

World Council of Churches  
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

**Interrogating and Redefining Power**  
**A theological consultation**

*organised by the Faith and Order Team of the World Council of Churches  
in Crêt Bérard, Puidoux, Switzerland, December 10 -13, 2003*

**Aide Memoire**

**The Rationale**

Power, an essential factor in all dynamics of human interaction, today is increasingly sought and exercised in ways that seem to pose serious challenges to the ethical integrity of our generation with implications for the present and the future, the personal and communal, and the local and global. Some of these which best characterise the moment in time that this discourse on power takes place are: the emerging empire of military, economic and technological superpowers, the legitimisation of the power of the privileged and the powerful by a phenomenal resurgence of the religious right and the concomitant value orientation permeating through to the level of interpersonal relationships, the ruthless plunder of earth and its resources, the increase of violence – both physical and structural, the wars of the powerful as well as the struggles and resistance of the powerless and the disempowered. In contrast, the phenomenon of increasing resistance world-wide to the misuse and abuse of power and the ideological struggles of peoples, communities and movements against these trends is also a source of inspiration for this process of theological reflection on power.

This attempt finds its rationale in the complexity of challenges encountered by the ecumenical movement in its relentless efforts to seek Christian unity in a broken world. Its new instrument, the *Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace 2001-2010*, launched in a spirit of repentance for complicity and determination to overcome violence, has recognised the roots of violence in the way power is understood, exercised, feared and glorified by the perpetrators, victims and even spectators of violence. As part of the world that is guided by these dynamics of power, churches cherish and live with these orientations as well as ambiguities within and outside. It is therefore necessary for churches to interrogate power as it is understood, exercised, preserved, obeyed, aspired and confronted in order to overcome, the spirit, logic and practice of violence.

Therefore Faith and Order, which facilitates theological reflection on peace within the context of the DOV as part of its efforts, has proposed “Interrogating and redefining power” as a theological challenge to the churches and the ecumenical movement. As part of its programmatic work on the DOV, the WCC too has identified the “Use and abuse of power” as an important thematic concern. This first consultation in Crêt Bérard, Puidoux, Switzerland during 10-13 December 2003, is an attempt to initiate a process of reflection, perhaps a prolonged and multi-disciplinary one, with the conviction that it would help churches to seek peace, justice and reconciliation actively and intently in this steadily fragmenting and polarising world.

The recent and ongoing work of the Faith and Order Commission, particularly in the areas of Ecclesiology and ethics, Church and mission, Ministry of ordination as well as Ethnicity, nationalism and the unity of the church, Theological anthropology, and Nature and purpose of the church, also necessitate the need of a fresh theological discourse on power. The Crêt Bérard consultation was also accompanied by the Churches Commission on International Affairs and the Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation with their questions and challenges around their work with the UN, and on the issues of impunity and reconciliation, economic globalisation, climate change, violence against women, etc. The active partnership of CCIA and JPC with this F&O's initiative of a theological reflection on power has proved to be an exercise that helped the three to recognise the inevitable connections between them and their need for each other in terms of expertise, perspective and constituency for the sake of pursuing their common ecumenical vision.

The consultation brought together a select and representative group of (27) theologians, biblical scholars, and social and political scientists from many parts of the world. Most of them have been

closely associated with WCC's work in the areas mentioned above and have also done extensive work in the areas of power from different vantage points. They shared their papers and publications with the group, some in advance and during the consultation. They brought with them several concerns: of war and militarisation, economic globalisation and the role of financial institutions, the predicament of resistance movements, the fate and future of the United Nations, the continuing pace of environmental destruction, the further exclusion of the disempowered sections – women, indigenous people, racially oppressed groups, ethnic minorities, the disabled, youth and children – and the questions around the role and response of churches to these issues. Such a variety of concerns, expertise, perspectives, contexts and experiences, made this theological consultation multi-disciplinary in content and down-to-earth in approach.

