



## Lukas Vischer: Climate Change, Sustainability and Christian Witness

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

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### 2. Historical Context

Scientists were the first to become aware of the danger of climate change. Their warnings prompted an international political process towards a binding international convention. As early as in 1975, the World Council of Churches' fifth Assembly in Nairobi declared that the society for which the church had to strive must be just, participatory *and sustainable*. Lukas Vischer was among the pioneers in the ecumenical movement to call the churches' attention to the urgency of a Christian witness in face of climate change and its victims. He was a member of the WCC climate group, founded in 1990.

### 3. Summary

The first definition of sustainability at an ecumenical conference (Bucharest 1974) reads as follows: "We begin to perceive that the future will require a husbanding of resources and a reduction of expectations of global economic growth... There may be a divine irony in the fact that the very technological victories which once supported the vision of affluence, now – by their contribution to increasing consumption of resources, growing population, and pollution – are bringing an end to the dream of a carefree and affluent future." In spite of such prophetic voices, the ecological crisis has only slowly penetrated into the awareness of the churches. The present debate is largely restricted to protection of nature insofar as human interests are at stake. Something like a spiritual conversion and a considerable degree of solidarity would be necessary for the transition to a sustainable society.

At least four aspects require a process of rethinking in the churches:

1. Humans form *part of creation* and are summoned to live *in community with* their fellow-creatures – as decisively emphasized by the feminist movement.
2. Asceticism in respect of consumption is part of the Christian tradition. The gifts of creation are for all. Freedom in Christ implies sharing in solidarity what is necessary for life.
3. The tension between the universal dimension of the church (necessary in face of the requirement of sustainability) and the local dimension (as a shield against imperialistic agendas) must be rethought and expressed in a new way.
4. The ecological crisis makes us aware that self-destruction is a real possibility to be reckoned with. Christian hope relies on the conviction that the future is ultimately in God's hands. It liberates from the ideologies of growth and progress and enables us to accept the challenge.

A critical remark concerning the World Council of Churches: Its verbal commitment to sustainability has not evidently challenged its own life-style so far. The realities of its present financial situation, however, enforce certain restrictions. Might this fact prompt a new, sustainable form not only of the WCC itself but also of the community of churches? A prerequisite for this opportunity would be an examination of the activities of the WCC on the basis of the criterion of sustainability.

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AND CLIMATE CHANGE

World Council of Churches

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# Climate Change, Sustainability and Christian Witness

*Lukas Vischer*

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In its present usage the term “sustainable development” derives from the 1987 report of the World Commission for Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (the “Brundtland Report”), which defines it as development that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

This formula has been repeated on countless occasions and was the guiding principle of the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (1992). However, it is open to such varied interpretations that its meaning and implications are far from obvious. Indeed, it seems justifiable to ask whether it does not obfuscate rather than help to elucidate problems. To be sure, it provides a general framework for discussing the future. It is generally acknowledged that dangers exist and that measures must be taken to guarantee the life of future generations. But opinions diverge as soon as one starts to move beyond this point.

Much depends on how one views the extent of the hazards to which humanity is exposed. There is an almost irresistible tendency to underestimate these (although the opposite inclination is also present; a mass of publications confronts us with doomsday predictions, and some intellectuals seem to obtain a certain satisfaction from painting as gloomy as possible a picture of the future). Yet once the question of the actual measures to be implemented is raised, the debate shifts from enquiring into the extent of the hazards to the question of what changes are possible and realistic under existing conditions. This shift in the posing of the problem can easily entrap us in self-deception. The emphasis is so firmly on the possibilities of implementation that the actual degree of danger involved is no longer even perceived.

The intensity of public awareness is a misleading yardstick for measuring the dangers we face. Consider some of the areas in which public awareness has fluctuated

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in recent decades. The debate on nuclear weapons, a major worry of the 1950s, receded in the 1960s and 1970s, re-surfacing only with the nuclear arms race between the super-powers in the 1980s. The ecological crisis became a dominant theme in the 1970s but lost much of its dynamics in subsequent years. In the late 1980s, it once again became a central concern, but since the Earth Summit in 1992 its influence has faded in many countries. Economic reversals are bringing more short-term questions to the fore. Yet these now-obscured problems have lost none of their urgency. These changes in public awareness only demonstrate the limitations of the human capacity to adjust to problems of the future.

Do the churches have any particular insights to bring to this debate? The World Council of Churches began to reflect on the sustainability of society at a time when there was scarcely any public discussion of this; and the WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975) explicitly declared that the society for which the church had to strive must be simultaneously "just", "participatory" and "sustainable".

The first definition of sustainability produced at an ecumenical conference (Bucharest 1974) read as follows:

For a short period in recent history some societies cultivated the dream of unlimited wealth, of overcoming poverty not primarily by sharing wealth but by increasing it so that there would be enough for all. Now we face a sobering return to reality. We begin to perceive that the future will require a husbanding of resources and a reduction of expectations of global economic growth. We do not expect that humanity can live as the most extravagant have been living, and we no longer believe that the spillover of wealth from the top will mean prosperity for all. There may be a divine irony in the fact that the very technological victories which once supported the vision of affluence, now — by their contribution to increasing consumption of resources, growing population, and pollution — are bringing an end to the dream of a carefree and affluent future. The goal must be a robust, sustainable society, where every individual can feel secure that his or her quality of life will be maintained or improved.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of sustainability receded into the background as other priorities came to the fore in the 1980s; and ecumenical interest in the topic was reawakened only when discussions of *Our Common Future* led to the term's general acceptance. Somewhat hesitantly, the WCC resumed the debate, but no agreed interpretation, based on specifically Christian criteria, has yet been developed. Is it possible now to make any progress in this respect? Can we find criteria for a Christian assessment of sustainability?

### **Climate change as an entry point into the debate**

While the scarcity of resources or the drastic diminution in the number of species or the apparently unstoppable increase in world population could serve as starting-points for addressing the complex of problems involved in sustainability, the danger of climate change resulting from human activity illustrates the nature of sustainability in a particularly intense way.

