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ECONOMIC SUFFICIENCY AND JUSTICE

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Economic life in all its ramifications is of profound ethical significance. This is so because of scarcity which gives rise to conflict, because of interdependence which creates mutual obligations, because of the wide range of values sought through economic activity, and because of the significance for human life of the economic process itself.

Howard Bowen¹

Background on areas of study

One of the greatest scandals in the world is the growing gap between rich and poor, both at the international level and within individual countries. Indeed, this trend has been prevalent since time immemorial. Members of society have commonly been divided according to their wealth status as the “haves” and “have-nots”.

The concern for the poor is at the very heart of God. For it was Jesus himself who deeply empathised with the cause of the poor, when he said “for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...I needed clothes and you clothed me...Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:35-40).

In Scripture, economic concerns and acts of justice are woven intricately together. Central in this witness is the call to Jubilee. This call is firstly, an acknowledgement that the world created by God is abundant with enough for everyone, as long as mankind

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restrains his appetite and lives within limits. Situations of extreme economic insufficiency in pockets of society are not natural but the product of sin with man turning against the biblical mandate of caring for the poor. Hence, the second call to Jubilee is a call to redemption – to rectify serious deprivations in the socio-economic order and to set forth the mandate for spiritual renewal and faithfulness to the Lord.²

On all account, the question on economic sufficiency and justice is increasingly pertinent in our local context. This is driven by the need to listen to the cry of the oppressed, to be present in the pulse of the world by bearing and living the Good News. Increasingly, the urgency has heightened due to the shiftings in the local political and economic tectonic plates amidst greater uncertainties on the global economic and financial fronts.

Through discerning the ‘signs of the times’, the key in addressing questions on economic sufficiency lies in the threat to our global environment and its inner connection to the consumerist ethos of our economic system. Globally, economics has departed from the root meaning of the term *oikonomia*^b: the management of the household in a manner concerned for the *long-term* relationship of the household with the environment itself. The desired outcome of a healthy economy is one underpinned by good stewardship. Unfortunately, by advocating an unending pursuit of higher levels of economic growth, classical economics has functioned as if natural resources were unlimited and that it would be acceptable to adopt a ‘benign neglect’ approach on the impact of human work on the environment and other people.

In this reckless pursuit for wealth, the ‘good news for the poor’ has been widely translated to mean ‘bad news for the rich’. This underscores the zero-sum logic, a pervasive claim that goes against the very grain of the proclamation of Jubilee and runs far and deep into the structure and psyche of society.

In a sense, there is a role for collective responsibility as we consider this as the most pervasive spiritual problem of our time. Economic insufficiency is propagated, in part, by this sense of resource scarcity and thus, the need to grab as much as one can, as fast as one can, condemning thousands of millions of our sisters and brothers to extreme poverty and hundreds of millions to wealth. Both extremes are deprived of their fundamental humanity, albeit in different ways.

As Malaysia celebrated its Jubilee year in 2007 and as the nation continues to experience shifts in its political and economic scenes, this issue is timely to encourage and mobilise Malaysian Christians to continue to pursue nation-building agenda. This

^b *Oikonomia*: to be a manager of a household or a property, either one’s own or another’s (Luke 16:2); a spiritual trust, administration or commission (1 Cor 9:17; Eph 3:2; Col 1:25).

paper is written in this context in the hope that human conditions could be explored from the perspective of economic sufficiency and justice within Malaysia's cultural dynamics specificities.

Identifying issues and challenges

Issue 1: Sustained efforts to alleviate poverty have achieved positive results but challenges continue in regions and people groups that are still in poverty

Economic insufficiency is a dominant feature of the global economic and welfare landscape. The 1992 report of the United Nations Program of Development showed rising polarisation in national income. In 1960, the ratio of income between the richest countries 20% and the poorest 20% was 30:1. In 1990, it had grown to 60:1. However, the disparity between the rich and poor within each country was starker. The richest 20% of the world's population was receiving 150 times as much as the poorest 20%.

