

An Economy for the Real World?

Economy, business, profits—a stimulating, inspiring dialogue on these topics emerged at a college credit course.

BY RON LANE

ON MARCH 3-4 AT ADAMS STATE College in Alamosa, Colorado, professors and students participated in an intensive 12-hour seminar that explored a now worldwide business system begun in 1991 called the Economy of Communion. The principal organizer of the seminar, Shirley Atencio of the ASC campus ministry, said in anticipation of the weekend that she hoped participants would use some of the EOC precepts “to better this community and our world.” Through presentations by and dialogue with three North American members of the EOC, Miriam Turri from Denver, Joan Duggan from Hyde Park, New York, and Nick Sanna from the Washington, D.C. area, participants learned of the theory and practice of a new economy intended both for profit and for the well-being of society. Such a person-centered form of business is being identified and encouraged by a gradually increasing group of economists, including recent Nobel prize winners Amartya Sen and Daniel Kahneman. The three presenters, each with doctorates in their fields, have businesses employing EOC principles. Turri has a language school, Duggan is co-president of a tutorial business with 14 tutors, and Sanna is president and CEO of a software development company in Virginia with 25 employees.

EOC businesses seek to extend and improve upon the long-time dominant view in economics, namely, that businesses are based on the profit motive and an enlightened egoism. The EOC outlook concentrates, instead, on the human being rather than on profit: “The human person, not capital, remains at the center of the business.” It fosters a business culture of reciprocity and fraternity (love not only your own company but your competitor’s too) and of promoting the common good. Every EOC employee has the right to full knowledge of the company’s holdings, plans, and activities and is free to express ideas about company policies. Each person is encouraged to manifest his or her unique talents and to participate in the company’s decisions, struggles and successes. The business commits itself to complete honesty in advertising and marketing and to consider always the wellbeing of intended customers. To put it most simply, the task is to love the members inside the business, and the suppliers, customers and competitors outside the business.

And what is the outcome for the business of such seemingly impossible attitudes and actions? According to the literature on the EOC and to the experience of the presenters of the seminar, a joyful and friendly work environment is created within the business. The company is more liable to succeed and endure, to contribute to and be a model of a healthier, happier society, and to help produce a culture of giving and sharing rather than one of having. A good sign of such a business’s real success is that members typically look forward to Monday morning. The common, painful contrast between work time and weekend loses its hold. The work week is no longer just something to be gotten through; one can look forward to the whole week.

Of course, the presenters said, businesses need to be run wisely and yield profits. The EOC approach to profits is revolutionary, using a simple, general guide. One part of the profits is put back into the business. One part is given to others—next door or across the world—trying to develop an EOC business or promote EOC ideas. And one part is given to the poor—or, as EOC members prefer to put it, “given to those whose needs are themselves gifts to us,” as the needy are helped to come out of radical poverty and achieve a level of economic independence.

To the criticism that all this is impractical and unrealizable in the real world in which most people live, Economy of Communion members respond that the nature of the human being is inherently social. There is something in us that lies deeper and more essential than our selfishness. And, of course, they point to the hundreds and hundreds of successful EOC businesses now operating around the world.

After two intensive days of study and discussion, and as part of the college credit earned, student participants were asked to evaluate the seminar. They said or wrote such things as, "I became motivated to live by a new vision," "It was cool to see how people can make a difference around the world," "This way would really help the economy of the United States and the way of life of Americans," "I sincerely believe that the EOC is an example of what everyone in this world should live. Imagine... there might be less poverty or just maybe we wouldn't be at war with each other, trying to be better than everyone else," and, "This seminar provided groundings for a new lifestyle."