Scientific research is yielding increasingly accurate evidence that human activity is responsible for global changes in climatic conditions on planet earth. The first signs of this are already observable. If no measures are taken to combat the roots of the phenomenon, we must count on a constantly increasing climatic "deregulation". Many aspects of this are predictable but many are incalculable:

Global mean surface temperature has increased by between about 0.3 and 0.6°C since the late 19th century, a change that is unlikely to be entirely natural in origin. *The balance of evidence, from changes in global mean surface air temperature and from changes in geographical, seasonal and vertical patterns of atmospheric temperature, suggests a discernible human influence on global climate.* There are uncertainties in key factors, including the magnitude and patterns of long-term natural variability. Global sea level has risen by between 10 and 25 cm over the past 100 years and much of the rise may be related to the increase in global mean temperature.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences are becoming apparent in almost all areas of human existence. Accordingly, the problem of climate change cannot be considered in isolation as just one problem among others but is indissolubly connected with the ecological crisis as a whole. A range of other dangers are made even more urgent by climatic change: excessive use of the soil, a dangerous reduction of forests, ruining the earth's surface by overbuilding, threats to water supplies, health hazards. Conversely, many measures to address climate change will have beneficial effects in all these other areas. Climate change can serve as a key to an adequate perception of sustainability.

The reference cited above to "a discernible human influence on global climate" has to do with human activities that either release greenhouse gases or prevent their absorption, thus calling into question all activities that rely on the combustion of fossil fuels. Are there other ways and means to pursue these activities, or will it be necessary to discontinue them altogether or at least restrict them?

Climate change shows with particular clarity that there are limits to the exploitation of the earth's resources. It is a paradigm of what is needed in other areas. Consequently, it forces us to rethink our way of life radically.

Above all, however, climate change reveals the vulnerability of human beings in God's creation. Those who thought they had escaped the supremacy of nature and could build their own secure world are suddenly exposed to forces they cannot control. The power over the future which they thought they had is slipping out of their hands.

### **The needs of future generations**

Concern for future generations is of central importance in the definition of sustainable development which guides the Brundtland Report. The idea is that future generations also have a right to a fulfilled life. While each generation constructs its own life and alters the face of the earth, no generation should change the quality of the conditions of life on earth so profoundly as to deprive future generations of major possibilities to build and construct their life and alter the face of the earth in their own right. The principle that each generation must take the greatest possible care not to cause irreversible damage is not contested. But what does it really mean to take the interests of future generations into account? When conflicts arise, how are the rights of future generations to be measured against the claims of the present generation?

In practice, the rights of the future generally take second place. Short-term thinking has precedence. Measures are limited to avoiding developments that unmistakably cause harm and damage; but often — as in the case of radioactive waste — even quite obvious risks are not avoided. Future generations will be faced with the burden of servicing hazardous waste deposits for centuries ahead.

Basically, the responsibility is placed on an unlimited sequence of generations. Clearly, however, there are limits to our ability to perceive the future and to plan

accordingly. Calculations and scenarios from the present generation are subject to extreme uncertainty. Innovations once thought to be non-hazardous can prove dangerous eventually. Climate change is a good example of the uncertainty involved. What is done by the present generation can considerably diminish the conditions of life for future generations, perhaps increasingly from generation to generation. Yet the measures proposed hitherto are based on an agreement reached in laborious negotiations within the framework of present-day insights; and the uncertainty of predictions is usually interpreted in favour of the needs and interests of today's generation.

Consequently, on closer examination the responsibility for future generations is much more demanding than it seems at first. The responsibility cannot be limited to avoiding obvious burdens for future generations. It imposes on us a commitment to the greatest possible care and restraint in dealing with God's creation.

### **A common future?**

The danger of climate change makes the discrepancy between North and South even more manifest. Industrial nations not only consume a disproportionately high share of resources, but also contribute by their life-style to the destruction of ecological equilibrium in the South. The exploitation of the South by the North has a new, morally even more unacceptable profile.

One of the strengths of the Brundtland Report is that it talks of the "common future" of humanity, and of the problems of the environment, poverty and energy as a *single* connected crisis. Only development which opens up a future for *all* nations may justly be termed sustainable. But even if this assertion is generally accepted as a principle, it is by no means certain that its implications will be understood and accepted as a moral duty. When the question of sustainability is raised in practice, the lines are not usually drawn so far. The dangers that threaten the human race are assessed from the viewpoint of *one's own* future. The many recent studies of sustainability by individual industrial nations all talk about duties to economically poorer countries, but when it comes to practical consequences such considerations are relegated to second place. If the sustainable development of the South were really in focus, the industrial nations would have to reduce their present demands on nature and their economic expectations of the future much more drastically than they have been willing to allow hitherto. The hope of establishing some kind of equilibrium by raising the standard of living of the developing countries cannot be fulfilled because it is impossible to extend to humanity as a whole the present patterns of consumption of the planet's limited resources by the wealthy nations.

Our responsibility to future generations is not limited to our own descendants. It includes *all* nations. It also extends to the millions who are added to the sum total of humanity each year, correspondingly reducing the per capita amount of available resources. Only when responsibility is understood in this comprehensive sense can we really speak of a "common future".

While the injustice inherent in the contrast between "industrialized nations" and "developing countries", or "North" and "South", or "rich" and "poor" must constantly be recalled and never minimized, the division of the nations of the world into only these two "camps" inevitably leads to limited perceptions and conclusions. North and South are not homogeneous quantities. However much the industrialized nations may have in common, their responsibility is not identical in all respects. Even more, "the

South" is a nebulous entity. The way into the future can be planned responsibly only if distinctions are made between different groups within the group of Southern countries.

The convention on climate change is based on the distinction between industrialized and developing countries and their different responsibilities. By signing it, the industrialized nations accepted the obligation to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The developing countries initially retain the right to an economic development with increasing emissions. Their commitments begin only after the industrialized nations have taken the first step. While there are good reasons for this, the obvious weakness is that an actual reduction in emissions is postponed. As long as the industrialized nations do not take the first step — and we must suppose that some time will elapse before they do so — emissions will considerably increase overall.

Some developing nations have reached a level of economic development that places them in the ranks of the industrialized nations. Other countries have oil reserves and thus occupy a position of power equal to many industrialized nations. African countries are looking for their own form of economic development. The island states of the Pacific and Caribbean are uniquely affected by the consequences of climate change. The contrast between North and South must not hide the fact that these countries already face — each in its own particular way — the challenges of sustainability and responsibility for our common future. Each starts from different presuppositions and has to respond to different moral demands. Each depends more or less on forces over which they have no control. Yet everywhere the choices for the future have to be made now. What then is the sense of continuing to promote a general model of development that we already know will bring forth a poisoned harvest?

Perhaps one of the responsibilities of the church is to pose the question of sustainability even more resolutely than hitherto in the context of each individual region.

