

Hope for the Common Good

Social Justice Sunday

BEYOND THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

27 September, 2009



National Council of
Churches in Australia

Message from the General Secretary

The global financial crisis began two years ago. We now know that the global economic system has developed in a way that is unstable. As we face the threat of dangerous climate change we learn that it is also unsustainable. It is a system causing violence and destruction to people and the planet.

Recent trends in economic policy, including deregulation, privatisation, trade liberalisation, reduced social expenditure, free capital mobility and the unrestrained exploitation of nature, have brought many benefits, especially to most of us living in Australia. It is also true, however, that such policies are biased against the most disadvantaged in our communities.

The rich in our world are increasing their wealth while those who are poor are caught in devastating

intergenerational poverty traps. We are witnesses to the destruction of animal species, forests, rivers, oceans and the spoiling of our atmosphere. It is time for us to reconfigure the whole economy, harnessing it for the wellbeing of humanity. We must find new ways to live together in peace — with each other and the planet.

I urge you to take action to help our communities realise there is a future beyond the global financial crisis and to Hope for the Common Good. Please read this document prayerfully and use these resources to better protect our environment and care for those devastated by this economic crisis.

The Rev. Tara Curlewis
General Secretary

The National Council of Churches in Australia



An Economic Storm

The financial security and prosperity our economic system promised to deliver disappeared almost overnight with the global financial crisis which began in July 2007. The collapse of the domestic housing market in the United States and the exposure to high risk, complex financial instruments developed in that environment, have had a devastating and truly global effect.

This crisis is a consequence of the failure of global financial markets. Over the last 30 years, governments have increasingly deregulated these markets, allowing them to be manipulated for short-term gain. Greed was rewarded. The needs of the world's most vulnerable people and the future sustainability of the planet were sacrificed for the profit of a relative few.

This economic storm has caused rising unemployment, falling incomes, mortgage foreclosures, delayed retirements and declines in overall wellbeing. In developing countries, rates of hunger and poverty have increased. Finance for development has become scarce as capital markets, donors and official lenders contend with the severe global downturn. The World Bank and various United Nations agencies have warned that by the end of 2009 more than 200 million people will be living on less than US\$2 a day. The realisation of commitments made by developed countries to reduce global poverty, boost literacy and improve health outcomes seems increasingly distant.

PRAYER

Lord God, we live in disturbing days:

across the world,

- *prices rise,*
- *debts increase,*
- *banks collapse,*
- *jobs are taken away, and*
- *fragile security is under threat.*

*Loving God, meet us in our fear
and hear our prayer:*

*be a tower of strength amidst the shifting sands,
and a light in the darkness;
help us receive your gift of peace,
and fix our hearts where true joys are to be found,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(Church of England)

It is time to consider the values and the principles we need to guide us to more equitable, peaceful and sustainable ways of living. The Christian gospel calls people to live in harmony with each other and the environment and to prioritise the care of the most vulnerable over the making of profit. Our relationship with the God of life is an invitation to us to understand human progress and wellbeing in other than material ways.

As hopes fail for many people, we, sure of our calling, must commit ourselves to act, sure of our calling to bring the love of God to all people.



Work, Dignity and Hope

These are terrible times for many workers.

Unemployment has hit double digits in many countries across the globe. Wholesale layoffs and business failures are happening in many industries. In Australia the situation has not been as severe as in other parts of the world, but some economists predict that by 2011 more than one million Australians will be unemployed.

Workers at the bottom of the wage scale are the hardest hit. The 2009 Wesley Report, *Financial Stress: The Hidden Human Cost*, shows a large increase (between 2006 and 2008) in the number of households finding it difficult, if not impossible, to pay general household bills on time and highlighted the destructive effects this can have on personal health and family relationships.

As Christians we believe that people come before profits. This is why church organisations like The Salvation Army, UnitingCare, Anglicare and St Vincent de Paul, and their agencies, provide practical and financial assistance for low-income families and individuals struggling to make ends meet. But governments also have a responsibility to ensure the provision of the necessities of life for those who are unemployed, underemployed, or enduring low wage poverty.

Work is a fundamental aspect of human life. It is one of the most significant ways that people find meaning in their lives and the means by which they make their contribution to the common good. Furthermore, human beings have a right to live and work with dignity.

The organisation of work and of employment opportunities, therefore, should be structured around the needs of families and communities. Policies that encourage cooperative and collective work arrangements and the sharing of ideas in the workplace are to be supported. The rights of workers to refuse to work in situations that endanger health and/or life without jeopardising their jobs are essential if the workplace is to provide safety and a positive environment.

