

Commitment to a Simple Lifestyle

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The CEEC and the Church of the Southern Cross endorse and subscribe to this document as the will of God for the proper custodianship of his Creation.

For four days we have been together, 85 Christians from 27 countries, to consider the resolve expressed in the Lausanne Covenant (1974) to "develop a simple lifestyle." We have tried to listen to the voice of God, through the pages of the Bible, through the cries of the hungry poor, and through each other. And we believe that God has spoken to us.

We thank God for his great salvation through Jesus Christ, for his revelation in Scripture which is a light for our path, and for the Holy Spirit's power to make us witnesses and servants in the world.

We are disturbed by the injustices of the world, concerned for its victims, and moved to repentance for our complicity in it. We have also been stirred to fresh resolves, which we express in this Commitment.

I. Creation

We worship God as the Creator of all things, and we celebrate the goodness of his creation. In his generosity he has given us everything to enjoy, and we receive it from his hands with humble thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4,6,17). God's creation is marked by rich abundance and diversity, and he intends its resources to be husbanded and shared for the benefit of all. We therefore denounce environmental destruction, wastefulness and hoarding. We deplore the misery of the poor who suffer as a result of these evils. We also disagree with the drabness of the ascetic. For all these deny the Creator's goodness and reflect the tragedy of the fall. We recognize our own involvement in them, and we repent.

2. Stewardship

When God made man, male and female, in his own image, he gave them dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). He made them stewards of its resources, and they became responsible to him as Creator, to the earth which they were to develop, and to their fellow human beings with whom they were to share its riches. So fundamental are these truths that authentic human fulfilment depends on a right relationship to God, neighbour, and the earth with all its resources. People's humanity is diminished if they have no just share in those resources. By unfaithful Stewardship, in which we fail to conserve the earth's finite resources, to develop them fully, or to distribute them justly, we both disobey God

and alienate people from his purpose for them. We are determined, therefore, to honour God as the owner of all things, to remember that we are stewards and not proprietors of any land or property that we may have, to use them in the service of others, and to seek justice for the poor who are exploited and powerless to defend themselves. We look forward to "the restoration of all things" at Christ's return (Acts 3:21). At that time our full humanness will be restored; so we must promote human dignity today.

3. Poverty and Wealth

We affirm that involuntary poverty is an offence against the goodness of God. It is related in the Bible to powerlessness, for the poor cannot protect themselves. God's call to rulers is to use their power to defend the poor, not to exploit them. The church must stand with God and the poor against injustice, suffer with them, and call on rulers to fulfil their God-appointed role. We have struggled to open our minds and hearts to the uncomfortable words of Jesus about wealth. "Beware of covetousness" he said, and "a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). We have listened to his warnings about the danger of riches. For wealth brings worry, vanity, and false security, the oppression of the weak, and indifference to the sufferings of the needy. So it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:23) and the greedy will be excluded from it. The kingdom is a free gift offered to all, but it is especially good news for the poor because they benefit most from the changes it brings. We believe that Jesus still calls some people (perhaps even us) to follow him in a lifestyle of total, voluntary poverty. He calls all his followers to an inner freedom from the seduction of riches ("for it is impossible to serve God and money") and to sacrificial generosity ("to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share" 1 Tim. 6:18). Indeed, the motivation and model for Christian generosity are nothing less than the example of Jesus Christ himself, who, though rich, became poor that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). It was a costly, purposeful self-sacrifice; we mean to seek his grace to follow him. We resolve to get to know poor and oppressed people, to learn issues of injustice from them, to seek to relieve their suffering, and to include them regularly in our prayers.

4. The New Community

We rejoice that the church is the new community of the new age, whose members enjoy a new lifestyle. The earliest Christian church, constituted in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, was characterized by a quality of fellowship unknown before. Those Spirit-filled believers loved one another to such an extent that they sold and shared their possessions. Although their selling and giving were voluntary, and some private property was retained (Acts 5:4), it was made subservient to the needs of the community. "None of them said that anything he had was his own" (Acts 4:32). That is, they were free from the selfish assertion of proprietary rights. And as a result of their transformed economic relationships, "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). This principle of generous and sacrificial sharing, expressed in holding ourselves and our goods available for people in need is an indispensable characteristic of every Spirit-filled church. So those of us who are affluent in any part of the world are determined to do more to relieve the needs of less privileged believers. Otherwise, we shall be like those rich Christians in Corinth who ate and drank too much while their poor brothers and sisters were left hungry, and we shall deserve the stinging rebuke Paul gave them for despising God's

church and desecrating Christ's body (1 Cor. 11:20-24). Instead, we determine to resemble them at a later stage when Paul urged them out of their abundance to give to the impoverished Christians of Judea "that there may be equality" (2 Cor. 8: 10-15). It was a beautiful demonstration of caring love and of Gentile-Jewish solidarity in Christ. In this same spirit, we must seek ways to transact the church's corporate business together with the minimum expenditure on travel, food and accommodation. We call on churches and para-church agencies in their planning to be acutely aware of the need for integrity in corporate lifestyle and witness. Christ calls us to be the world's salt and light, in order to hinder its social decay and illumine its darkness. But our light must shine and our salt must retain its saltiness. It is when the new community is most obviously distinct from the world - in its values, standards and lifestyle - that it presents the world with a radically attractive alternative and so exercises its greatest influence for Christ. We commit ourselves to pray and work for the renewal of our churches.