### **The historical context**

A realistic view of sustainability must recognize that the implementation of measures proposed depends to a large extent on historical factors. The scientists' estimates and scenarios demonstrate that solutions are fundamentally possible in at least some areas. Ways to achieve sustainability are set forth in countless studies backed up by statistics and diagrams. But all these proposals assume not only the will to put these solutions into practice but also the possibility of setting in motion and executing smoothly the requisite processes. The illusion is evident. Consistent planning is endangered by unforeseeable historical developments — and will be even more so in the future. Scenarios cannot decide the course of history. No matter how rational it may be, given the obvious vulnerability of creation, to resolve disputes peacefully, armed conflicts are no less likely to occur; indeed, the number of tensions likely to erupt into conflict will actually increase in the future as the scarcity of resources becomes more pressing and the rise in population growth more rapid. Current disputes about water resources and fishing quotas are only a foretaste of what is in store on an even greater scale. Moreover, modern technological society is an increasingly vulnerable target for terrorist attacks.

Solidarity, the struggle for the minimum human rights of all people and a commitment to reconciliation and peace thus form an integral part of the quest for sustainability. The Brundtland Report explicitly refers to this (part III,11); and



Principle 24 in the declaration of the Rio Earth Summit expresses the pious hope that, since "warfare is inherently destructive of sustainable development", states will "respect international law providing protection for the environment in times of armed conflict and cooperate in its further development, as necessary". But the Agenda 21 report makes no further mention of the issue.

### **How are risks to be assessed?**

By its very nature, human existence is vulnerable, endangered by illness, accidents and disasters. Modern scientific and technological developments have undoubtedly reduced natural risks but also given rise to new risks, some of them particularly difficult to overcome. The technological "second world" created by human beings makes us vulnerable to road, railway and air accidents, dams which burst, and poisonous substances which escape into the environment. Especially menacing among humanly-created risks are those arising from the use of nuclear energy. Apart from the persistent danger of a war conducted with nuclear weapons, nuclear power stations represent a constant threat. However carefully they are monitored, the risks of accidents or terrorist actions remain; and no satisfactory way to dispose of radioactive waste has yet been found, making the risk connected with nuclear energy unique, in that it affects a long series of human generations.

The risks associated with climate change are of still another kind. With growing certainty, scientists are predicting far-reaching changes in climate. But much remains open and uncertain. No one can yet predict exactly what the damage will be. Calculations remain highly problematic. On the other hand, it is evident that the threat involved in climate change constitutes a real risk, and that rapid action is necessary to minimize it. If appropriate measures are postponed, a situation could arise which can be mastered, if at all, only at the cost of immense suffering. In all probability, the first victims will not be the industrialized nations but the countries of the equatorial belt.

We can insure against certain risks. The basic notion behind insurance companies is to spread the cost of eventual accidents and catastrophes over a large population, so that at a particular time of need all those who are spared can come to the help of those affected by misfortune. But this system can benefit only those who are in a position to pay the necessary premiums. Whereas it was possible to cover a considerable part of the effects of the flooding of the Mississippi River in the US in 1992 by means of insurance, only governmental and international aid was available for the much more numerous victims of the almost simultaneous disaster in India. Moreover, the system can work only as long as the cost of disasters remains within the bounds of what can be paid for. Already it is becoming evident that insurance companies will be unable to bear the rising costs of catastrophes due to climate change. In future, these consequences will increasingly have to be covered by the community or, if this fails, by those affected themselves.<sup>3</sup>

How are we to assess these risks? What significance do they have for our behaviour today? While we know that risks can never be avoided entirely, where are the limits of the tolerable? Four considerations seem to me to be important.

1. The gravity of a risk can never be judged in isolation. Any assessment of risk must also include the context. The danger posed by a risk grows when a situation is already subject to risks. For example — as was illustrated in Rwanda in 1994, the risk of inter-ethnic conflict rises when the population grows and exceptional climatic

conditions lead to failed harvests. Moreover, the possibility that the further development of science, technology and production will involve risks hitherto unknown must always be taken into account.

2. Early action is generally less costly than removing the damage once it has occurred. Consequently, when the possible damage cannot be predicted or calculated, it is sensible to apply the precautionary principle — all the more so in the case of damage that cannot be put right afterwards.

3. The question of the possible or probable victims of a risk is decisive for the Christian conscience. It is one thing to accept a risk for oneself, quite another to run it for others. Most studies of the responsible treatment of risks overlook this aspect. Global risks like climate change affect humanity differently in different parts of the world. Above all, we must distinguish between the agents who are responsible for and cause the risks and those who have no power of decision in the matter. The agents of climate change today are the industrialized nations; in all probability the first victims will be island states and the low-lying coastal territories. Accordingly, from an ethical viewpoint, the vulnerability of these countries must be a decisive factor in assessing the risks of climate change.

Ronald Preston has argued that ecumenical social thought, especially in the WCC, has not paid sufficient attention to questions of risk. His own comments on this issue, however, seem to glide over anything that might shake one's confidence in contemporary society. For example, he complains about resorting to "worst-case scenarios", as though it were morally impermissible even to consider these. But can a risk be assessed at all without taking the worst possible case into account? Moreover, he does not raise the issue of the agents and victims of a risk. His strange assertion that there are no insights peculiar to Christianity in the matter of risk assessment can be explained only in terms of this omission.<sup>4</sup> Surely solidarity with the victims of risks is one of the essential Christian contributions to this debate.

A good example of how risks are treated comes from Michel Camdessus, director of the International Monetary Fund. Noting that globalization, like every important historical phenomenon, implies both chances and risks, he affirms hope in a united world, but does not overlook the dangers inherent in this development:

Those dangers, especially the social hazards, stand out and contribute to a kind of anxiety, a sort of new "great fear" of the end of the millennium. How should we assess this kind of mixture of fortunate and hazardous possibilities? For my part, when searching for inspiration to answer this question, I look to Blaise Pascal: "You have to make a wager!" My wager, then, is that here we have one of those signs of the times St Matthew speaks of (16:23) — a new chance offered to our world.<sup>5</sup>

The question is how we are to legitimize this wager. Who has the right to make it, and who will pay the bill if it goes wrong?

4. Measures to avoid risks are also clearly associated with costs and disadvantages. To obviate future damage the present generation may have to defer short-term interests. This can lead to social rigour and perhaps also to conflict. How far should present interests be taken into consideration, as opposed to future harm? The general answer is probably that measures serving sustainability in the broadest sense must be given fundamental priority. These days we often hear talk of "no-regret measures" — steps that will be advantageous even if the supposed risk proves to be unfounded. This

term is often misused to evade the necessity of far-reaching measures to protect creation. Basically, however, the argument must go the other way. "No-regret measures" are all those measures which ensure sustainability. The demands resulting from the danger of climate change reflect this. The more rapidly greenhouse gas emissions are reduced, the sooner we shall be able to overcome the hazards climate change brings with it.

