

Title: Offering a *Way of Life*: The Witness of Local Christian Community and a Contextual Economic Order

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Abstract:

This paper explores how the life (*bios*) of local Christian communities practice and give witness to an economic order which is embedded concomitantly in the vocation of the church catholic and the specific contextual situation of the local community. In the midst of hegemonic economic structures determined by globalization, neo-liberalism, and unadulterated mechanization, local Christian communities are uniquely suited to give witness to alternative economics through the way they live and engage their surrounding communities and economic structures. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the significant and unique witness of local Christian communities and the organic alternative economic practices founded in their various contexts.

Much of the ecclesiological development on the economic nature of the church assumes local communities are primarily constituted in linear fashion *from* the church catholic. This paper, however, argues that local Christian communities, particularly within their unique contextual circumstances, are not so much linear constitutions of the church catholic and its identity, but rather ecstatic movements of God in the Spirit. In this way, local Christian communities *dialectically compose* the greater Body of Christ and its vocation while creatively and profoundly engaging their own context. The witness of local Christian communities is twofold: they contextually re-present the vocation of the church catholic with theological continuity and also speak back to the theology and tradition of the church catholic. Local Christian communities do this by presenting the reign of God in their context while giving new meaning to the church's vocation and stretching its identity through local ecclesial engagement.

Given the interplay of ecclesiology, economics, and context this paper will be rooted in the ecclesiological contributions of John D. Zizioulas and John Howard Yoder, the alternative economic ideals of St. John Chrysostom and E.F. Schumacher, and the contextual bridging of economics and ecclesiology found in exemplars from traditional local congregations and contemporary monasticism.

Ecclesialogically I hope to show that continuity and catholicity are found in the dialectical relationship of diverse local Christian communities within the Body of Christ. Local communities dynamically perform, often in new and creative ways, the vocation of the Body of Christ for the world. It is often in these local organic articulations of the church's witness that the Body of Christ is visible in the world. The witness of local Christian communities is not premised upon other-worldliness or distancing from the reality of current life. In fact just the opposite, the witness of local communities is determined by engagement here and now—the truthful exhibition of God's reign in the world today. This paper will further examine alternative economic structures materialized in local community and witnessed through the local ecclesial *bios*. The Body of Christ does prescribe an economic way of being, and its economic ideals are not merely utopian, in the sense of being unobtainable, but are prescriptive ideals to be creatively embodied in different contexts. Therefore, no economic structure is the same, as no community *bios* is the same; there is no formula or blue-print to be presented. Accordingly, this paper will exemplify

concrete alternative economic embodiments by local Christian communities. The paper will highlight Christian communities living out an economic way of life in the midst of oppressive or unjust economic orders that displace the poor, marginalize cultures, and affirm class distinctions. For example, in Gisenyi, Rwanda a local congregation arose after the 1994 genocide. Composed of both Hutu and Tutsi, it is a church premised on reconciliation between the two groups and the well-being of its community. Without any outside funding, grants, or umbrella structure on which to rely, the local congregation of 432 members has taken in over 180 orphans, 42 of whom currently live with AIDS. Also, in Luque, Paraguay, a small congregation resembles early church *oikonomia* through mutual support. Like many other “household” oriented local congregations, this church has developed its communal identity over time as economic participants who understand work, earnings, and skills as gifts of and for the benefit of others. Their communal identity has sustained the congregation’s witness in a poverty stricken community and the members’ livelihoods in a shifting economy. Lastly, throughout North America there is resurgence toward monastic-like communities ordered by a rule of life which determines, among other things, their economic practices. In the midst of rampant individualism, neo-capitalism, and unbridled consumerism these “new monastic” communities are contextualized Christian communities witnessing to an economic way of life alternative to the surrounding hegemonic structures.

The hope through this exploration is to shed light on the rich and constructive resources already at work in the Body of Christ. The *bios* of a local Christian community represents organic, contextual, yet inherently connected economic ways of life which move beyond the public-private debate of the nature of the church and show its profound ability to witness to surrounding communities through contextualized economic orders.