### **The process**

The task of the consultation was to raise pertinent questions by analysing the complexity of the issue of power today and to identify relevant theological challenges for further exploration. The expected outcome of this consultation was this aide memoire as an account of the conversation at Crêt Béard, its nature, content, scope and limitations, with the hope that it would stimulate further reflection. As such this consultation was not meant to arrive at conclusions, but needs to be seen as a beginning of, perhaps, an ongoing process of reflection.

The participants found their way into this process of collective reflection through morning worship services. In his meditation on the first day, Martin Robra from Germany unpacked the moral challenges posed by the processes of economic globalisation and highlighted the alternative visions of the resistance movements as he reflected on the texts from Habakkuk (1:2-11) and Mark (12: 13 -17). On the second day, Hope Antone from the Philippines drew the attention of the consultation to traditions, cultures, structures, theories and theologies, including those atonement theories that lend legitimacy to the abusive power of men over women as she reflected on John 3:16; Gal.5:1; and Rom. 6:18. On the third day, Guillermo Kerber from Uruguay focused on the power of silence which is often exercised in a spirit of resistance as he reflected on Matt.4:1-11, and called on the participants to identify themselves with the voiceless and the silenced peoples and communities around the world. On the fourth day, Najla Kassab from Lebanon expounded on the life-affirming potential of the power of service as against the power of domination as she reflected on Mark 10:35-45.

### **The presentations**

In order to clarify the issue and the concepts that are involved, the consultation spent nearly one and half days organising its conversation under three broad headings. These were: Rationale for a new ecumenical discourse on power; An overview of the notions and trends of understanding power in today's world; and An examination of the biblical and theological models of power.

Discussion on these issues were initiated by three presentations. Konrad Raiser, the outgoing general secretary of the WCC, in his presentation on the **Rationale for a new ecumenical discourse on power**, elaborated on the way the issue of power has been at the core of some of the major milestones in the ecumenical journey. He outlined three major phases. The first was the period from Oxford 1937 Conference on Church, Community and State to the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 during which the ecumenical discussion focused on the understanding of the state and the concern for the legitimacy or the limitation of the power of the state in view of the emergence of totalitarian rule. This has resulted in Amsterdam proposing a clarified concept of power through the definition of the "responsible society". During the second phase, the ethical discussion was marked by the effort to interpret "rapid social change". This implied a gradual shift of attention from the power of state and government to the new forms of power related to technological development and their capacity to orient and implement decisions. It also acknowledged the emergence of "people's power" as a new reality. The third phase is in the context of the discussions on a "just, participatory and sustainable society" which upheld that the struggle for justice requires a new understanding and praxis of the political order and the use of power. This implied an exploration of options which Christians and churches must take in their political witness and the biblical and theological bases for such. This phase culminated in the World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul in 1990 which issued ten affirmations of which the first one was that "all exercise of power is accountable to God".

Raiser argued that the present global realities require a new exploration. This is due to the process of globalisation which has accelerated the concentration of power into the hands of a limited number of global players and the erosion of the traditional notions of sovereignty and thus of the power of the state. Raiser then went on to present four major concerns that need to be addressed. These were: revisiting the understanding of power itself; the issue of legitimacy of power; new forms of distribution of power; and a renewed and critical theological analysis on the ultimate horizon of power. Raiser concluded that any ecumenical theological response to the concentration of power in the context of globalisation and the critical discussion about its legitimacy should return to the alternative biblical symbolism of power in order to give shape to alternative visions where love of power is replaced by the power of love.

The following were some of the major questions and comments during the ensuing discussion:

As we recognise the power of the powerless, how do we view the rage of the powerless – the suicide bombers, their unprotected vulnerability and the consequent courage to make a statement through death that “I am there”?

How do we understand the phenomenon of symbolic power and what mechanisms do we envisage to limit/moderate their destructive influence?

There is an urgent need to work towards a global political ethic. How do we strengthen structures of accountability, such as the UN? What can the ecumenical movement do?

How can the goal of achieving human security based on the affirmation of mutual vulnerability be presented as an alternative to military security that draws on certain notions and resources of power. What are the limitations?

How do we check the influence of the ideologies of nation-states on international and economic politics? There is a need to work towards understanding sovereignty and power in relationships in terms of relationships rather than in terms of possession and strength.

