

THE BEGINNINGS OF SAGE (INSTITUTE FOR SPIRITUALITY AND GLOBAL ECONOMICS)

How Shall People Of Faith Be Effective Leaders In Creating Positive Social Change And Economic Justice? How Can We Reduce The Inequity Of Resources Among The World's Peoples? What Is The Role of Religious Organizations In This Effort?

A Church Struggles to Find Ways to Create Positive Economic Changes: Summary of The Church of the Savior Adult Discussion Group Experience 2002-3

Church: The Church of the Savior is a member congregation of the United Church of Christ located at 934 Weisgarber Rd, Knoxville, TN 37909. Church members have been very active in helping in the community. But none had much experience in finding ways to create a more just and moral economic system.

The Kinsler Book: The Church of the Savior Adult Discussion Group began studying The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life by Ross and Gloria Kinsler (Orbis Books, 1999) in November 2001. It has had a profound impact on the group. The Kinslers demonstrate clearly that Christians also need to deal with the major causes of world problems. We cannot just alleviate symptoms of injustice. We cannot truly call ourselves Christian if this is all we do. They see the accelerating gap between rich and poor, and the destruction of our Earth as the two major current global problems. Both of these are tied to an economic system that most of us depend on and support to some degree. The Kinslers urge people of faith to become much more knowledgeable about our global economic system. They need to equip themselves if they are to help create positive changes. Their book provides the moral grounds, a biblical rationale and the imperative for doing so.

Background on the Kinslers: They served as Presbyterian missionaries and teachers for many years in Central America. During this period they experienced the growing poverty and violence along with the growth of faith and liberation movements in this region. This experience informs their writing. Just before they retired and returned to the United States, their friends asked them to participate in the Presbyterian ceremony used to send missionaries off. Their friends asked them to bring the message back to U.S. citizens how our economic policies contribute to the struggles of peoples there. Their book is one way they have carried this out.

Income Distribution: The Champagne Glass: The Kinslers use this powerful portrayal on page 2 to show global income distribution. The UN Program on Development created it and periodically updates it. The study group found it to be one of the key documents in its work. The top 20% of world population received almost 83% of the income in 1992 and the bottom 60% (about 3.6 billion people) received less than 6%. The Champaign glass, without a base, is an accurate way to portray this distribution.

The history of this distribution is even more telling. In 1820 the richest 20% received 3 times that of the poorest 20%. This gap grew slowly until it was 30 times in 1960. Since then the distortion has grown greatly to 60 times in 1990, 74 in 1997 and 86 in 1998.

Many people react to the Champaign glass graphic at first either with a sense of powerlessness or denial. Widespread ignorance of global economic policies makes it difficult to trace a major cause of this intolerable income inequality. This ignorance often includes the fact that U.S. corporations and government have the greatest influence on these policies.

The Kinslers have a compelling way of putting the global poverty situation in perspective. They contrast the public's concern and media coverage of the 3000 deaths on 9-11 to the 30,000 deaths due to starvation that same day around the world. Then they add the fact that an average of 30,000 starved to death the next day and every other day in 2001 with little attention from us.

Bono's Effort: This rock star's efforts to convince world leaders to pay more attention to the poverty and disease in Africa have received wide publicity. The 3-4-02 issue of Time has an article on these efforts. We agree with its message that public at large - the grass roots - must also be involved if increased attention and funding is to occur. What better place for this to happen than in our churches which already have a biblical rationale for doing so? Churches and other faith groups can bring a moral dimension to these efforts that merely political or economic efforts cannot. The Kinslers note that without such a moral dimension, change will be much more difficult.

What the Kinsler Book Did for the Group: Group members have made a variety of personal changes and are considering others. The group has taken on a monthly review of each one of the nine parts to the Shaker town Pledge (see Taking Charge 1977 Bantam Books). We accepted the Kinsler's challenge to become more knowledgeable about economic policies and to find ways to act on this information.

We selected David Korten's book, The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism (1999 Kumarian Press) for our next study. We have also reviewed Bill Moyer's tape on Chapter 11 of NAFTA loaned by TIRN (Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network) and met with their staff to learn more about their work. We have started bringing information about socially conscious investing to the group. A number of us have increased our shopping at local or regional businesses.

