

EUROPEAN METHODIST COUNCIL
CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMISSION

SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY
A GUIDE FOR STUDY AND ACTION

1. Introduction

As Christians we believe that our entire world, all that is and will be, has been created and is sustained by God. We also believe that we are called by him to be responsible stewards, co-workers in the ongoing work of redemption - not only of human beings, but also of the whole creation.

The world is in an ongoing process of change, and our lifestyles influence this process continuously. We recognise the increasing interdependence of every issue. Our decisions affect whether succeeding generations are born into a world in which we would like them to live. **Sustainability** involves handing over the world in the same – or better - condition as we received it. This is true for all dimensions of life: the environment, social and economic conditions, democracy, and global justice. Only if every dimension sustains life will our world survive.

This short booklet is a study guide to be used by groups within Methodist churches across Europe. It is to be seen as a "starter" - to help people think about their own situation and what they can do within it. It is to be 'dipped into' rather than read. Parts of it may be used as a stimulus for worship, for Bible study, for work with young people or with house groups.

Each part comes with questions. Groups should feel free to follow these questions or to use others more rooted in their own context.

When this study guide was originally planned it was anticipated that it would focus primarily on environmental and social issues. Since then we have all experienced the events of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath. It is no longer possible to focus on issues of sustainability without taking a much wider context into account.

First of all we need to be aware that after 11 September not everyone sees 'religion' as a force for good, or people of faith as having a positive contribution to make to the life of the wider community. The media highlight the malign influence of extreme and fanatical forms of religion. Only rarely are the positive contributions of faith groups given any publicity. More and more we have to earn our right to make our faith-based contribution to debates about the future of our world.

Whilst it is an overstatement to say that 11 September changed the world, it is true that the disaster has forced many people to think seriously about relations between states, ideologies, faiths and economies in a way we have not had to do for at least half a century. It has caused us to think about our own and our families' safety in the short-term, and about the fragility of all that we have created in the long-term. Will the planet will be able to sustain our children and grandchildren at reasonable standards of living?

Recent events have also caused us to question how far humanitarian intervention is sustainable. Is it not just another form of neo-colonialism? For how long can the so-called 'international community' provide the personnel and the money to rehabilitate places which are states in name only, whose writ hardly runs outside the capital city? Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone – how many more? What is the impact of international meetings and conventions, in which the role of competent government is critical to addressing issues, on such failed or non-functioning

states? It is extremely difficult for the international community to act in such cases - but it is much more difficult and dangerous not to act and abandon parts of our world to anarchy.

2. Peace and non-violence for a stable society

Violence, sustained over a long period, can be addictive especially if individuals are also suffering from economic deprivation, prolonged unemployment and social marginalisation.

Historical traditions where one group seeks to dominate another on ethnic, national or religious criteria can create barriers, which are difficult to remove. Communities feel more safe in their own 'ghetto' areas. Walls of separation produce siege communities who view themselves as victims. They not only lock the 'enemy' out but also lock themselves in. Fear and lack of trust produce unsustainable societies. The 'other side' is expected to change first.

When societies become violent and community tensions are strong, instability occurs and economic investment is less likely to happen. A downward spiral of deprivation takes place. Damage to property and the price of maintaining order, especially where armies or peacekeeping forces have to be employed, are economically costly to a society. This finance should instead be available for sustainable development.

A society is not only made unstable by violence but by issues of social exclusion - poverty and unemployment are critical factors. There are often gaps between and within regions in Europe – poverty rates in Scotland have doubled over the last twenty years with up to a third of Scottish families being at or below benefit levels.

Despite protests against 'globalisation' there is evidence to show the positive links between openness to international trade, growth and poverty reduction. A recent study by the World Bank using a sample of 80 countries over 40 years found that the relationship between poverty reduction and growth has not changed in the era of globalisation. While growth remains the most effective weapon against poverty, we have to face the problem that growth may be limited.