A theological reflection on power demands that we take seriously the oft-neglected political dimension of Christian witness.

How do we deconstruct the image of God as almighty and omnipotent? We also recognise that the deconstruction of models of dominating power is also a continuous process right through the biblical story. How do we reclaim this tradition?

What are the complexities of reasons that compel churches in many places to bless economic and political powers?

How convincingly can we propose the trinitarian model of power in the face of the compelling power of the trinity of empire, globalisation and the war against terror? How do we view spiritual power *vis-à-vis* hegemonic powers?

**Ken Booth**, professor of international politics at University of Wales, focussed his presentation on the way power is understood in the world of politics. In his presentation “**Reasons of power and powers of reason: Some reflections from International politics**”, Booth attempted an extensive interrogation of the claims about the contested nature of power – “a notoriously difficult concept in the study of politics”, as he put it, “that seems straightforward only until we begin to interrogate it”. He then elaborated four key disputes: Where does power come from? How can power be measured? How can power be categorised? Does power reside in structures or agents?

Booth held that power politics operate according to the dictates of the reasons of power. Power is the reason for ‘who gets what’. It is the power to achieve the naturalisation of social and political ideas, to have one’s own cherished social and political preferences and interests accepted as primordial or unchangeable. The drivers of the global economy (the principles of capitalism) and of the states system (the principles of political realism) represent the common sense of their structures because they embody the interests of the powerful, by the powerful, and for the powerful. He goes on to argue that for the ‘power of reason’ to triumph over the “reasons of

power,” an interrogation of power is essential. First, the instrumentality of power must be interrogated. When power is understood instrumentally, it is desired, sought, and amassed for what it can do. Secondly, the paradoxical nature of power must be understood. It is both an opportunity and a threat, for its holders and those around. These two faces of power – one looking at its desirability, the other at its dangers – are basic to an understanding of international relations.

When instrumental reason rules, the ends justify the means in a remorseless logic, allowing decision-makers to operate independently of moral constraints. The ‘means’ can then become an instrumental tyranny that threatens to destroy the ‘end’ sought. Booth used Joseph Nye’s phrase “end point utopia” to describe this conception of power. End point utopias ignore the ethics of the means because they are focused on the virtue believed to reside in the utopian goal. Booth suggests Nye’s concept of “process utopia” as an alternative that best embodies the new understanding of power he advocates. Process utopias nudge history forward using means that are appropriate to the ends sought. Utopia is present in the process itself, not simply at the end point. To illustrate, Booth presented a Gandhian model that brings the ends and means into a life-affirming harmony. With Gandhi, Booth held that to practise *ahimsa* (non-violence) is to realise truth and to realise truth is to practice *ahimsa*.

The test for every policy should be, therefore, whether it contributes to the de-legitimation of violence as an instrument of politics, and ensures accountability to international institutions. Booth then concluded that “if we want a humane world, then it will not emerge from a political big bang – a grand treaty or victorious eschatological war. It will only emerge, in time, through the progressive humanisation of policies.” The only way power will be socialised is by using it in a socialised manner.

The following were some of the major concerns that were discussed at length:

How do we analyse and counter the sources of power of a powerful minority in a context of hostile and disempowered majority such as in the Middle East? What are the options for peace and non-violence in such contexts?

Powerlessness sometimes and in some cases may result in irresponsible actions. Powerlessness also inspires radical action, although sometimes in violent ways. How do we address this phenomenon?

Where do we draw the lines between individual and collective power while understanding people’s power to limit hegemonic powers?

How do we make the violent powers feel responsible for the trauma of violence which is costlier than war/aggression itself?

We need a public / political theology. Theologians must listen to social scientists. It is tragic and even offensive if theologians close their eyes and ears to empirical realities.

There is a tendency among some to overestimate the church, assuming that the church is an embodiment of peace and the world is all full of violence and injustice. The church is a sphere of peace in terms of its calling rather than in terms of actual achievement. We need to desist from making triumphalistic claims.