5. Personal Lifestyle

Jesus our Lord summons us to holiness, humility, simplicity, and contentment. He also promises us his rest. We confess, however, that we have often allowed unholy desires to disturb our inner tranquillity. So without the constant renewal of Christ's peace in our hearts, our emphasis on simple living will be one-sided. Our Christian obedience demands a simple lifestyle, irrespective of the needs of others. Nevertheless, the facts that 800 million people are destitute and that about 10,000 die of starvation every day make any other lifestyle indefensible. While some of us have been called to live among the poor, and others to open our homes to the needy, all of us are determined to develop a simpler lifestyle. We intend to re-examine our income and expenditure, in order to manage on less and give away more. We lay down no rules or regulations, for either ourselves or others. Yet we resolve to renounce waste and oppose extravagance in personal living, clothing and housing, travel and church buildings. We also accept the distinction between necessities and luxuries, celebrations and normal routine, and between the service of God and slavery to fashion. Where to draw the line requires conscientious thought and decision by us, together with members of our family. Those of us who belong to the West need the help of our Third World brothers and sisters in evaluating our standards of spending. Those of us who live in the Third World acknowledge that we too are exposed to the temptation of covetousness. So we need each other's understanding, encouragement, and prayers.

6. International Development

We echo the words of the Lausanne Covenant: "We are shocked by the poverty of millions, and disturbed by the injustices which cause it." One quarter of the world's population enjoys unparalleled prosperity, while another quarter endures grinding poverty. This gross disparity is an intolerable injustice; we refuse to acquiesce to it. The call for a New International Economic Order expresses the justified frustration of the Third World. We have come to understand more clearly the connection between resources, income, and consumption. People often starve because they cannot afford to buy food, and because they have no access to power. We therefore applaud the growing emphasis of Christian agencies on development rather than aid, for the transfer of personnel and appropriate technology can enable people to make good use of their own resources, while

at the same time respecting their dignity. We resolve to contribute more generously to human development projects. Where people's lives are at stake there should never be a shortage of funds. But the action of governments is essential. Those of us who live in the affluent nations are ashamed that our governments have mostly failed to meet their targets for official development assistance, to maintain emergency food stocks, or to liberalize their trade policy. We have come to believe that in many cases multinational corporations reduce local initiative in the countries where they work, and tend to oppose any fundamental change in government. We are convinced that they should become more subject to controls and more accountable.

7. Justice and Politics

We are also convinced that the present situation of social injustice is so abhorrent to God that a large measure of change is necessary. Not that we believe in an earthly utopia. But neither are we pessimists. Change can come, although not through commitment to simple lifestyle or human development projects alone. Poverty and excessive wealth, militarism and the arms industry, and the unjust distribution of capital, land, and resources are issues of power and powerlessness. Without a shift of power through structural changes these problems cannot be solved. The Christian church, along with the rest of society, is inevitably involved in politics which is "the art of living in community." Servants of Christ must express his lordship in their political, social, and economic commitments and their love for their neighbours by taking part in the political process. How, then, can we contribute to change? First, we will pray for peace and justice, as God commands. Secondly, we will seek to educate Christian people in the moral and political issues involved, and so clarify their vision and raise their expectations. Thirdly, we will take action. Some Christians are called to special tasks in government, economics, or development. All Christians must participate in the active struggle to create a just and responsible society. In some situations obedience to God demands resistance to an unjust established order. Fourthly, we must be ready to suffer. As Followers of Jesus, the Suffering Servant, we know that service always involves suffering. While personal commitment to change our lifestyle without political action to change systems of injustice lacks effectiveness, political action without personal commitment lacks integrity.

8. Evangelism

We are deeply concerned for the vast millions of unevangelized people in the world. Nothing that has been said about lifestyle or injustice diminishes the urgency of developing evangelistic strategies appropriate to different cultural environments. We must not cease to proclaim Christ as Saviour and Lord throughout the world. The church is not yet taking seriously its commission to be witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). So the call to a responsible lifestyle must not be divorced from the call to responsible witness for the credibility of our message is seriously diminished whenever we contradict it by our lives. It is impossible with integrity to proclaim Christ's salvation if he has evidently not saved us from greed, or his lordship if we are not good stewards of our possessions, or his love if we close our hearts against the needy. When Christians care for each other and for the deprived, Jesus Christ becomes more visibly attractive. In contrast to this, the affluent lifestyle of some Western evangelists when they visit the Third World is understandably offensive to many. We believe that simple living by Christians

generally would release considerable resources of finance and personnel for evangelism as well as development. So by our commitment to a simple lifestyle we recommit ourselves wholeheartedly to world evangelization.

9. The Lord's Return

The Old Testament prophets both denounced the idolatries and injustices of God's people and warned of his coming judgment. Similar denunciations and warnings are found in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus is coming back soon to judge, to save and to reign. His judgment will fall upon the greedy (who are idolaters) and upon all oppressors. For on that day the King will sit upon his throne and separate the saved from the lost. Those who have ministered to him by ministering to one of the least of one of his needy brothers and sisters will be saved, for the reality of saving faith is exhibited in serving love. But those who are persistently indifferent to the plight of the needy, and so to Christ in them, will be irretrievably lost (Matt. 25:31-46). All of us need to hear again this solemn warning of Jesus, and resolve afresh to serve him in the deprived. We therefore call on our fellow Christians everywhere to do the same.

Our Resolve

So then, having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to his call, in heartfelt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the Day of Judgment, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple lifestyle, to support one another in it, and to encourage others to join with us in the commitment. We know that we shall need time to work out its implications and that the task will not be easy. May Almighty God give us grace to be faithful. Amen.