The Rio declaration sets forth the following principle:

In order to protect the environment, the *precautionary principle* shall be applied by states according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irrevocable damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent degradation.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of this formulation too, the question is how far the principle is defined by the qualification "*cost-effective*".

### **Does creation have rights?**

To what extent must we ensure sustainability not only for humans but for creation as a whole? Are we to look at creation solely from the viewpoint of human needs, or is there such a thing as consideration of nature for its own sake?

The present debate on sustainability is largely restricted to the perspective of humanity. Animals, plants and the landscape are protected insofar as human interests are at stake. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration states that "human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." The argument of Section 15 of Agenda 21 on the variety of species is also oriented exclusively to human interests. It confirms that "the current decline in biodiversity is largely the result of human activity, and represents a serious threat to human development". We are invited to consider that "biological resources represent an inestimable capital resource". Against this background, we are called to "urgent and decisive action... to conserve and maintain genes, species and ecosystems, with a view to *sustainable development* and use of biological resources". Immediately, then, we are reminded of national sovereignty: "States have the sovereign right to exploit their own natural resources sustainably." This principle may be important to allow weaker states to protect themselves from exploitation, but it also means that overriding solutions become more difficult to implement.

To be sure, a movement to protect the natural world, at least selectively, from human intervention has grown up in response to the destructive impact of the industrial development of this century. But how far this should go is left wide open. Are we really prepared to protect the variety of species? How much space and raw materials are we to concede to the survival of certain animals and plants? Are we satisfied with a symbolic quantity of each species, so that it can be said that this or that particular species has not died out? Climate change also poses these questions. How far do we take into consideration its consequences for the animal kingdom? The basic question is what place there is for extra-human nature in the sustainability of the planet? What "rights" does it have? Is it constituted only to serve human beings and their needs? Or does it have a "right to life" for the sake of its own value? The measures required will be very different depending on the answer given to these questions.

The two UNCED conventions on climate change and bio-diversity are indissolubly connected and must be seen together. Protection of the variety of species demands a more rigorous interpretation of the convention on climate change.

### **Human moral forces for the protection of creation?**

The sustainability of human society depends ultimately on the availability of moral forces for change. The construction of a sustainable society represents an immense challenge. Will humanity be able to summon the insight and will to meet it? Will the human spirit grow with the ever more complex tasks contemporary society presents? Will it find ways to escape danger not just through new inventions and new social solutions but especially through a new degree of responsibility?

While most scenarios take for granted that these qualities will be available, we should not underestimate the obstacles found within human beings themselves. The transition to a sustainable society presumes a considerable degree of solidarity — precisely the value which is called into question by the entire project of modern society. For centuries, the image of human beings dominating nature has been promoted. Self-development was proposed as a central value. Only by consistent pursuit of one's own economic interests, it was said, could the happiness of all be attained. Responsibility for the community, concern for the weak and attention to nature have been systematically minimized. Certainly, new forces are developing in protest against the destructive aspects of contemporary society, but will they be sufficient to counter the dominant image effectively?

Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb have written of the "corrosive effect of individualistic self-interest on the containing moral context of the community":

However much driven by self-interest, the market still depends absolutely on a community that shares such values as honesty, freedom, initiative, thrift and other virtues whose authority will not long withstand the reduction to the level of personal tastes that is explicit in the positivistic, individualistic philosophy of value on which modern economic theory is based. If all value derives only from satisfaction of individual wants, then there is nothing left over on the basis of which self-interest, individualistic want-satisfaction, can be restrained. Depletion of moral capital may be more costly than depletion of physical capital... The market does not accumulate moral capital, but depletes it. Consequently, the market depends on the community to regenerate moral capital, just as it depends on the biosphere to regenerate natural capital.<sup>7</sup>

This point is especially significant because halting the increasing destruction of the environment demands action on a growing number of fronts. In a time of degradation, it is especially difficult to regenerate "moral resources".

### **Sustainability through increased efficiency?**

The demand for sustainability apparently represents a far greater challenge to humanity, especially in the industrialized nations, than usually supposed. A full picture of the dangers awaiting humanity makes it evident that the tasks confronting the present generation far exceed present-day analyses. Moreover, it is impossible to identify conclusively all the factors that will affect sustainability in the decades to come. The tasks will evolve with each step we take into the future. It is thus appropriate to talk of "moving targets" of sustainability.

How then are we to describe the measures to be taken? It is evident from the start that sustainability can be attained only at the cost of far-reaching adjustments. The inevitable reduction of claims on resources will bring with it more than one change in the contemporary way of life; and it will be simply impossible to carry on certain human activities. One of the churches' tasks is to express this insight straightforwardly and to promote preparedness for a new and simpler life-style.

The measures made necessary by the struggle against climate change are a good example of this. Scientific calculations leave no room for doubt that emissions of carbon dioxide must be drastically reduced if climate change is to be kept within tolerable limits. To reach the goal would mean at least a ninefold reduction for a country like the USA. Obviously, this calls for a whole new concept of energy and its use.

It is often said that sustainability can be achieved by increased efficiency. The present way of producing and using energy is notoriously wasteful of raw materials and inefficient. More refined technological means, more imaginative ways of building, more efficient planning and the like could not only yield the necessary reductions but also raise the quality of life. On this view, instead of talking about restrictions, the present generation should devote all its forces to setting in motion an "efficiency revolution".

Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins have made a spirited plea in this direction under the theme of "Factor Four" — twice the prosperity with half the use of nature. Their thesis is that the present use of resources can be reduced by a factor of four:

Politicians have always maintained that energy saving would mean fewer cars on the road and being colder in winter. But they have said nothing about efficiency, for efficiency makes our lives more pleasant, for instance, by using better vehicles and buildings that consume less money and resources. In order to evade the widespread error that a more environment-friendly form of behaviour would force us to impose restrictions on ourselves, this book largely dispenses with terms such as saving and non-consumption and uses instead terms such as "productive resources" and "efficient use of resources". New kinds of use of resources and improved technologies will offer either the same use with fewer resources or more use with the same consumption.<sup>8</sup>

Nobody would dispute that energy efficiency can bring considerable improvements. The contemporary style of industrial-technological society largely reflects a time when concern for nature had not yet penetrated people's consciousness. Thus there is no doubt that a systematic study of resource and energy use from this perspective is a pressing need. But that an "energy revolution" will follow from this is far from self-evident. However advantageous it would be, the inertia of society means that an unusual amount of imagination and effort would be required to advance in this direction.