While highlighting the models of power in the Bible, **Edesio Sanchez**, a visiting professor of Old Testament, Latin American Biblical University, Costa Rica, through his presentation “**Power that empowers and power that destroys**” (Append.VI) attempted an elaborate critique of the power of the powerful as he unravelled the power of the powerless in the Biblical stories. His presentation was a creative attempt to re-read some Biblical stories from the perspective of the powerless and the disempowered.

Even as it gives glimpses of the power of the powerful, for Sanchez the Old Testament is primarily a story of the sufferings of the powerless, whether as slaves or as the poor and the widows. It presents two types of the powerful: those who oppress and those who fail to empower the oppressed and the vulnerable. He developed his argument with the book of Judges as the point of engagement as it reveals the confrontations of different notions of power. Throughout the

Bible, God plays practically all roles. As a powerful monarch and Lord of the universe and human life, God creates, gives life and nurtures. God liberates a group of slaves from Egyptian oppression. "The exodus is thus the supreme example of divine power." Nonetheless, God is presented also as a terrible destroying power, used to chastise the other nations, or to punish the people of the covenant. Actually, God's power to destroy is aimed at punishing those who use their power to destroy the lives of people, and especially the poor, the oppressed and vulnerable. To that extent, king is always seen as one who is entrusted with the responsibility of the poor.

Sanchez then presented the alternatives to the abusive notions of power by highlighting the power of the powerless. Samuel and David were still young and were not confident when God called them. It was the young girl from Israel that made Namaan become childlike. Jael was a woman in Judges who changed the odds against her into the opportunity to defeat the enemy. Ruth used her personal power to take control of her life, her mother-in-law's and other people's. Jephthah's daughter in her powerlessness experienced the solidarity of the community of women who supported her as person and as woman during the time of great need. Sanchez further elaborated the power of the powerless in the Bible by drawing on the image of children as the inheritors of the kingdom.

God's incarnation in Jesus Christ is a unique revelation of divine power in service of peace, non-violence, justice and love. In Jesus Christ, God declares that God's self does not only act on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, but decides to become one of them. God comes into this world not as a mighty warrior, or as a clever and powerful politician, but as a child in total vulnerability, was born in the midst of poverty, grew up as member of a poor family, and lived among the poor. Jesus' alternative to dominating power is the power of service. God's kingdom as preached and lived by Jesus was defined and constructed from the perspective of the weak and the vulnerable – the poor and the children. When the disciples of John the Baptist requested Jesus' credentials, the answer was: 'in my ministry and mission, the poorest of the poor are my priority' (Mt 11.2-6). Thus, when Jesus explained to Pilate what Jesus' kingdom was, he says: "My kingdom is not from this world" (Jn 18.36), implying not an out-of-this-world reality, but a new way of manifesting power and organising society, quite different from how things are conducted according to "this world".

In the ensuing lively discussion, a number of insights were shared. Some of these were:

Doctrinal theologies seem to uphold a perception of God's power as unlimited, destructive, and dominating, perhaps expressive of egotism, fear, suspicion and arrogance which are common to all structures and systems of power, including the ecclesiastical ones.

We hear so much power language in our churches. We are constantly confronted with texts about the power of God in our hymns, liturgies, sermons, prayers, etc. As one participant said: "Sometimes it seems to me that we must have crash helmets distributed before we go into church".

These powers are coming alive again, pressing religion and religious language into service to legitimise their ideologies of domination and violence. (e.g.: Bush, Bin Laden, etc.)

Where do we place or how do we understand the "power" that some Christian spiritual traditions, such as the Pentecostals, affirm?

Exodus is not just once but it happens all the time in many histories. How do we discern and align with such movements of the spirit?

Pastor/preacher as an interpreter has enormous power in choosing and interpreting texts.

Jesus' attitudes towards women are often ignored by many preachers. However, the Bible liberates and also imprisons. There are no clear typologies. How do we account for the power of perception? Some writers give no names to some women, e.g., the young girl who directed Namaan, the women with menstrual flow, etc.

We must recognise the power of the oral world and bring it to confront the power of the *literati*.

