that God has entrusted to us, for the benefit of us all. Some questions to challenge our thinking in this regard

- How can the MCSA better reflect God's particular concern for the poor, especially in the ways in which human resources are allocated to the poorest corners of the Connexion?
- Is our current system of stationing ministers economically just and missionally sound?
- What measures should be implemented to narrow the stipend gap between the highest and lowest paid ministers?
- How best can wealthier circuits, societies and organisations fulfil their economic responsibilities towards the poorer sectors of the church?
- What are we doing to challenge ordinary church members to rethink their economic responsibilities?

In the household of God we are called to share all that God has entrusted to us. In doing so we will not only be a hope-filled witness to the world, but will also discover the sufficiency of God's provision for the needs of us all.