Furthermore, it would be an illusion to think that such an "efficiency revolution" would allow the industrialized nations to maintain their life-style. No matter how much can be done by systematic planning, certain activities cannot be maintained even with increased efficiency. The current development of air travel, for example, is simply unsustainable! If all the factors of sustainability are really taken into account, restraint towards the resources of nature is the only way forward. But the main

question is how the resources saved by efficiency are to be applied. Will they serve the continuance of the present way of doing things and help to extend human dominion over nature? Will they extend the space of creation occupied by human beings, leading to more mobility and more built-up areas? Considerable technological advances in efficiency have in fact been made in the last few decades; yet the burden on the environment has increased. Will that be repeated with the revolution now proposed?

The "efficiency revolution" makes sense only if accompanied by a far-reaching alteration in human behaviour. While sustainability inevitably presupposes a more sensitive treatment of creation, the "efficiency" scenarios are rooted in the same technological attitude as the present crisis. They represent a new, more sophisticated attempt to defraud nature by means of the same "second world" of technology that turned nature into an object in the first place. But will this spirit of feasibility offer a way out? Will it be accompanied by the human qualities required to build a sustainable world? The "efficiency revolution" may help to gain the time needed for a rediscovery of and reorientation to a basic attitude of community with nature. But it is too bound up with the same project to yield the ultimate solution.

Von Weizsäcker and the Lovinses admit that the promises made at the beginning of their book are only conditional:

The 21st century does not have to be so depressing a prospect. If our vision of a "new horn of plenty" comes true, even the most intractable global problems of just distribution can be solved without the grave sacrifice of any part of the earth. *What computer simulations cannot take into account are wars and other conflicts or irrational behaviour under the cutthroat pressure of worldwide economic competition...* As long as our civilization neither understands nor overcomes the mechanism of the suppression of immaterial satisfaction by material growth, *we have no chance of winning the race between growing efficiency and the revolution of rising expectations and uninhibited spirals of growth.*<sup>9</sup>

Reducing the burden on the environment by efficiency is not in itself an authentic solution. Real sustainability is possible only on the basis of a new quality of human existence in creation as a whole.

### **The sustainability of the present economic system**

The ecological crisis demonstrates ever more clearly that sustainability compels us to respect certain limits in our use of nature. We have already spoken of scientific data regarding the limitation of emissions of carbon dioxide, but there are similar limits that must not be exceeded in every other area: the number of fish to be caught, the exploitation of certain raw materials, the use of forests, the ratio of cultivated to fallow land. The limits cannot be precisely delineated in every area. They may be displaced by new discoveries. Fundamentally, however, human economic activities must acknowledge the scope of the bio-system of which they themselves can never constitute more than a sub-system.

As an ecumenical colloquium in 1993 suggested:

There is a fundamental challenge to economists to find both theoretical and practical criteria to help make decisions about efficient allocation, just distribution and what may best be termed *sustainable scale*... What is needed is to create a limited set of boundary conditions, particularly with regard to the maximum use of resources and the maximum allowable emissions of such pollutants as carbon dioxide... The setting of ecological boundaries to the

consumption of certain irreplaceable resources, or the emission of certain pollutants, for example, in time must become accepted as normal and efficient standards and constraints, just as are the boundaries limiting the employment of human beings or the overloading of ships.<sup>10</sup>

How far is the present world economic system in a position to act in accordance with this fundamental insight? It is inescapably evident that economic activities are still directed to growth and expansion. The primary goal of business enterprise remains the maximized production of goods of all kinds. Inevitably, then, industry and trade tend to impose an increasing burden on nature. True, ecological measures are discussed and even implemented, "within the bounds of the possible", but since the extent of these measures is determined by the primary goal, ultimately they can produce no more than cosmetic changes. To do justice to the real demands of sustainability, the priority of the goals needs to be reversed.

The Brundtland Report and later the Rio Earth Summit considered the connection between sustainability and development to be self-evident. The very first page of *Our Common Future* offers the following statement of belief: "We can see that technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth." The report uses "development" as a synonym for the contemporary free-market system. But surely it is premature to make this assumption the basis for perceiving the implications of the crisis without examining unproven ideological postulates. In reality, it is quite clear that the conclusions we must draw from the need for sustainability call the present system into question in more than one respect. Sustainability is more than a mere corrective; it is impossible without far-reaching changes in the system.

Larry Rasmussen is correct in saying about Agenda 21 from Rio:

There is a serious tension between the means proposed to achieve sustainable development (the reform of trade, aid and finance of Chapter 2) and the goals necessary to achieve such development (combating poverty and changing consumption patterns outlined in Chapters 3 and 4). It is, in fact, likely that the means utterly frustrate the end. If that is so the survival ethics fails. Development as a concept remains anchored in the very strategies by which current economic growth was achieved, the kind of growth which is now the bane of ecological well-being. It is rooted in post-World War II economic expansion and continues within the framework of globalized capitalist economy.<sup>11</sup>

The tension is especially clear in statements like the following (from Agenda 21, para. 39): "International standards for environmental protection should be promoted gradually, taking into account the different situations and abilities of countries. Policies should address the root causes of environmental degradation, and should not unnecessarily restrict international trade." If this is how the criteria are tied together from the very start, there is every reason to suspect what kind of concern will be given priority.

It is significant that the WCC spoke in the 1970s not of "sustainable *development*" but of commitment to a "just, participatory and sustainable *society*". In other words, the criterion of community must be maintained above economic hopes and interests.

Two related examples make this tension more obvious. The first has to do with mobility. The measures required to protect the climate indicate unequivocally that the present degree of mobility is not sustainable. Yet the continuing expansion of

international trade inevitably demands that mobility should be extended even further. Not only will one country after another opt for private vehicles, thus wiping out any theoretical reduction of the burden on the environment from more efficient technologies, but also air transportation of people and goods will constantly increase in the name of international exchange — without consideration of its detrimental factors. Intercontinental tourism will be promoted by all possible means.

Second, production and consumption must occur on as small a scale as possible in order to bring about an effective reduction of the often irrational ways and distances now travelled by people and goods. This implies a positive revaluation of the significance of smaller regions — which is precisely the opposite of the direction in which development is now going. New technologies strengthen the impression that human life can and must be conducted only in a global context. The greater the production, the less it will be associated with specific places. More and more, it will be internationally controlled and transferred, according to criteria not of sustainability, protection of resources and just distribution but of growing production.

Even more important for the churches than such contradictions is the insight that pursuit of the present economic project threatens the quality of human community. The contribution of the local community to the shaping of life is sharply reduced. Decisions about the future are made in places over which there is no possible control “from below”. Local communities are faced again and again with *faits accomplis*. This limitation of their freedom of decision makes them the playthings of “global networks”.