The issue of economic sufficiency received significant attention at the turn of the millennium. In 2000, all UN member states adopted the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which called for quantified, time-bound progress in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. Hitherto, progress has been encouraging. Based on the UN Millennium Development Report 2007, the proportion of the world's population living in extreme poverty has fallen from nearly a third to less than one fifth between 1990 and 2004. Nevertheless, the progress has not been as broad-based with mixed results across the regions.³

Since independence, Malaysia has transformed from a predominantly agricultural and rural economy to a dynamic and prosperous nation. Poverty eradication efforts were taken in tandem and resulted in the fall in absolute poverty levels from 29% in 1980 to less than 5% in 2007. By 2007, Malaysia had all but ended absolute poverty with non-Bumiputera poverty virtually eliminated.

Notwithstanding this laudable achievement, 93% of Malaysia's remaining poor are Bumiputera. 75% of the Bumiputera poor are concentrated in rural areas of five states – the indigenous communities in the country's two largest states, Sabah and Sarawak, and the rural populations of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Kedah. In 2004, 37% of total poor households lived in Sabah. Poverty in Malaysia is increasingly a regional problem.

Therefore, the needs of communities who experience economic insufficiency require sustained attention. They should be considered in the spirit of the principles of social justice and human rights, irrespective of spatial location or community group.

Issue 2: Concerns on rising inequality in Malaysia

Relative poverty, which measures the inequality between groups, showed a more perplexing development. Inequality is rising in Malaysia and is amongst the highest of all Asian countries. Income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient^c in Malaysia has declined steadily from the 1970s until 1990, and has remained roughly constant since. A recent research⁴ found that the share in income of the bottom 40% of the income bracket fell from 14% in 1999 to 13.5% in 2004, while that of the top 20% increased from 50.5% to 51.2% over the same period.

A key finding in this research is the changing dimension of poverty in Malaysia. While past poverty issues were classified mainly as a rural problem, the rapid urbanisation efforts and prevalent rural-urban migration have exacerbated the incidence of urban poverty. Nonetheless, the study also showed that inequality in Malaysia is due mainly to variations in income within rural and urban households and less due to urban-rural differences in income. The states with the highest inequalities are Sabah, Terengganu, Kuala Lumpur and Labuan.

Meanwhile, intra-ethnic inequality is the worst among the Bumiputera, followed by the Indians and the Chinese. Richard Leete, the UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, reports that although household incomes have risen markedly for all communities since 1957, the disparities in per capita income between Bumiputera and Chinese have remained at the 1970 level.⁵

Issue 3: Spill over effects of poverty on other socio-economic issues, e.g. crime and violence⁶

Like other socio-economic issues, the effects of poverty are rarely confined to the maligned households or individuals alone. We need to be cognizant that when groups are sidelined in the economic development process, serious social tensions would inevitably result. Poverty leads to economic vulnerability, which in turn could cause crime, riots and social disruptions. These could derail the development process.

The damaging bi-directional linkages between crime and development could generate a vicious circle. From the perspective of nation-building, this serves as helpful warning. Depending on a country's response to poverty, the impact could vary between a state characterised by persistently low or negative growth rates with high or rising crime levels, and one on strong path of social and economic development.

^c Zero implies perfect equality and one, perfect inequality.

Issue 4: Challenge of poverty on the sanctity of family institutions

The family institution is one of the most important social spaces for the reproduction of poverty. A typical poverty-stricken family would display traits such as the absence of elders and a corollary breakdown of the social support systems. At worst, poverty propagates the growth of dysfunctional families resulting in poor parental supervision and domestic violence. Dysfunctional families could then breed children with poor academic achievements and high drop-out rates. As economic vulnerability and family breakdowns are mutually reinforcing, the cost of neglecting the poor could be very severe.

