

*Coracle*

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## **Taking Shell on in the Hague**

by Christopher Hall

In May 1997 a shareholders' Resolution, on behalf of the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR, [www.eccr.org.uk](http://www.eccr.org.uk)) at the Shell AGM 'sent ripples throughout the corporate world'. 160 million shares supported the ECCR resolution calling on Shell to clean up their act on damage to communities and the environment primarily in the Niger Delta. That came later.

After trade Unionists from the Philippines had told Industrial Missioners in the UK: 'The lives and livelihoods of our people are decided in your boardrooms,' ECCR has engaged with certain British-based transnational corporations, replacing the hand-washing policy of disinvestment more appropriate in the struggle against apartheid.

In December 2005 ECCR decided to increase the pressure on Shell once more. Tabling a Resolution in time for the AGM needs 100 separate shareholders to endorse it. By the deadline we had 130.

ECCR next lobbied institutional shareholders, such as pension funds, to vote for the motion calling for greater action on environmental sustainability 'the peace, safety, environment and prosperity of local communities directly affected by the Company's operations'. We briefed the Church of England investment officers, who subsequently met Shell staff. Several large institutions have told ECCR that they decided to Abstain ignoring the Directors' advice, and wrote to Shell expressing their dissatisfaction. That alone made tabling the Resolution worthwhile.

The venue for the 2006 AGM was The Hague with a video-link to London. I emailed Dutch Iona Community Members and Associates, and Jan Maasen responded to my request for hospitality. He arranged for three of us to stay with a colleague over the time of the AGM. To identify each other at the station, we carried Iona Community Members' handbooks! It was a bonus thus to get to know two Dutch Catholics who share our commitment to Peace and Justice. Their hospitality helped calm the nerves at the prospect of an unfamiliar Dutch public meeting.

Four hours into the meeting I was called to speak to our Resolution. I protested that a Resolution, tabled 10 weeks earlier supported by 130 shareholders, had been thus marginalised. I detected a barely disguised smirk on the chair's face. (The Vice Chair has since denied there were any delaying tactics.) Both in London and the Hague the halls were half empty before the last vote on our Resolution.

Although the Resolution was technically lost 13 to 1, over 17% voted For the motion or Withheld their votes. If the Shell pay-roll votes were to be excluded, that figure would increase. The value of the shares that day disapproving of the Board was over £10 billion.

Ethical investment has increasingly become a major factor in the decision making of individuals and trustees. It has moved beyond whether to invest or to disinvest. Anyone with a bank account, insurance policy or pension has a stake in a transnational company. Each can and should ask questions about how their money is being used.

Engaging with companies is corporate responsibility, part of the continuing struggle for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.