*Dunamis* is present throughout all creation. We encounter justice and peace as the flourishing, nurturing power of God as against domination and violence which signify the withering power of the world. *Adamah* is the actor; the earth cries when Cain kills Abel.

*Dunamis* is also the power to heal. This is perhaps another biblical alternative. How do we interpret the texts from the perspective of the disinherited? E.g.: the Palestinians. Are we prepared to read other scriptures or listen to the cries of the victims along with the Bible?

We need to be in dialogue with the life-affirming traditions in the Bible. For example, we have a Christology based on the image of the sacrificial lamb but we do not have one based on 'the hen gathering her brood under her wings' (Mt.23.37). Perhaps the Faith and Order needs to take up this challenge.

### **Identification of relevant issues for further exploration**

Against this background of discussion on a variety of issues from and following the presentations, the participants were helped by two facilitators to arrive at some broad categories for further exploration in groups. While affirming the importance of other issues that had to be dropped, the group used the following criteria to agree upon thematic foci for their work in groups: the relevance of the issues for the ecumenical movement and the churches, the urgency of the challenge and its unexplored nature. The thematic foci were:

1. The power of interpretation
2. Shared nature of power focusing on the question of means and ends.
3. Religion, culture and power
4. Models of powers

The group also agreed on the following set of common questions to guide the discussion in groups during the next one and half days.

What are our tools of analysis?  
 What is distinctively Christian about what we are saying?  
 What is the theological significance of the issue?  
 Where is the church falling short or where does it need to be challenged?  
 Who are the addressees and how do we communicate?  
 What alternative resources/models do we (Christians) have to offer?  
 How do we continue this process of reflection?

The participants also fed into the discussion insights from the preparatory material. The following are brief summaries of the reports from groups, revised in the light of the plenary discussion that took place following their presentation:

#### **1. Power of interpretation**

The power of interpretation is a matter of concern because there is often a disconnection between the world as many experience it and the world as it is presented by the most dominant individuals and institutions. Interpretation is key to the power to understand and represent reality. It becomes problematic when it is allied to systems of domination, to social systems that produce certain kinds of knowledge that control, alienate, subjugate, fragment and neutralise. It is these distortions of knowledge that prevent humanity from discerning clearly the signs of the times. We are thereby distanced from truth, goodness and justice, and diminished in our capacity to live and to let others live life abundantly.

This power of interpretation permeates many dimensions of social reality. For example, mass media's power to interpret includes the ability to consolidate and manufacture information; to make alternative information invisible; and to distort or deprive authentic information. These abilities of the mass media raise questions such as: Who owns the means of communication? Who controls the "paper" or medium carrying the message? Who controls image? Who has the

power to determine what goes on the agenda, what is kept off it, what is subjected to deliberate “spin”, and who will account for those communities that are excluded by the sophistication of the mass media?

We need to recognise that systems of domination tend to sustain themselves by appropriating interpretative power. This power allows them to generate knowledge that attempts to infiltrate the common sense of communities. The power of independent interpretation itself is stifled in a process of continuous negative feedback. Common sense itself then is degraded, language is co-opted by the people in power, and the rest “dumbed down” because they have been deprived of authentic relationship to their own symbolic power. Driven by marketing and advertising, this is exactly what mass media does. These together produce passive consumers identified with packaged self. However, it must be mentioned that consumerism is an operational necessity for the kind of economy we have opted so far. Furthermore, consumers are not passive dupes but are quite discerning. Be that as it may, consumerism arises out of and promotes individualism and self-aggrandisement. These pursuits prevent people from discerning truth, goodness, justice and fairness.

Symbols play an important role in interpreting power as they socially mediate reality and thus both focus and channel power. It is true that symbols have the power only to the extent that the interpreter allows them to have, but it is equally true that power is all the more effective when it is accepted unthinkingly and symbols ensure this response. It is precisely because of this gap between the symbol and what it signifies that the power of interpretation is germane to power generally. Such symbolic power can literally help us to connect with, or be alienated from, the greater whole. Jesus’ words about interpreting the present time and having the courage to judge for ourselves what is true or right are therefore insights about how we engage with symbolic power (Luke 12: 54-57). By perverting the perception of reality (and, Jesus suggests, cultivating hypocrisy), evil leads us into collusion with corrupting the structure of reality.