Within households, poverty experience in childhood and adulthood would likely deepen with advancing age. Out of Malaysia's 1.5 million older persons, 14% live in poverty, and predominantly women.⁷ The older poor are vulnerable to inadequate living conditions, limited access to healthcare and social protection and intergenerational abuse.

Poor saving habits also exacerbate poverty among the elderly. According to the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) 2005 annual report, 90% of workers have less than RM100,000 contributed to the EPF savings. This amount is arguably insufficient to see them through 20 years upon retirement. For households close to the poverty line, this figure is likely to be significantly lower.

Issue 5: Implications of migration and the rapid pursuit of development on economic sufficiency

For developmental purposes, the tight domestic labour market necessitated the inflow of foreign workers into Malaysia. Since the 1980s, the inflow of migrant workers from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Nepal and Myanmar has transformed Malaysia's demographic landscape. The size of registered immigrant workers is very large (1.8 million in 2006).

The influx of foreign workers has led to the rise in urban poor. Many are unskilled and become victims of exploitations. While their employers are obliged to provide housing facilities for the workers, the standard of the living quarters have typically been abysmal. This worsened their case of economic deprivation.

In addition, there is a significant rise in the plights of refugees seeking political asylum in our country. The asylum seekers are facing increasing threats to their security, with the looming detentions and raids. The findings from a recent study by the International Federation of Human Rights and SUARAM are especially sobering. It highlights the deplorable conditions of the detention facilities and the poor treatment of refugees.

Furthermore, the report also warns against the heightened risks that children face in detention in the form of human traffickers and other criminal groups.

Malaysian immigration law does not provide special protection or procedures for asylum seekers, refugees or trafficked persons nor does it make special provisions for children or women, including pregnant women. As a result, the status of 'refugee' does not exist in Malaysian law and, at least formally, the fact that a person has the recognition of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not attract any special rights in Malaysian law.⁸

Issue 6: Impact of macroeconomic volatilities on vulnerable sub-groups

Adverse short-run macroeconomic shocks had a greater impact on income inequality in Malaysia than its longer-run positive growth performance. Indeed, past successes in poverty eradication is not necessarily an accurate predictor for future successes. In an increasingly volatile and uncertain world, the poor are vulnerable to the impact of financial and economic crisis. Economic self-sufficiency among the poor is still elusive as the poor are still dependent on overt government interventions for survival. For example, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/98 was said to have reversed some of Malaysia's achievements in raising the quality of life of the population.

Macroeconomic swings also interact with the economic livelihood of the poor and marginalised to affect its social capital. This includes the norms, trust, and reciprocity networks that facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation in a community. A World Bank⁹ study shows that social capital is most developed in urban squatter communities that are established through negotiations with political parties and governments.

During normal times, social capital is built and strengthened when households develop reciprocal arrangements to share food, water, cooking, and child care. Economic insufficiency, while still prevalent, could be alleviated by the communal sharing of resources. But these links are strained during crisis periods. Both women and children would need to spend more time at work and therefore have less time to contribute to community activities. During a protracted crisis, crime and violence could escalate to further deplete the community's trust bank.

In this regard, it would be vital for policies to alleviate economic insufficiency to consider the impact of economic crisis on both the tangible livelihood of the poor as well as the intangible social capital. The challenge is to integrate both human and social capital in a holistic approach in improving the poor's quality of life and to preserve social capital in withstanding the backlash of a crisis.

Biblical viewpoints, academic and theological input on the role of the local church

The issues and challenges that we face in the light of the prevailing economic structure and conditions in our country are not, by no means, intractable. The resurgent in awareness amongst evangelical Protestantism in embracing the *missio dei*¹⁰ is an encouraging sign.