A peaceful and inclusive society provides a basis for sustainable development. The following observations flow from this:

- Global experiences show that a nation cannot be economically successful on a sustained basis if large proportions of its people are excluded from participating in economic activity and its benefits. Exclusion is not only inefficient – it is a threat to the social fabric and may lead to violence.
- Addressing issues of exclusion requires resources. Often growth rates are too low to sustain development or to attract investment from international sources. Globalisation is not only a question of competition and market forces but also of pursuing common global goals of a humanitarian and ecological nature: goals which competition and market forces alone will not achieve.
- Achieving high quality growth is linked to investments in people. Societies will be more peaceful and achieve more when individuals are productive. Education and health enhance the prospects of growth by helping people to develop skills. The quality of people's lives and attitudes to society can improve as a result.
- High quality growth is linked to the global economy. It expands opportunities, strengthens competition and enhances learning. In the west at least, the best social policy is often a job. Poverty is linked to unemployment. Global competitiveness will generate more jobs as well as more resources but strengthens the obligation to support those who are excluded or

in poverty. The globalisation of economies has its parallel in the globalisation of poverty and raises questions over justice in international trade.

- Sustainable growth and social justice are two important aspects of peaceful and integrated nations. Education is key to increasing opportunities for all sectors of society. The UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, said that, "Investment in education is critical to economic success. Modernisation inspired us in the 19th and 20th centuries." New skills will be required for the new millennium. Sustainable socially and environmentally sound policies are essential to a healthy society, which recognises the lesson from global experience - people and natural resources are vital aspects of development.
- Cultural, ethnic and religious issues can separate races and nations and result in lack of respect which often leads to violence. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other world religions are built on foundations of respect and justice. These shared values can help to balance religious fundamentalism. This is part of building sustainable society.

Questions for congregations:

- *Reflect on your own society locally – are there identifiable groups, some which dominate and others, which are dominated.*
- *Reflect on why groups integrate in some situations, and fracture and become enemies in other situations.*
- *How do you feel 'globalisation' has impacted on your area? What do you understand by this term?*
- *Is all 'economic growth' equally welcome?*
- *Do you feel from your own context that 'sustainability' and 'economic growth' are comparable?*
- *What do you feel Christian theology and Wesleyan social ethics have to contribute to the debate over how we develop sustainable communities with a fair standard of living around the world?*

3. Environment & Sustainability

As people living at the beginning of the new millennium we are starkly aware of the fragility of the systems which support our world. We are also aware that as human beings we have been responsible for polluting the air and the water, for misusing and wasting resources, for subordinating the well-being of the earth to the selfish interests of human beings.

Our concern is currently focused on the dangers of global warming and how difficult it is for the political will to be found – either in the leaders of the nations or in the majority of people - to do something effective about it by a radical change in lifestyle.

The tragedy of the flooding in Central and Eastern Europe in August 2002, with the loss of so many lives, the suffering and homelessness for thousands of individuals, and the economic consequences of the loss of business, raises serious questions about individual, national and international responsibilities to change, not only attitudes, but practice.

All of us live on the one planet and we have but one home.

'There will be no new Noah's Ark to save some and leave the rest to perish. We all either sink or swim together...'(Leonardo Boff)

A first and most basic need is for us to consider how we live together as people with a great diversity of culture, education, religious allegiance or lack of it. We are rich and poor, black and white, people with access to all those things that the media parades before our eyes each day and

those with no access to such things. A particular responsibility lies with those nations which are the most powerful and in possession of the greatest material wealth – in particular the USA and some countries of Europe.

The issues that face all the inhabitants of the planet now do not, in the main, require just local or even national solutions. One of the inevitable consequences of increasing global interdependence is that no nation can live in isolation. We have to be able to make international and multilateral institutions work for the good of all and particularly for those least able to influence events and trends around them. Examples are the dangers, which still effect many people, caused by nuclear fallout or chemical emissions from plants in neighbouring countries.

However if life on the planet is to become sustainable for all its inhabitants, there also has to be a way of involving ordinary people in the decisions which affect the details of their daily lives. No planning, however thorough or sophisticated, can work if it does not have the willing acceptance and consent of the people. To achieve such a thing in a mature democracy is difficult enough because it involves trade-offs and compromises to accommodate a range of views and positions in the social and economic order. But to achieve it in a nation recently ravaged by war, ethnic division or oppression is quite another. A reasonable state of peace is a basic prerequisite for any form of sustainable development.