The danger that this poses to the sustainability of society has not been adequately perceived; and it is one of the duties of the churches constantly to remind people of that. Precisely because of the present development towards increasingly large-scale projects, it is imperative to stand up for the rights and the greatest possible degree of self-determination of regional and local communities. The old principles of a “responsible society” and “subsidiarity” are now becoming relevant in a new and more urgent way. Only in small communities and groups can human beings be in a position to take effective responsibility for their own lives.

Daly and Cobb offer convincing arguments for this thesis:

Free traders, having freed themselves from the restraints at the national level and having moved into the cosmopolitan world, which is not a community, have effectively freed themselves of all community obligations. World community, at least at present, is an abstract vision... The goal of building up a community of communities, a community of nations at the world level, is one we share. But we are sure that it will not be achieved by sacrificing the real bonds of community at the national level.<sup>12</sup>

Is it possible to reform the system to build in the principle of sustainability? Or must we start over from entirely different presuppositions? Whatever answer we give to this question, it is clear that new directions will be found only as a result of a confrontation with the present system which is far more thoroughgoing than we normally assume.

Although such a critical confrontation has scarcely begun, there are signs of resistance in many parts of the world. For example, a growing number of movements in Europe are opposing, on behalf of their own regions, the general tendency towards globalization. Coalitions to protect regional interests are being formed, often across



national frontiers. As a rule, these movements arise from selfish interests, and many are unfortunately in the hands of nationalist or even right-wing groups. Yet the churches ought not to ignore their more profound significance. So far, the churches have no agreed alternative to offer. To equip themselves for this task is perhaps one of the most pressing demands in the present situation.

One of the disquieting aspects of the present situation is the limited influence of the insights and results of the 1992 Earth Summit. In the World Trade Organization, for example, the concept of sustainability plays almost no role whatever. Proposals for special clauses to integrate social and ecological responsibility firmly in the WTO texts have not yet led to tangible results. Moreover, the WTO excludes any dialogue with non-governmental organizations. Surely every possible resource should be called on to form as wide as possible a coalition of forces to oppose this bastion.

### **The role of science**

Scientists were the first to become aware of the dangers of climate change. The disquiet evoked by their warnings set in motion an international political process towards a binding international convention. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an international body of scientists, was commissioned to clarify the scientific issues posed, while governments entered into negotiations about a possible international agreement. Scientific consensus remains the conscience and power supporting the convention. Does this mean that scientific research also holds the key to the solutions?

In a speech at an early IPCC session British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made the statement that "the problems science created science will solve". This claim is questionable at the very least. However essential the contribution of the exact sciences to explaining the phenomenon of climate change, it is evident that the realization of a sustainable society demands something like a spiritual conversion. The nature of the insights supplied by scientific research reveals the limitations of science. To put sustainability into practice requires a type of wisdom which does not automatically arise from the spirit and methods of exact sciences. Because it is characteristic of scientific thinking to keep to results which are universally verifiable, scientists are generally reluctant to commit themselves to statements that depend on ethical principles. But how can we approach the question of sustainability without moral categories?

The Second Assessment Report of the IPCC illustrates this. It consists of three sections by three different working groups: the first seeking to give as precise as possible a scientific answer to the question of the likely evolution of the climate system; the second dealing with the impact of climate change on ecological systems, human health and different areas of social life; the third concerned with the strategies and measures to be adopted. The authors of the third part were confronted by the difficult question of criteria. To obtain a consensus, the details of the requisite measures had to be "scientifically unassailable", which meant that the criteria used could count on general approval. Because public interest is focused on economic considerations, the report argues almost exclusively in terms of assessing costs and benefits. Attention centres on "no regret measures", sometimes known as "measures worth doing anyway". Thus the information supplied by the report is almost exclusively quantitative. This approach may correspond to present-day "common sense",

but that is not to say that it is a truly scientific approach. From the point of view of ethics, the conclusions of this third working group are extremely dubious.

What does this imply for the attitude of the churches? They have to take the results of research seriously. They can only acknowledge what has emerged from the field of climatology: the persisting certainties and suspicions as well as the uncertainties. They have to make an act of trust. Their task is to consider the question further from their own points of view on the basis of the picture yielded by scientific discussion. What ethical conclusions are to be drawn in view of the dangers described by scientists?

Ineluctably, this very attempt will bring the churches into a confrontation with the prevailing narrow understanding of scientific method. The churches must summon the courage to introduce their own spiritual and moral views into the debate. They must unmask those points at which scientific discourse is actually not scientific at all but springs from ideological presuppositions. Above all, they must ensure that the debate on sustainability is extended to include a broader spectrum of convictions.

### **Overcoming the adaptation of theology to ideological axioms**

At the same time, theology must engage in a process of critical self-questioning of its own. As the threats to the future multiply, people often invoke the religious dimension, sometimes citing the warning of André Malraux that "the twenty-first century will either be religious or it won't be". But given the numerous religious groups and movements of recent times, the meaning of "religion" and "religious" needs to be carefully examined. Even the appeal to Christian tradition is far from self-evident. Not without reason the Christian religion is thought of in many circles as a cause of conflicts and a factor of violence against creation.

Among the reasons why the urgency of the ecological crisis has only slowly penetrated into the awareness of the churches is that they have adapted themselves too readily to the ways of thinking which support our present-day system and thus remain aligned with it to a considerable extent. The ecological crisis is more than just one more item on the agenda; confronting it effectively requires a process of rethinking that in many ways has yet to be carried out. Four aspects may serve as illustrations:

#### *1. What is the position of human beings before God and in relation to their fellow-creatures?*

Scripture speaks of human beings as made in God's image and thus having a special position among all other creatures before God. But humans also form part of creation and are summoned to live in community with their fellow-creatures. The balance between these two convictions was not preserved in the theology of recent centuries. As more exclusive attention was given to the development of humanity as opposed to the rest of creation, God's history in relation to humanity came to the fore in Christian theology. It was taken as almost self-evident that God had made the creation for the sake of human beings and that the work of redemption was focused on humanity. "For us and for our salvation" God even became human, as the Nicene Creed says. Moreover, under the onslaught of the natural sciences, theology withdrew increasingly into what was supposed to be its realm: the meaning of human existence. The creation as a whole, its coming to be and its goal, faded into the background as scarcely more than the stage on which the drama between God and humankind is played out. The increasingly exclusive interest of theology in the

history of human beings and of humanity — with a few notable exceptions like Albert Schweitzer and Leonard Ragaz (1868-1945), who was not only a driving force in the movement for Christian socialism but also issued perceptive warnings about human arrogance in dealings with nature — is certainly one of the main reasons for the extraordinary blindness of recent decades. Given this one-sided view of things, how could it have perceived the destructive process going on under its eyes?