Concerns about poverty and justice run deep in Scripture. Biblical examples include Yahweh's scathing criticism of unjust oppression of the poor (e.g. Amos 2:6, 4:1; Isa 3:15; Jer 2:34; etc), the failure to uphold the rights of the defenceless (Isa 1:23) and the withholding of wages (Jer 22:13). The Psalms bear many occasions of the cries of the poor in appeal to God for justice. The law also provides protection for the poor by legislative enactment, e.g. the poor are allowed to glean (Lev 19:9-10), limits are set on loans and pledges (Exo 22:25-26) and the poor are to be treated equally before the law (Lev 19:15). This same theme echoes in the New Testament with the early Christians considered caring for the poorer communities an integral element of their Christian duty (Gal 2:10; Rom 15:26).¹¹

Given that economic sufficiency for all man is a desired outcome, how then, should justice be practiced for the church to fully embody the good news to the poor? Historically, the concept of justice has revolved around several closely related dimensions: moral righteousness, equity of treatment and reciprocity of action. Both Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics* and Thomas Aquinas in *Summae*, for example, view general justice as an important eternal quality that the individual should strive to uphold. Particular justice is expressed in the following three forms:¹²

- a) *Commutative justice* defines relationships among a group's members. It seeks equality based on fair standards for reciprocity and rejects unnecessary encroachment on others' rights.
- b) *Restorative justice* seeks to reconcile conflicted parties in a way that enables them to find common ground to heal the broken relationship.
- c) *Distributive justice* orders the good of the community in a way that enables the most seriously injured to have access to their basic needs.¹³

In all these three aspects, there are clear resonances in Scripture reading. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is identified by the name 'Justice' (Jer 23:6). Yahweh fully embodies a just nature and justice characterises His activities. Justice comes from the Hebrew words *tsedaqah/tsedeq* or *tsadaq*. The root meaning of *tsedaqah* is firm, steel-like and implies conformity with a norm, as opposed to evil, *rasha*, to be loose or slack, to ignore

or forget. Meanwhile, *mishpat* connotes justice-in-action. Justice (*mishpat*) comes from the verb *to judge*, and implies righteousness-in-action. C. J. H. Wright describes the link between *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* as follows: “*Mishpat* is what needs to be done in a given situation if people are to be restored to conformity with *tsedeq/tsedaqah*.”

The Old Testament describes one’s knowledge of Yahweh to be in tandem with one’s pursuit of justice (Jer 22:13-16). Compared with the secular concept of justice (described in terms of the right to receive what is due a person), biblical justice is inherently a relational concept. One can only be in a truly right relationship with God if he lives out a righteous and just relationship with his neighbours, and especially with the marginalised. It would be accurate to say that it is *impossible* to live out the Great Commission without first living out the Great Commandment. Similarly, it would be a distortion to say that one can practise the Great Commandment without at the same time, living out the Great Commission.

Furthermore, the biblical concept of the Jubilee Year describes a concern for those who have none or weak built-in supports such as the poor, slaves and aliens. In all four occasions when the word ‘poor’ appear in Leviticus 25 (vv 25, 35, 39 and 47), they relate to redemption and reconciliation. The outworking of biblical justice is reflected by the full restoration of the identity of a person to who he is created to be, as well as his relationship with his community.

This Jubilee theme is also expounded by Jesus’ in His inaugural sermon. He directly links the proclamation of liberation of the poor and marginalised with His own mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19).

The spectrum of activities outlined in Jesus’ call reveals the heart of God in liberating His people. The crucial spiritual element of the role of the Spirit of the Lord implies that liberation is fundamentally a spiritual affair. Social transformation expressed by poverty alleviation and human rights restoration requires spiritual transformation. But acts of justice cannot be ‘spiritualised’ into merely a pietistic matter. A narrow and incomplete understanding of salvation is one that limits the power of the good news to our private sphere.

Firstly, the church should continue to provide a voice in the form of a sustained and informed critique of the dominant socioeconomic system. We need to proclaim that the trends of economic bondage and oppression are not the result of inevitable and

unpreventable processes. A key task is to demystify the supposed independence of the economic realm and to encourage the church to see that the economy is not governed by independent laws which are untouchable or unchangeable. While other voices such as the NGOs do argue a similar case, the church cannot afford to be silent, lest it is considered disinterested, at best, or irrelevant, at worst, with respect to issues related to nation-building. Implicit in this proclamation is the belief that gospel changes not just people, but also the oppressive structures.