Since the UN World Summit in Rio more than ten years ago, slow progress in the protection of the environment has been made in some areas, but in others the situation has actually gone into reverse. The USA, sadly, has retreated from its efforts to work with other nations. It has ploughed a very unilateralist furrow over the last few years and has stated categorically that it will have nothing to do with the Kyoto targets. It is disappointing because, in environmental matters, there can be no unilateralism. From a commercial point of view, the American failure to see that humankind needs to live more lightly will mean reduced research and market opportunities in cutting edge technology. Environmental conventions have proliferated but co-ordination has been difficult. Big issues, such as how environmental agreements relate to the provisions of the World Trade Organisation, remain unresolved.

In addition to the Rio agenda we now need to respond to a changed situation. Questions of climate change, biodiversity, the protection of forests, fisheries and desert areas, issues of adequate and accessible water supplies and of how to meet the demand for energy and transport in sustainable ways have long been on the agenda and remain there. In addition we have to face the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaging the African continent and threatening other parts of the world. Affecting one in three of the young people in many Sub-Saharan African countries, HIV/AIDS threatens the sustainability of education and health systems, of manufacturing and of the agricultural base of rural populations. Above all the costs of the epidemic derail the budgeting of even the best-organised governments. Other priority items for the agenda include the need to address the gulf between the rich world and the poor world, to try to sustain community in a world fractured by rapid social and economic change, and to address globalised crime, drug-dealing and people-trafficking.

What can faith-based communities such as ourselves bring to the debate? We believe, as Christians, that we have good news to share and we need to explore how to do this for a community which, by and large, does not share our vocabulary and images. We believe in a God who created the world in which we live and pronounced creation as good. We believe that God created humankind and gave us great responsibility – a duty of care and of stewardship of the rest of the created order. We believe that God has such faith in humankind that he called us to be co-workers in the ongoing development of our world. Despite all our shortcomings and waywardness God continues to promise salvation to all people and to the whole of creation. We see this supremely in the Incarnation, God sending his son into our world. Christianity is a very earthy religion – the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation of a very down-to-earth God, who not only creates and sustains the whole cosmos but who is found within it, and who has taken flesh with us in all aspects of our lives.

We then have to ask ourselves what is the nature of our responsibility in caring for God's creation in the place where we live. It will entail our asking about our own lifestyles as individuals and as Christian congregations.

Questions for congregations.

- *How do we put the care of the environment on our church agendas and in our prayers and worship?*
- *In what ways do I need to change my lifestyle as my personal contribution to sustaining the world?*
- *How can we encourage openness in our wider community through the resources of our buildings and people?*
- *How do we contribute to political discussions and decision-making locally, nationally and beyond?*
- *For churches with links to the United States – how do we engage in such discussions with our fellow Methodists there?*

Bible references: Genesis 1 and 2; Job 38 – 41; Psalms 8 + 24; Matthew 25, 31 – 46; John 1, 1 – 14, Romans 8, 18 – 21; Colossians 1, 16 – 17; Revelation 21, 1

4. Sustainable transport world-wide

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" (Romans 14, 7a)

As we can not explore in detail every issue mentioned above, we picked transport as a particular example of the problem, because it affects nearly everybody.

How far and fast do we need to move?

To be mobile is to be alive. Both moving about and being quiet and at peace are essential to human life and the life of the world in general. Nature uses the energy within it in an efficient way - economically, without pollution and in a sustainable manner.

The type of mobility that has developed within and between the cities and industrial nations of the world, on the other hand, is restless and hurried. It wastes enormous amounts of energy and raw materials. It produces huge mountains of rubbish, and pollutes the water, the air and the soil. The type of mobility we have today is wasteful and destructive. It is irresponsible and not sustainable.

Access to cars has revolutionised many people's lives. However there are significant negative consequences of increased car-use.

- Cars cause accidents. Even though safety precautions have tightened, road casualties cannot be avoided. Every year more than half a million people die of traffic accidents around the world. Many people spend the rest of their lives with injuries they suffered in traffic accidents.
- Vehicles damage public health. Summer smog has become a well-known phenomenon; the layer of ozone close to the ground has adverse effects on human health and the natural environment. It also considerably reduces crop yields.
- The increase of motorised traffic leads to a loss of quality of life in cities and villages. Main roads criss-cross residential areas, people are exposed to constant noise, and traffic restricts pedestrians' mobility on the streets.
- Increasing car-use imposes a high strain on natural resources. The production and operation of vehicles are costly and produce a great amount of waste. Mobility requires infrastructure - roads, car parks, airports etc - which can be provided only by building on ever more land.