Therefore, truth needs to be discerned by identifying and accentuating the sites of discernment and resistance. We must also recognise speaking and using truth as a method of liberation. The following questions point towards further reflection: On what foundation might we base resistance that seeks to establish truth? How and where might we learn more accurately to read the signs of our times? Given that the system has been so successful, what are the “sites” (or contexts) where we might find or establish alternatives?

The following could be some possible directions: 1. Orientation of structures of interpretation towards the needs of the poor is likely to both serve, and be served by, the power of truth. 2. Sites of discernment might be academia, educational institutions and churches. “Who and what does this serve?” Our churches might help us to become more effective in identifying the faces of power and powerlessness and in teaching about the idolatry of everyday life, including the idolatries of “spiritual materialism” or the trappings of ecclesiastical power structures and cultic manipulation. 3. Search for alternatives may be attempted in the collective efforts of the disempowered. For instance, the Fair Trade movement is based on co-operation rather than on competition. While consumerism tends to perpetrate concentration of wealth and is promoted for profit as an end in itself, Fair Trade is promoted for mutuality and service .

To sum up, what we need is to interrogate systems of domination, explore sites of resistance and accompany the communities of negotiation.

## **2. Democratising Power: Just Peacemaking**

In response to the dilemma around the issues that have emerged during the discussion on means and ends, the group proposes “democratising power and just peacemaking” as possible responses. In a world where the hegemonic powers, especially the economic and military super powers, and their instruments – financial institutions, multinational corporations, market, media, etc, seem to be operating with greater collaboration and are asserting their power, upholding the sanctity and integrity of structures of accountability at all levels is both urgent and necessary. These economic powers are defining the rules and manipulating the political processes. This has led and will continue to lead to injustice and, especially, to an institutionalisation of unjust economic power, which we call, “negative institutionalisation of power”. Therefore, it is perhaps necessary that the instruments of global economy and trade be brought within the purview of the UN.

In an increasingly polarised and fragmented world, what we need today are global rules and norms that ensure justice, freedom and space for all. A response such as this would imply resisting the legitimisation of injustice. In other words, what we need is a concerted effort towards larger participation and dispersion of power instead of its concentration. We may perhaps call this “democratisation of power”, although democracy means different things to different people in different places. Democracy cannot be presented as applicable to all situations. There are several contextual manifestations as well as limitations of democracy. For example, in Asia, democracies are associated with the US Empire. Some democracies need wars and enemies to survive. Democracy depends a great deal on the socio-cultural ethos within which it exists. On the other hand, life in many African communities is organised around democratic principles. What we mean by “democratisation of power” is a dispensation that ensures larger participation of people in all political and economic processes and to that extent a dispersion of power.

In the same way, the trend to opt for military solutions to crises and threats needs to be seriously questioned and military powers must be compelled to be accountable in order to be held legitimate. Security that relies on military strength is demonic. It draws its strength from the arrogance of power and ignores the ethic of mutuality and interdependence in human relationships. Human vulnerability must not be seen as a sign of weakness but as a valuable resource to be and to become human. It helps us to be fair and just in our relationships. When we acknowledge our mutual vulnerability, we recognise the need of mutual responsibility and security. Therefore, we need to protect our vulnerability as much as we protect ourselves from our vulnerability.

The present ‘war against terrorism’ and the doctrine of pre-emptive war, waged by the super power need to be seen as attempts from a one-sided and power-driven premise. Bringing terrorists or potential terrorists to justice is more appropriate than waging wars and causing massive human suffering and indulging in wasteful expenditure on wars and weaponry. Wars only exacerbate the root causes of terrorism which are often the abuse of military power, the monopoly or maldistribution of resources, the denial of fundamental human rights, and the lack of legal recourse through democratic means. We must state clearly that resorting to violence is always sinful even though sometimes it may seem necessary and a lesser evil. However, churches should be unequivocal about their preference for peace and non-violence.