On this point, Newbigin¹⁴ challenges the church to go beyond formal pronouncement *per se*, but to nourish and sustain believers to act responsibly in the course of their secular duties as citizens. While the church should and must remind and warn those in authority to act justly, such pronouncements will lack authority if they are not reflected in the daily activities of believers in their secular involvements.

Secondly, the message of the good news proclaimed by the church should reflect the *imago dei*, i.e. man created in the image of God. This thrust affirms that every human being has a right to live a full, dignified life in society, and every society has a duty to enable each person to do so. The basic requirements for a man to live include material items, i.e. food and shelter, as well as education, a safe environment, participation in household and community life and in society's decision-making processes. In that regard, it is the duty of every society to enable and empower their members to seek the fullness of life.

Crucially, however, the fulfilment of human needs is not the final purpose of the creation of the human person. An inexorable quest for material things can degenerate into the idolatry of consumerism and lead to the direct opposite of the intended outcome, i.e. one of insufficiency and discontentment. Creation and stewardship are ontological expressions of being in the image of God. Viewing the poor only in terms of making sure they have enough to consume would dehumanise them. We are all created for stewardship and that means having access to the minimal resources needed to function as stewards and a societal environment that allows everyone, including the poor to succeed.

Thirdly, the *missio Dei* is fundamentally motivated by the redemptive and reconciliatory call of the Jubilee. God's work of reconciliation is centred in a specific historical event – the Cross of Jesus Christ. With the Cross, the whole person is being redeemed. This debunks the false belief that the church's role is confined to meeting spiritual needs, leaving social agencies to meet material needs. As agents of reconciliations (2 Cor 5) we take a broader view of the church's role: one of provision of felt needs as well as healing personal and relational wounds.

Fourthly, the ultimate distinctive that children of God can bring to a world stricken by insufficiency is not solely acts of justice, but love. Even in a society that achieves absolute egalitarianism with no lack in economic well-being to anyone, economic systems and structures cannot provide the very thing that a person fundamentally needs, which is unconditional love. Acts of justice and care for the poor and marginalised ought to have love at its core, lest we are misled by the ‘sufficiency’ of materialism.

The motivation for the church in provision is love. The item of provision is also love. Love goes beyond ordinary moral obligations. The church must not view acts of justice and love in addressing the needs of the poor as additional ‘activities’ in its calendar of events, relegating it to being merely a duty. The risk in so doing is that such ‘welfare activity’ could equally well be left to others, arguably more competent and better organised entities. Rather, acts of justice and love form the very core of the church’ nature, without which, she is both cruel and irrelevant, ceasing to partake in the incarnated Christ.

Strategies for ‘Transform Nation/World’ through the local church

The most critical dimension of this ‘Transform Nation/World’ forum is no doubt the question of commitment and action. Without commitment there will be no action, and without action there probably implies that no real commitment or understanding are actually in place. As a holistic package, this proposal for strategies for commitment and action would involve a three-fold approach: personal, ecclesial and social transformation.

Personal Transformation

Fundamentally, personal transformation is the outworking of a process of prayer, undergirded by a profound respect for the Bible. In this respect, Gary A. Haugen¹⁵ proposes a two-pronged strategy, i.e. cultivating a capacity for compassionate permanence and preparing our minds for action.

- a) Develop a courageous and generous capacity to remember the needs of an unjust world even when they are out of our immediate sight. “All they asked was that we should continue to remember poor, the very thing, I (Paul) was eager to do” (Gal 2:10). Maturing children of God would do well to heed the word in ‘remembering’, precisely because it is not our first and natural inclination.
- b) Preparations for action began with transformation of our minds through His Word (Matt 26:69-75; 1 Pet 1:13). On a personal basis, it helps to limit our own

consumption and expectations, so that others could have enough. As far as possible, each person could support a cause or a person or a family who is living in poverty, by the active giving of funds.