- The costs of road construction and the creation of infrastructure for cars place a heavy burden on national budgets. Consequently, money needed for other urgent matters may no longer be available.
- Private mobility invariably leads to social injustice. Although car ownership has increased rapidly, a great share of the population is isolated and prevented from participating. The elderly, children, people with disabilities, and lower income groups are often not taken into consideration in the age of motorised mobility.

Where will we find quality of life?

Ever greater mobility - especially by car – is seen as the mark of a modern, industrial society. The growth of traffic of people and of goods is seen as a ‘good thing’ – a mark of a growing economy, greater prosperity and a higher so-called ‘standard of living’.

Society needs to begin to disconnect the linkage between prosperity and ever increasing motorised mobility. However recent protests over the cost of fuel indicate that this is going to be extremely difficult to achieve.

Today freedom of movement has been replaced by the necessity of moving by car. We have built our towns and cities so that distances between homes and work, shops and schools are often too great for pedestrians. The many short car journeys undertaken in cities pollute the air, causing illnesses, especially asthma, in children. As more people travel by car, public transport becomes marginalised and increasingly uneconomic.

The growth in the use of private cars over the last fifty years has produced a whole new infrastructure, which relies upon and is centred on the use of cars. In some places footpaths have disappeared making walking more difficult. Riding a bicycle has become more dangerous in many places. Railway stations in the countryside have been closed down. Bus routes, tramways and trains have not been developed. Lifestyles have come to be dependent on the use of the car. Forms of mobility, which could have contributed to a healthier environment and healthier people, have not received investment.

How can we search for a new way?

We need to develop forms of transport that use less energy and raw materials, and which will not damage neighbourhoods even further. Such new ways of thinking will require courage and boldness. They will demand a search for communal ways forward, not individualistic solutions. They will demand new ways of integrating transport to allow people to move about safely, with greater comfort and with minimum delay. Such ways will demand that the churches themselves think about where they locate meetings and how people co-operate in travelling to church. All of us need to discover new ways to find sustainable forms of transport both at home and across the world.

Questions for congregations

- *In Genesis 1:18 human beings are instructed to be good stewards of God’s creation. How can we begin to carry out this responsibility in the area of transport and mobility?*
- *How can we find ways of changing our lifestyles so that they are not so dependent on motorised transport and especially the private car?*
- *Elderly people and children have different transport needs from the motorised, adult population, How can those two groups be helped to take part fully in the life of our community?*

- *How can we as Christians and as church communities help in developing a transport policy for our own locality, our country and across Europe that is more sustainable and improves the quality of life of all people?*
- *How can we change the way we move freight around, so that there is less of it and as much as possible is moved by rail or by water?*

5. Social and Economic Issues: Snapshots from European countries

Prisoners and after prison care in Russia.

Crime is a serious social problem. Public attitudes towards prisoners and the whole prison system are negative. People are tempted to forget that a prisoner is normally locked up only for a set period, and when the term is over he or she is going to be released back into the society. What types of people emerge after imprisonment?

Unco-ordinated work by governmental institutions, churches and other organisations can contribute to the failure to prevent repeated crimes and to provide decent rehabilitation for those who are released from prisons. The majority of those who leave through the prison doors are facing an inordinate number of social problems. They have to struggle with low educational and spiritual levels, with a dysfunctional family or no family whatsoever, with drug and alcohol dependencies, and without a place to live. People with such problems are prone to turn back to crime within several months of release from detention.

Methodist Churches in Russia, in their attempt to follow the lead of the Wesley brothers, are starting Bible groups in prisons, and some are helping those whose term is over. Unfortunately, all this work is somewhat unsystematic.

The churches are called to help society face this problem and to enable all those of good will to help prisoners. Society needs to be reminded that prisoner might have committed a crime, but it doesn't remove him or her from our society - they are still very much part of it.