David Korten's Book: The discussion group found it is not only enlightening but also challenging to our view of the world. It focuses on economics and only includes spiritual concerns in very broad ways. Korten illustrates ways in which we all to some degree support an economic system that is destroying our earth and creating an immense gap between rich and poor. But without first studying the Kinslers, it is unlikely we would have ever selected such a book. It also probably would have less meaning.

Korten recommends creating a more humane economic system by going back to our traditions. These include creating a true market economy, having democratically set rules to guide business and increasing ethical business practices. His book is both a hopeful and practical way to begin changing the corporate control of our lives and governments. It is based on the simple premise that if you change an image, you change behavior. It certainly changed shopping at Wal-Mart for a number of the group

Next Steps: The group effort to spread the word led to our interest in contacting other churches to learn of their activities in this area and to explore the possibility of an interdenominational learning experience. It has been a struggle to decide how to carry out the challenge of the Kinslers on both personal and church levels. We think that an interdenominational group could assist this effort. The Kinsler book appears to be the best resource for church groups to use that we have found thus far. We hope to expand the possibilities by talking with other churches and looking at resources like the Highlander Center in New Market, TN.

Bob Rundle
COS Adult Discussion Group
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The Interdenominational Group: Faith, Global Economics and World Peace

Beginnings April 2003: With the assistance of Jim Foster, President of the Institutes for Christian Spirituality, pastor John Gill and the leaders of the Church of the Savior group mailed out about 150 invitations to local churches to attend a meeting. We invited them to join a new group to study the faith/global economics/world peace connections and the church role in this. After two meetings 30 people were involved in the group. Church representatives came from nine different denominations. There were also five different social organizations represented.

Early Struggles: We first discovered that it was more difficult than expected to narrow our focus enough to begin our study. Most members were uncertain how we could get a handle on this huge problem area. Our review of potential resources was not very useful in providing models for doing this in a church setting. Several meetings were required for each of us to clarify our own ideas about the group focus. These coalesced into three visions:

First, the group would strengthen our understanding of the faith and economics connections through study of books like The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life (Ross and Gloria Kinsler) and The Post-Corporate World (David Korten). The group would spread this understanding along with the conviction that economic issues are moral issues to other religious groups and organizations.

Second, the group would first study the false assumptions behind the way our economies operate. This understanding would be disseminated as widely as possible. It would provide the framework for discussions with economic leaders at all levels. This could help those seeking to humanize our economy avoid actions with little chance of success. The group would start studying God the Economist (M. Douglas Meeks, Fortress Press, 1989). It would form a background for the future use of the Kinsler book with religious organizations.

Third, the group would learn to use popular education materials and exercises on our economic system with members of other religious groups and those particularly impacted by how the system works. The group would help other groups to connect their life situation to the way our economy functions. Underlying this vision is the idea that people learn from each other and can learn to teach each other.

The more these were discussed the more apparent it became that these three were complementary. The group decided to start with the second approach studying God the Economist. This would provide the framework for using the other approaches in the future.

Main Point of the Group: After some debate the group developed this statement: "We as people of faith and conscience have the power to heal a world broken by violence and poverty by creating alternative economic systems."

Study of God the Economist July 2003 – February 2004: This became the main focus of the group during this period. (See the separate report of the main points of this review for details.) Given the difficulty of this material, it is not surprising group attendance dropped off during this period. But its richness of ideas about the interconnection between Christian theology and economics became a strong basis for the group's work.

Efforts to Move Beyond Study to Action Feb.- June 2004: The group reviewed some materials generated by group members. But it also focused on developing the next steps to take. Brainstorming sessions created a long list of these. The largest number involved putting on educational programs. Other areas included resource and network development, clarifying our message, lobbying efforts and group development. This exercise demonstrated the wide range of interests in the group and the difficulty of achieving consensus. By this point the group was small enough that choosing a single goal became essential. But our failure to do this led to the dissolution of the group after June.

Looking back this is not surprising given the lack of previous experience by almost all members with economic issues, the lack of guidance or models for church groups interested in creating alternative economic systems and the size of the problem we were dealing with.

Transition to SAGE (Spirituality and Global Economics): We decided to accept Jim Foster's invitation to use this Institute and its web site as a depository for materials developed in the group and as a base for future action steps.

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