Ecclesial Transformation

The local church plays a key role in sustaining the processes of personal transformation and to promote processes of social transformation. It was said that Jesus did not write a book but formed a community. This community exists in Him and for Him. In the words of Newbigin, the church is the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'. The distinctive of the Christian community is evident in its service as a hinge between faith convictions and economic policies. Through engaging in acts of justice, the local church moves from being privileged ghettos to servant communities.

In the context of the Malaysian church, an ecclesial transformation¹⁶ could take the following expressions:

- a) **Being a community of compassion** by not living for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighbourhood. A holistic two-fold understanding of the *ekklesia* in the New Testament involves: one, it being 'the Church of God', and two, it being the church of a place. A helpful emphasis would be on the 'local' church, whereby the church embraces her call to be the church at the place where it lives. When the identity of the local church in the neighbourhood is not associated with her twin-fold mission of good news expressed in good works, society would not see the relationship between social justice efforts with the gospel. Inevitably, in the eyes of the world, faith and works have decoupled. Strategies in this area include:
 - To increase the frequency of gatherings in our local church to process the pain of the economically deprived in our land, through prayer and cries to the Lord;
 - To explicitly place concerns of the poor and marginalised at the forefront of our church's mission;
 - To create learning experience of the needs of the community within the local church through prayer, bible studies, experience-sharing sessions and discussion groups;
 - To increase the presence of our local church through more active involvement in the concerns of our neighbourhood; and

- To increase participation of our local church with NGOs, the government and other para-church organisations in efforts to help the poor and marginalised, beyond the giving of financial support.
- b) **Being a community of truth** by constantly remembering and speaking the actual state of human nature and destiny and the potential roadblocks that could derail us from the right path. Particularly, we must remind the congregation of the great power of contemporary media in shaping our thoughts and imagination. If need be, a healthy scepticism to the scourge of materialism and consumerism could be cultivated to remind ourselves that ‘possessing things’ in itself is no panacea. Strategies in this area include:
- To critically assess our church’s lifestyle and policies that bear any hint of materialism and then repent and turn away from them;
 - To break up any implicit structure and culture in our church that could potentially be showing favouritism for the wealthy, while alienating the poor;
 - To limit our in-house expenditures to essentials and steward the rest wisely for the benefit of those in need; and
 - To organise media breakfast to provide a platform for the churches in Malaysia to speak up on issues concerning economic justice.
- c) **Being a community prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world**, by being a place where members are trained, supported and nourished to be fully empowered in their daily businesses. As a result, the individuals’ lives help to validate the proclamation of the good news to the poor. Seeking justice is not confined to the domain of the professionals, missionaries, those who are passionate or the church leaders alone. We need to see that this task of bringing truth and power to bear on behalf of those who are oppressed requires the full participation of the diverse gifts of the body. Strategies in this area include:
- To teach our congregation on the holistic understanding of the Kingdom’s message and our collective role in fulfilling our vocation as a royal priesthood;
 - To reorientate the present church-based ministerial trainings toward missionary calling related to acts of justice for those outside the walls of the church; and
 - To encourage young people in our churches to answer their vocations (especially those in health care services, education and the legal profession)

through working in towns or areas in our country that have the greatest needs.