The Methodist Church along with other churches is called to become a co-ordinating force with the aim of joining hands with other churches, governments and charitable organisations in order to work alongside a person, from the time of his or her imprisonment to the time of release and recovering a "normal" lifestyle. Also, it is of utmost importance to work with the prisoners' families as they have a need for social rehabilitation as well.

The United Methodist congregation "Return to Christ" in Ekaterinburg, Russia, together with other charitable organisations, has been working for several years with prisoners and their families. All people of good will are invited to help - their religious affiliation is irrelevant. Worship services and Bible teaching are being conducted for prisoners and their relatives, meetings with children of prisoners are being arranged, birthday parties are held for prisoners without families. Churches, charitable organisations and relatives of the prisoners collect the funds for these activities. Church members and the pastors help to prepare the prisoners for return to society through teaching, looking for work, providing clothes etc. All this charitable work is strengthening and unifying the congregation, and is part of the work of evangelism.

Questions for congregations

- *How does Matthew 25:31-45 challenge your congregation?*
- *Can you define a special project, a way in which your congregation might respond?*
- *Are there other ways in which your members can co-operate with other organisations in society to help those with particular needs?*

The Employment situation in Portugal.

Portugal is facing a time of opportunities and challenges. Some examples include:

- University graduates are having difficulties finding jobs which relate to their training. Often they have to take employment which is completely different from the original plans they made when they took a university diploma or degree.
- There are children who cannot or do not want to continue at school till 16 years of age, which is normal and compulsory in Portugal. The reasons for this are varied. The students may face pressures from the financial needs of family, a lack of parental support, or consumerist demands from his or her own peer group. If they go to work before legal age, they not only are paid less but also do not have the security of medical or accident insurance.
- There are individuals who are under pressure to do extra work hours without payment. If they were to refuse, their contracts would not be renewed.
- There are many immigrants, particularly from Africa, who are living in difficult conditions. Many work illegally, are paid badly and have no medical or insurance cover.

Examples of Bible stories can help to focus on the issues. The feeding of the five thousand shows how one person's contribution led to a wider sharing and many were fed (Matthew 14, 13 –21). The story of the labourers in the vineyard, where all received the same wage for whatever they did, is an example of understanding the needs of each individual (Matthew 20, 1 – 16). The story of the Good Samaritan shows how human need overcomes prejudice against those who are different (Luke 10, 25 – 37).

Human dignity, work and unemployment

The dignity of each person

- Each person has his or her own dignity
- This dignity is given by God
- Each person is encouraged to discover his or her own potential and skills, as one important way of realising this dignity.

Those who are unable to work or who cannot find work

- Society often judges wrongly the worth of an individual by the particular profession or job in which he or she is engaged. Each must be encouraged to understand their value in the contribution made to society.
- Unemployment involves not only material loss but can result in damage to self-esteem of the individual and result in tensions and other problems in family life.
- To be unemployed is regarded by some as 'failure' or shameful. This feeling, while it is understood, must be challenged.
- Unemployment is often complicated by attempts to 'escape' the situation, with an individual denying the reality of what they face through the use of drugs or alcohol.

The role of the congregation

- The congregation is encouraged to offer pastoral support both in emotional and practical ways. This can help to raise the sense of the individual's value. Needs are often not only financial. A support group may be useful in helping individuals to discover other ways of building self-confidence.

- In changing and stressful times faith can offer strength to individuals and families.

Questions for congregations

- *What can the local church do about these matters?*
- *Discuss ways in which your congregation may offer help to unemployed people and their families.*

6. Politics and Sustainable Society: Participation in decision-making

Biblical references

Jeremiah 29, 4 - 7: Responsible use of the good gifts from God in society; Mark 12, 13 ff: The coin wears the portrait of the Caesar, human beings wear God's image; their first loyalty is not to a state or ruler; Luke 19, 41 ff: Our Lord cares for peace (shalom) in society, so we have to care too; Romans 12, 1 – 2 and 12, 19 – 13, 1: To overcome evil in society (including political authorities and structures) we cannot use the patterns of this world.

Is our democracy in a good state?

Our democracies are threatened not only from outside (e.g. by terrorism) but much more from inner tensions:

- Struggles over distribution and tension between different groups of the society, between privileged and underprivileged.
- Different cultural backgrounds leading to both open and concealed racism and xenophobia
- In contrast to earlier times there is less of a common understanding of values influencing society as a whole.
- We observe a lack of trust in authorities, especially politicians ("they are only interested in their own power"). On the other hand problems are so complex, that most people feel resigned to letting the authorities respond on their behalf.