A central topic of Christian theology in recent decades has been human freedom and liberation. Important as the thrust of this theological movement was from many viewpoints, it remained overall a victim of the general lack of concern for creation. The great exception is feminist theology, whose determinative experiences led it almost inevitably to question the conventional relationship between human beings and nature. The feminist movement has decisively emphasized and strengthened the ecological awareness both in society as a whole and in the churches.

## *2. How do we relate to the goods of creation?*

For centuries sobriety or asceticism in respect of consumption was taken as self-evident in Christian tradition, as an expression of both respect for God the Creator and of the freedom characteristic of communion with Christ. What human beings need for subsistence is God's gift and should be respected as such. Wasteful expenditure is ultimately an insult to God. In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly warns about the power of possessions, and it is part of the freedom of those who follow him that they do not allow themselves to be enslaved by the goods of creation. In no way does this justify the poverty of the exploited: the gifts of creation are for all, and it is part of the disciples' freedom to know how to share what is necessary for life. From the biblical viewpoint, freedom and solidarity are synonymous.

These scriptural recommendations have become a source of embarrassment for the churches. By the time of the Renaissance, and especially from the Enlightenment onwards, the spirit of the age began to move in the opposite direction. A first step was taken when the Reformation called asceticism into question because it contributed to the misunderstanding that God's grace could be earned by human works. But the decisive turning-point came later. From the beginning of the 17th century, it was more and more generally accepted that human beings are primarily called to increase their prosperity. The goal of human labour was to make the gifts of nature serviceable for humanity. A completely new understanding of the relationship of humanity to creation arose. Freedom from the power of possessions was no longer seen as a matter of distancing oneself from them but of owning and mastering them. The free human being was not the one who lives in community with the whole of creation but the one who is capable of dominating it.

Even the churches gradually adopted this point of view. Christian tradition was increasingly interpreted in this sense. Given these conditions, how could the churches have perceived the signs of disintegration and decay? Those who possess and control, or intend to do so, are usually deaf to the suffering of the oppressed.

In order to make a credible case for sustainability, the churches must free themselves from their accommodation with the now-conventional ideas of constantly increasing production and ever-growing consumption. Only on the basis of biblical witness will they succeed in showing that "more" does not actually mean "more" in all

circumstances. Only by concentrating on essentials is the freedom acquired to proffer solutions oriented to genuine sustainability.

3. *What is the relation between local roots and universal community?*

Although the churches have had to confront this question constantly, particularly in this present century, they are not yet prepared to respond appropriately to the challenge of sustainability. The ecumenical movement was primarily the common discovery of the universal dimension of the church. Experiences gained in the missionary movement led the churches to begin to express their sense of unity beyond national boundaries. International alliances or federations of churches came into being, first denominational associations, then the World Council of Churches. Many Christians experienced the ecumenical movement as the exodus of the churches from the narrow limits of national affiliations into a discovery of their true vocation as a universal community which could make a joint commitment to the reconciliation of the nations. The ecumenical task was primarily one of transcending boundaries. Breaking through into the broader world, dialogue between churches and encounter between cultures, reconciliation, solidarity in crisis situations — these became self-evident values.

At the same time, the ecumenical movement also experienced what seemed to be the reverse of this. To stand up for justice, it was often necessary to identify with the interests of a particular community. There was no other way for liberation fronts and newly born nations to defend themselves against external forces. In order to preserve a culture's integrity, its traditional space had to be preserved. Accordingly, the churches and the ecumenical movement had to campaign simultaneously for the viability of small yet definite communities. On the one hand, barriers have to be crossed; on the other hand, they must be maintained. The open doors that liberate forces of reconciliation can at the same time be entry-ways for repression. Small entities can lead to chauvinism and cause conflicts, but they can also serve as shields against imperialistic agendas.

The place where the church should be and act cannot be predetermined. It must always act on both fronts at the same time. The requirement of sustainability poses this issue in a new way. On the one hand, the cooperation of the churches is necessary to a wholly new degree; on the other hand, the viability of smaller entities is at stake as never before. Accordingly, the tension between the local and the universal dimensions of the church must be rethought and expressed in a new way.

4. *What kind of expectation of the future are we justified in maintaining?*

The deep-rooted conviction in Western thought that human history is characterized by an ever-ascending line has influenced Christian thinking. The emphatic formulation of the Second Vatican Council expresses a general expectation:

Individual and collective activity, that monumental effort of [humanity] through the centuries to improve the circumstances of the world, presents no problem to believers: considered in itself, it corresponds to the plan of God. [Human beings were] created in God's image and commanded to conquer the earth with all it contains and to rule the world in justice and holiness; to acknowledge God as maker of all things and relate [themselves] and the totality of creation to God, so that through the dominion of all things by [humanity] the name of God would be majestic in all the earth.<sup>13</sup>

From this point of view the churches' duty is to follow this movement critically but constructively. While obstacles and even setbacks were to be expected, Christians could be certain that God would lead humanity over all obstacles to the divinely intended historical fulfilment. Ultimately, to be sure, God's kingdom lay beyond any kind of fulfilment within human history. But there was a connection between the ongoing course of history and ultimate fulfilment in the kingdom of God, for the forces of the kingdom were already at work in the history of humankind.

Almost inevitably, these considerations lead to the assumption that human history will be "sustainable" in all circumstances. They do not take into account the possibility that the historical project as such to which humanity has been committed for decades could bear within itself the seeds of self-destruction. This made it difficult to discern the crisis at an early stage, for surely that would have called into question all the achievements we have celebrated as progress for so many years and forced us back to stages of development we had abandoned long ago.

The current hopes for the future, therefore, increasingly show themselves to be quite illusory. The ecological crisis makes us aware that self-destruction is a real possibility to be reckoned with. For theology to downplay the signs which point in this direction would be to turn itself into ideology. The only appropriate understanding of hope is one which integrates the signs of decay. The future is radically open. Hope which takes reality into account has to face the possibility of the failure and even the end of the human race. That does not mean that all hope must be abandoned. But real hope must rely on the conviction that the future is ultimately in God's hands — "for *yours* is the kingdom", as we say each time we recite the Lord's Prayer.