- d) **Being a community of mutual responsibility** by denouncing individualism which denies the reality that true humanity is only possible in relationships of faithfulness and joint responsibility to one another. The local church stands in a wider community of the neighbourhood, the nation and also the global community. Strategies in this area include:
- To encourage the building of network with other churches to leverage on both resources and expertise in common areas of concern, e.g. create a web community that will enable Malaysian churches to form self-directed communities to collaborate in the sharing and practice of meaningful actions;
 - To register Malaysia as a participating country in the Micah Challenge¹⁷ national campaign;
 - To actively engage our local councils, assemblymen or Members of Parliament by being the bridge that raises the concerns of economic deprivation to the policy makers. This could be done through consultative meetings, or other creative community undertakings such as community weekends; and
 - To involve in partnerships with grass roots organisations (representing small farmers, women's groups and civil society organisations). These small organisations represent the often unheard voices of their members
- e) **Being a community of hope** by declaring that all is not lost to those who have less or none at all. The battle of oppression stands or falls on the battlefield of hope. The most precious gift we can bring to those who are economically deprived is the real hope that they can have in our Lord Jesus. Hope is not built solely on receiving handouts and having one's material needs met. Material gifts may be sufficient for the present but they do not heal the broken-hearted. A family maligned by economic deprivation would propagate insecurities and would be held captive in a spiral of violence. In that sense, the curses of one generation are brought down to following generations, leaving the community in a vicious cycle of both economic and spiritual deprivations.

In contrast, hope points to a better way and goes beyond wishful thinking. The hope we have in Christ is about the certainty of God's love for us; the assurance of forgiveness; the promise of life beyond this life. Hope is built when we affirm the value of the other persons in light of their abilities to give and receive. Strategies in this area include:

- To inspire hope by modelling positive family relationships and act as agents of reconciliation in communities that are broken by distrusts and violence; and
- To acknowledge that the economically deprived are not necessarily spiritually deprived. Everyone has some capacity to give. For a church that has been involved in meeting the needs of the poor and marginalised, it would be redeeming to allow the community to give and serve other communities.

Social Transformation

With the support of personal and ecclesia transformation, we are ready to approach social transformation as the ultimate goal of the Kingdom's message. To be effective, social transformation strategies would need to bear in mind the poverty and inequality concerns in Malaysia as highlighted in the above section 'identifying issues and challenges'.

Firstly, the paradigm for the church's nation-building agenda needs to be race-blind. Statistically, the Bumiputeras are the most maligned group in Malaysia, and would need to be included in the church's acts of justice for the economically deprived. Secondly, strategic policies would need to consider our church's locality and identify the group of people who are most vulnerable to economic deprivation and changes in government policies (e.g. fuel price hikes), specifically the single mothers and the elderly.

Strategic policies in this area would cover three key areas: employment, education, and social care. These strategies for social transformation are intended to be indicative and not definitive, as we are aware that ideas and proposals to help the economically deprived are limited only by our imaginations:

a) Employment

- To focus on church planting efforts in economically neglected areas, in the states which are identified to have the highest incidences of poverty and inequality (e.g. Sabah, Terengganu, etc.). These new churches or the existing local churches would then have the ability and access to voice the needs of the communities to the local authorities;
- To identify communities of people from the above 'poor' states who have moved to seek a better life in urban areas, and to ensure that they are suitably employed with adequate living amenities;

- To set-up micro-financing facility, funded by the church to empower the poor economically. With a self-sustaining regime, this could reduce the poor's vulnerability to short-term macroeconomic shocks; and
- To organise and operate job referral services and mentoring support for working adults who grew up in welfare homes or released from prison

b) Education

- To provide financial education services such as understanding the sources of money and responsibilities of stewardship;
- To set up a pool of funds dedicated to subsidising student loans and grants for individuals from economically deprived households;
- To provide tutoring and job-skill trainings for the underprivileged children and youths; and
- To provide holistic education involving life-changing values to inspire the young and to deter them from vices.

c) Social Care

- To set up community service centres (e.g. free health care, shelter and legal counsel) in the city slums;
- To operate mobile medical clinics in low-income neighbourhoods; and
- To organise donation and maintenance of used cars for the poor families.

Conclusion

There are still 325,000 poor households in Malaysia. What would it mean for Malaysian Christians to take a more deliberate and concerted step to act on behalf of our sisters and brothers who suffer under economic deprivation? More urgently, what is the cost of not acting?