Questions for congregations

- *Are these the main reason for individualism and indifference in political and social questions?*
- *What is your experience? Are there differences between local issues and the national level?*

Why is participation crucial?

- Democracy doesn't work automatically. To operate well it requires the co-operation of the majority of citizens. It is not sufficient that technocrats organise the society. Our world has become too difficult, linked and interdependent, so we need many different views and ideas to deal with all the issues.
- For example: constructing a new road needs not only traffic and construction experts, but also good co-operation with local people, to solve the problems like noise, pollution, safety of children and elderly people – local people are the experts for local difficulties through their daily experience. However, they can also be part of the conflict (Beware the "NIMBY" syndrome: **Not In My Back Yard!**).
- The job of scientific and technical experts is to find out the most efficient way to a certain goal. But who defines the goals? The fast development in sciences and technology results in immense possibilities, but *"to realise all that is technically possible is not technical but childish behaviour"* (C.F. v. Weizsäcker). We have to choose. There is plenty of lobbying for commercial aims. But who is lobbying for the citizens and especially the weak or minorities? Administration doesn't like critical questions very much. So the participation of the concerned

is crucial. Churches have an important role to raise ethical considerations and to help the voiceless to speak.

- Even with strong commitment we normally don't change things immediately. We need perseverance (see the parable of the persistent Widow, Luke 18). We need allies too. Networks with other Christian as well as non-Christian groups (e.g. trade unions) will not only strengthen our power but also widen our world-view.
- Sometimes real commitment for the weak leads to conflicts with the government (eg sanctuary movement, boycotts, blockades).
- Churches are always asked to be party-politically neutral, especially at election times. But to address important issues frankly sometimes means to oppose a particular political line. If there is no change in politics, we have to persist.

Civil society

Awareness of common values

Education is more than the transfer of knowledge. It also forms a set of guidelines for life. If we neglect this responsibility we can allow media pressure to have the control.

Questions for congregations

- *Form a scale of values (No.1 to ...x) a) from your personal view
b) of the majority of society in your country*
- *Are there differences between "Common Sense" and a Christian point of view?*
- *Our children are influenced by many factors. What can we do as parents or congregations to form a Christian-based value system?*

Information

Nobody can participate in decision-making without a substantial level of information. Otherwise they can be manipulated very easily.

Questions for congregations

- *In your country is information about recent issues easily available from the media, including both sides of the argument?*
- *Does the media make problems sufficiently transparent?*
- *How can your local congregation become a place to speak about difficult issues from a Christian background to find a clearer point of view?*

Balance between different powers in the society

Power takes a range of different forms – financial, commercial, influential or media, and political powers all influence the dynamics in our society.

Example: unemployment becomes a kind of tool for large enterprises to influence political decisions. Regional authorities can be pressured with the threat 'otherwise we close the factory in this town and go to another place or country'. The balance of power seems to be a key question for our democracy.

Questions for congregations

- *Do you feel that any of these powers are too strong, or are subject to little control?*
- *How do you help individuals to be sensitive to this problem? How do you balance the influence of various power systems?*

Transparency in politics

We do not have a "direct" but a "representative" democracy. That means political power operates

through political parties, but is more or less monitored by public awareness. That makes the issue of "internal democracy" in party life crucial: Is decision-making transparent for the public or is it a process that only takes place behind closed doors? Does leadership moderate the different views or is there a virtual dictatorship of the party leader through a small elite? For example: Have women and young people a voice? If not, how can this political party represent the different parts of society?

Questions for congregations

- *Are our congregations a place for training in participation and democracy?*
- *What about participation in decisions in your congregation/circuit? Do you feel responsible? Do you feel that your ideas are discussed? Have you proposals to change anything?*
- *Can our church become a kind of model of an **alternative society**, which trains us for responsible participation and respectful openness to different ideas, or for solving conflicts (1. Corinthians 6, 1ff)?*

In order to have an influence on society, it is necessary to first realise that we are both part of the problem and the solution. (Mark 10, 43)