In the light of the enigmatic, inconclusive arguments around the issue of means and ends, the idea of “just peacemaking” may be pursued as a positive and comprehensive way of life. This idea derives its inspiration from the biblical faith in the God of justice and love that affirms the dignity and equality of all. Abundant life for all is possible only when justice is the guiding norm of all structures of relationships. ‘Just peacemaking’ holds peacemaking not primarily in response to war and violence but promotes a new ethic of sharing life. The “commitment is to embody communally and historically a way of life marked by the qualities of God’s domain. So grace and mercy, repentance and forgiveness, living well and dying well, hospitality, compassion and equal regard - also for the enemy, as a kind of litmus test - are to find concrete expression in this community’s way of living together.” (Larry Rasmussen: “Just Peacemaking: Recent Christian Revisions”, *The Nuclear Dilemma: The Public Christian Ethics*)

This pursuit makes peacemaking a participatory enterprise that needs and accepts the widest range of gifts. “It includes children, the elderly, and the generations between. It happens in homes and schools and in the workplace, recreation place, and worship place. There are no places where peacemaking is inappropriate, no social boundaries it does not cross. And its forms are so diverse that no one is without some contribution and responsibility. ... peacemaking is the most universal of undertakings.” Creating this culture is the task of all, not just of the state, soldiers, police or diplomats. Therefore, efforts must be made to create a culture of security – a safe space for the flourishing of life whether this be in the home, the neighbourhood, the nation or the ‘world house’ in which we are all now fated to live. Peacemaking then becomes a pursuit for ethical transformation of the world and for mutually responsible structures of relationships. This just peacemaking also has the potential to pursue the path of peace in partnership with other religious communities, thus purging religious vocations of the potential for violence and individualistic arrogance.

Is it then possible to revisit some of our cherished notions of the covenant, *koinonia* and Eucharist, in the light of this alternative way of living based on the ethic of shared and responsible power?

### 3. Religion, Culture and Power

Reflecting on the metaphor of the "salt of the earth" in Matthew 5:13-14, the group understood and analysed the interconnection between religion, culture and power and analysed the same. It understood salt as the substance that is used to enrich the earth (*to halas tes ges*) and not the edible salt as commonly understood. The empowering mission of the Church, like the salt of Jesus' parable, has a consistency of power. However, that empowering mission, inculturated into contexts, does not lead to uniformity. Rather, it leads to considerable diversity of expression, growth and human flourishing. The salt always has to respect the type of earth in which it is spread. Diverse cultural sensibilities have to be taken into account in the mission of the Church.

The key to understanding the relationship between church and culture rests on a tension. On the one hand, Christians are to be engaged in the world and influence it, perhaps in ways that are not easily identified as specifically "Christian". The power of salt is that it is pervasive and nourishing. On the other hand, Christianity also proclaims God's kingdom - a radically "other" culture that will sweep away the present order. This is the beacon of light set on the hill; it illuminates the present, but points to a new order. This is the Christ who is above or against culture. The church seeks a kingdom that is to come. But it also strives to work in the world until that time. As such, the church lives in this tension between the present and the future and works for both.

However, this salt dimension is often lost when its power as salt is overwhelmed by the power of empires and dominions (i.e., political and economic systems), and when it is caught up within a system of self-preservation and prosperity. Its support and indifference to both larger political and social realities as well as to the evils and injustices within the family and neighbour are the case in point. For instance, instead of being a community of solidarity with the victims of the destructive use of power in the family, the Church often colludes with society in misleading the victims (often wives and children), to submit to blind forgiveness and self-sacrifice. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the nature and purpose of church in each context, in the light of the challenges posed by the unjust, inhuman assertion of the powerful and in acknowledgement of churches' continued indifference to human suffering and blatant injustice against the poor and the powerless. The salt character of Christianity cannot be pursued with a sense of arrogance of power.