An agenda for nation transformation needs not be an annual project alone. It is not even a five-year project. The economic woe that cuts through the artery of every political, economic and even religious paradigm would likely persist throughout and beyond our lifetime. Nonetheless, as economists, politicians, philosophers, ethicists and theologians continue to contemplate on the intricacies of causes and effects of poverty, we as disciples of Christ could do well to meditate on Jesus' answer to John's question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we *expect* someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk,

those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the *good news is preached to the poor*” (Matt 11:5, *emphasis mine*)

Many will continue to *expect* solutions from governments, organisations, ideologies and new heroes. But it is the church that is His chosen platform to be His agent of transformation. Christian communities that show solidarity with the poor and plead the case of the marginalised before the protagonist of injustice would themselves experience the power and presence of the risen Christ. It is an experience that will take a lifetime.

In that sense, the various churches in Malaysia are undoubtedly at different points on this journey towards compassion for the poor and marginalised. Hence the answer to the question of “where do we go from here?” is to some extent, a personal one. But it is not a private choice as Christians can ill-afford to resort to apathy or benign neglect. We must wake up to the reality that it is in the partaking in the act of transformation that we, His Church, will be transformed.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in J. E. Stapleford, *Bulls, Bears and Golden Calves – Applying Christian Ethics in Economics* (InterVarsity Press, 2002).

² R. and G. Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Paulines Publishing House, 2000).

³ The number of extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa has levelled off, and the poverty rate has declined by nearly six percentage points since 2000. Nevertheless, the region is not on track to reach the Goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015 (*UN Millennium Development Report 2007*, p. 4).

⁴ United Nations Development Programme Malaysia, *Malaysia: Measuring And Monitoring Poverty and Inequality* (UNDP Malaysia, 2007).

⁵ Richard Leete, *Ending Poverty and Rising Inequality in Malaysia: Trends over the Past 50 Years* (UNDP, 2007).

⁶ A. S. Sidhu, *The Rise of Crime in Malaysia: An academic and statistical analysis*, Journal of the Kuala Lumpur Royal Malaysia Police College, No. 4 (2005).

⁷ Richard Leete, *Aging, Women and Poverty* (UNDP, 2005).

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⁸ International Federation of Human Rights (SUARAM), “*Undocumented migrants and refugees in Malaysia: Raids, Detention and Discrimination*” (March 2008).

⁹ Cited in International Monetary Fund, *Finance and Development* (December 1996).

¹⁰ In 1934, Karl Hartenstein, a German missiologist, coined the phrase “*missio Dei*”. He said “When kept in the context of the Scriptures, *missio Dei* correctly emphasises that God is the initiator of His mission to redeem through the Church a special people for Himself from all of the peoples of the world. He sent His Son for this purpose and He sends the Church into the world with the message of the gospel for the same purpose.”

¹¹ References taken from *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1986).

¹² *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

¹³ S. Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2004). Fleischacker outlines the distinction between the modern and Aristotelian understanding of distributive justice. The Aristotelian approach refers to the distribution in political offices and income, but equality is understood to mean reward relative to merit. According to Felischacker, “merit” implies that a person either inherently possesses or participates in certain meritorious actions. Distribution a thing to all people regardless of these meritorious trait, contradict the prevailing premodern moral and political thinkers who considered the poor as a class of people who deserved nothing.

¹⁴ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989)

¹⁵ Gary A. Haugen, *Good News about Injustice* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).

¹⁶ This framework is borrowed from Chapter 18 “The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel”, Newbigin, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Micah Challenge is a global campaign to mobilise Christians against poverty. The campaign aims to deepen Christian engagement with impoverished and marginalised communities, and to influence leaders of rich and poor nations to fulfil their promise to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Micah Challenge was launched globally on October 15, 2004 at the United Nations in New York. The Micah Network brings together more than 295 Christian organisations providing relief, development and justice ministries throughout the world.

<http://www.micahchallenge.org/>