This does not mean surrendering to fatalism. The hope that trusts in God's kingdom is a source of freedom. Precisely because it liberates us from the compulsion of the ideologies of growth and progress, it enables us to accept the challenge and to strike out on paths that at first sight look like steps backwards. Those who make their behaviour dependent on growth and success will soon be discouraged. The expectation of God's kingdom of love makes us capable of love even irrespective of the course finally taken by history. From one moment to the next, we shall stand up for the preservation of God's gift of life. What is involved here is something like an Hippocratic oath uniting the churches and to which they must be committed in view of the phenomena of disintegration and decay. It is a matter of opposing the destruction of life with commitment and forethought.

The range of vision demanded by the ecological crisis, and climate change in particular, is exemplified in these words of Daly and Cobb:

Each passing year we see foreclosed happier possibilities for the future. Today we know the earth will get hotter in the coming decades and that many destructive consequences will follow. We know that the ozone layer will shrink and that much of the protection it has afforded us will be denied to our children and grandchildren. It is too late to avoid the greenhouse effect or the reduction of the ozone shield. The question now is how rapidly and how far the situation will deteriorate. But that question is not unimportant. Our actions now may determine whether the deterioration of the planetary environment can be slowed and stopped at a level that will allow much of the biosphere to survive... On a hotter planet, with lost deltas and shrunken coastlines, under a more dangerous sun, with less arable land, more people, fewer species of living things, a legacy of poisonous wastes, and much beauty

irrevocably lost, there will be the possibility that our children's children will learn at least to live as a community among communities.<sup>14</sup>

### **Churches as a factor of sustainability?**

How far can the churches be counted on in the struggle for the future? Undoubtedly much has changed in the last two decades. Theological work on creation themes is fully underway. A new understanding of the divine commission to humanity in Genesis 1:26 has become almost generally accepted in the churches. The number of ecclesiastical declarations on various aspects of preserving the creation grows from year to year. Some churches have even established posts for "environmental officers". To be sure, resistance to this complex of themes has not entirely disappeared; and theological assertions which block access to the problems are still going the rounds. Often, unequivocal pronouncements are prevented by a fear that the church's witness might be confused with that of "New Age" religious movements.

But the real difficulty is the gulf between theory and church practice. On the whole, the churches are not in the forefront of the ecological movement but reflect the picture of society in general. Many individual Christians — perhaps somewhat more than the average — try to live in an ecologically responsible manner and commit themselves to ecological projects. More and more parishes and church communities are ready to examine their activities from an ecological viewpoint. Yet as soon as more far-reaching consequences loom, the churches' commitment does not extend beyond that of the general public. Non-sustainable activities in the area of mobility, for example, are not called into question by the churches. Above all, criticism stops when it is a matter of social and political options with regard to sustainability.

The same is true of the World Council of Churches. There is, to be sure, no lack of statements about the ecological crisis. While the ecumenical insights of the mid-1970s into sustainability received only a muted response at first, during the course of the 1980s pronouncements and comments became increasingly clear and urgent. Since the Canberra assembly (1991), commitment to the "integrity of creation" has been a definite part of the WCC's public profile. In contrast to the indecisive and vague attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, the WCC can point to an unambiguous advance. Yet all these statements have influenced the actual procedures of the WCC to an only insignificant degree. The verbal commitment to sustainability has not evidently challenged the existence and life-style of the World Council of Churches itself.

A good illustration of this can be found in the considerations currently underway on the future of the WCC. The working draft "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches", sent to the churches and ecumenical partners for comments in November 1996, does not in any way touch on the complex of problems centred on sustainability.<sup>15</sup> The text indeed makes an attempt to describe the situation of the world fifty years after the founding of the WCC. But no specific analysis emerges. The text keeps to the usual antithesis found in ecclesiastical declarations: there have been changes for the better but unfortunately there have also been setbacks. But no mention is made of any particular dangers, of the degradation that has already occurred or of the need for self-limitation. To be sure, there is a straightforward assertion that in recent years the ecumenical movement has sought to unite the vision of John 17:21 (that all may be one... so that the world may believe)

with the vision of Ephesians 1:10 (God's plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ). But what this implies for our relation to God's creation is not discussed. The question of what form the witness of the churches should take in a time of new boundaries is not raised at all.

What implications does this have for the future? As I see it, questions arise in at least three areas:

1. How are the priorities of the World Council of Churches to be determined in order to ensure that they serve the witness of the churches? What does commitment to sustainability in all aspects of the WCC's activities — from the quest for unity to inter-church aid — really mean? How can the universal community of churches be shaped and kept alive without making intolerable demands on planetary resources? What new forms of community and communication between the churches are available? The realities of the WCC's current financial situation force certain restrictions. Might this prompt a new, sustainable form not only of the WCC itself but also of the community of churches?

2. A prerequisite for studying this possibility is an examination of the present activities of the WCC on the basis of the criterion of sustainability, looking into activities both in the Geneva centre and in the broader context of the ecumenical movement (travel, conferences and so forth).

3. More reflection is needed on how local initiatives and global actions can be effectively associated in the context of the World Council of Churches. How can organizations, movements and groups which seek to promote sustainability in one way or another in accordance with Christian criteria meet or join forces through the WCC? How can the WCC become a home and place of encounter for sustainability?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From the report of the 1974 consultation on "Science and Technology for Human Development", published in *Study Encounter*, no. 69, 1974, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Second Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 1995, para. 2.5.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Risiko Klima* ("Climate Risk"), Zurich, Schweizerische Rückversicherungsgesellschaft, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ronald Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics*, London, SCM, 1994, pp.161f.

<sup>5</sup> In a lecture at the Institut International Jacques Maritain, 30 Nov. 1995.

<sup>6</sup> *The Rio Declaration*, para. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989, pp.50f.

<sup>8</sup> E.U. von Weizsäcker, A. Lovins and L.H. Lovins, *Faktor Vier: Doppelter Wohlstand — halbierter Naturverbrauch*, Munich, 1995, pp.21f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.296, 327; on the question of limits, cf. also Donella and Dennis Meadows and Jorgen Randers, *Die neuen Grenzen*, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> *Sustainable Growth — A Contradiction in Terms? Economy, Ecology and Ethics after the Earth Summit*, Geneva, Visser 't Hooft Endowment Fund, 1993, pp.22f.

<sup>11</sup> In Noel J. Brown and Pierre Quiblier, eds, *Ethics and Agenda 21: Moral Implications of a Global Consensus*, New York, United Nations, 1994, pp.55f.

<sup>12</sup> Daly and Cobb, *op. cit.*, p.234.

<sup>13</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965), *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Daly and Cobb, *op. cit.*, pp.399f.

<sup>15</sup> For the full text see *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 49, no. 1, Jan. 1997, pp.13-33.