Analysing the reality of the world and the church opens us to the question: What alternatives can we propose to overcome the present situation? Many Christian communities at the grassroots level are a living experience of love, care, solidarity and hope. The church should also struggle for reconciliation at different levels, from the personal to the international, securely located in Christologically-formed truth and justice. In this mission, the church, following Jesus' ministry, stands with the victims, the poor and the excluded, in order to restore their denied dignity. These challenges include: realising hope in the lives of the violated, kenotic ecclesiology, solidarity with the victims, diaconate, peace and justice, and the inner life of the church.

Therefore, "salt" is not to be kept apart from society, nor is it to be used as a purifier or as an additive stabiliser. Disciples of Jesus are not to be simply preservers of the good society, and nor are they to be merely pleasant folk adding flavour to either an amoral or immoral society. More powerfully and positively, true religion, as salt, is a life-bringing force in situations characterised by stagnation and death. On the basis of this principle, Christians must recognise the need to be the ferment of change and good outside the church and in other religious persuasions. Thus, the "salt" of Jesus' metaphor is a mutating but coherent agent that is both distinct yet diffusive in its self-expenditure. This involves creative and critical engagement with society.

### 4. Models of power

Acknowledging the way certain conceptions of God, biblical images, ecclesiastical institutions and formations have drawn from hierarchical notions of power and thus have become dominant expressions, the group tried to identify positive models of power which are just, life-affirming and socially responsible.

Power is the potential to effect changes, to get things done, to be creative, and to produce. Power has a dimension broader than the individual one, it can belong to the group and it is possible to accumulate it. While 'power over' people corrupts, shared power is positive and leads to collective empowerment.

Creation is how God uses God's power. God as creator embodies creative ability, power, beauty and interdependence. Jesus is the revelation of the fullness of God's power, and the Spirit meets us in unexpected ways and places, including in the variety of ways that we grope for divine presence.

The mystery of incarnation is to be seen as a continuation of God's expression of God's intentions of power. God presents Godself as a model of virtuous human living. In spite of the aggressive notions of power of God as almighty and all powerful, in Jesus we find a God self emptying, as a servant and more so as a suffering servant. In his life and suffering, Jesus identified with the weakest, the vulnerable, and the lost, so that they with him might be exalted (II Cor 12,9; Eph 1,3-14; Phil 2,5-11; Col 1,15-20). Through this identification, the failure of human societies, structures and governments is exposed. The dying of Jesus is the pivotal point in the process in which power is made perfect in weakness. God is with Jesus on the cross, and through the resurrection new life is created. Jesus as the suffering servant manifests the servant nature of power. Jesus' affirmation of the despised and the excluded and his radical message of the kingdom further point towards the resources for an alternative conceptualisation of power.

However, even good models of power can degenerate and become harmful to human flourishing and contradict God's will. Moreover, those that are appropriate in one situation may be dangerous in other situations. These ought to be continually scrutinised in the light of the Shalom God intends. Every structure (including ecclesial), which may have potential for good, is distorted through self-interest and irresponsible exercise of power. Therefore, we must critique our ecclesiastical institutions, offices, and even the physical appearance of church buildings. These can alienate and symbolise power and arrogance.

The church as an inclusive relational, dynamic, interdependent community is meant to be a working model of God's dealing with the world and human kind, manifesting to the world God's intentions. Whatever polity it takes, it should be communal, personal and collegial. A balance of these has to be maintained. The church as a community is called to exercise power as God exercises power through servanthood. The church is a moral community involving some of the least powerful and some of the most powerful. Therefore, the church, as a human institution, needs to constantly examine itself. The church in the hospitality of her worship should reflect the open fellowship of Jesus. The Church is meant to speak the truth and uphold justice even if it implies confrontation with the powerful. The Church is called to a life of service - locally, nationally and ecumenically. The church catholic, manifest and present as a community in a particular place celebrates word and sacraments and engages in witness. The local church is linked to other churches who also celebrate the word and sacraments. The empirical church is essentially local and it is there the church can physically represent the body of Christ, witnessing to the vision of the coming reign of God. Therefore, we need to affirm and uphold small, local initiatives of churches' involvement in resistance, even as we strive for larger expressions of Christian commitment for justice and peace.