Advocating for such fair and just employment policies, Christians around the world are heeding the call of the ancient Hebrew prophets (Isaiah 58:3b-4a, Isaiah 58:6-7) to end the oppression of workers.

WORKERS' PRAYER

*Show me the suffering of the most miserable,
so I may know my people's plight.*

*Free me to pray for others,
for you are present in every person.*

*Help me to take responsibility for my own life,
so that I can be free at last.*

*Grant me courage to serve others,
for in service there is true life.*

*Give me honesty and patience,
so that I can work with other workers.*

*Bring forth song and celebration,
so that the Spirit will be alive among us.*

*Let the Spirit flourish and grow,
so that we will never tire of the struggle.*

*Let us remember those who have died
for justice, for they have given us life.*

*Help us love even those who hate us,
so we can change the world.*

(National Farm Worker Ministry, USA)

*Too many
Australians are
missing out on
the essentials
of life*

The Common Purse

In times of crisis, we often turn first to consider our own interests. During a financial crisis, it is almost inevitable that many of us are drawn to think about how much tax we are paying. This is not surprising considering that we rarely hear the word “tax” without the word “burden” attached and that at election times promises of tax cuts are often the first to be made.

However, when most of us are asked, we say that we would prefer better healthcare, education, roads and public transport to a few extra dollars in our pay packets. This response reflects our understanding that taxation is what we use in our society to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth and the raising of public money, our “common wealth”, our common purse.

Despite the language of “burden”, taxes are, in fact, the price we pay for a decent society — for publicly provided services so that everyone in the community has access to the means to live a decent life. When people argue about taxation, therefore, they are actually arguing about the level of moral responsibility they should accept for the community.

Christianity teaches us that we have a responsibility to care for each other and share what we have so that the most vulnerable are not left wanting. A Christian understanding of taxation, therefore, would regard it as an obligation we are eager to meet rather than a burden to be endured. It is one of the most important tools at our disposal for achieving economic justice.

In Australia, it is commonly believed that we are a highly taxed country but by developed country standards Australia is a relatively low taxing country. This is one reason why, despite our overall wealth as a country, there are embarrassing and persistent levels of poverty and exclusion and inadequate public services and infrastructure.

Too many Australians are missing out, on the essentials of life such as adequate food, clothing and shelter, and essential services such as dental care and mental health care. There are Indigenous communities in remote Australia with no electricity and no running water. The

Australian Council of Social Service has estimated that two million Australians live in poverty (based on a poverty line of 50% of average disposable income). Some 12% of Australian children live in poverty as do 27% of Australians of retirement age.

Through our governments we have a responsibility to uphold the right of all Australians to live a decent life. One of the keys to achieving this is a taxation system structured to encourage sustainable and ethical economic activity, facilitate individual and community wellbeing and inclusion and discourage activities that exacerbate social and economic disadvantage and vulnerability and environmental degradation. It is time to reconsider how we understand our taxes.

PRAYER

*God of justice and compassion,
we long to be a nation where all people
can live a decent life.*

*Help us work with and through our governments
to affirm our shared public responsibilities.*

*Inspire us to create a society
where all people can have*

- *financial security for a reasonable standard of living,*
- *decent and meaningful work,*
- *education,*
- *access to adequate healthcare,*
- *secure housing,*
- *appropriate social services,*
- *opportunities for cultural, technological, social and spiritual development*
- *and lively, safe and inclusive communities.*

Allow your love to prevail.

*God of justice and compassion, hear our prayer.
Amen.*

Sustaining Creation

In 2002, the National Council of Churches issued a statement entitled Sustaining Creation which included the following:

All of us are aware that our planet's health and vitality are decaying. In the 20th century, the human impact on the earth increased enormously ...

Every problem facing the world community is interrelated. Exploitation and greed, the consequent poverty of human communities, displacement of people, environmental degradation all impact on each other. It is not possible to tackle one without attempting to tackle another.

Certainly, these matters are political issues. They are economic issues. But at a deeper level, they are much more. At their core, they constitute a spiritual and moral crisis, touching all that we hold sacred.

We desperately need a change of spirit and attitude. Sustainable development is one of the most urgent moral tasks of our time. An appropriate response begins from sustainable values that recognise the inter-relatedness of all life.

Development is not sustainable if it steals from present and future generations. Poverty and environmental degradation are interwoven, and it is the poor who suffer most from this degradation. Sustainable development cannot be defined in economic terms alone, but must begin in a commitment to care for the poor, the marginalised, and the voiceless. We seek a sustainable community.

In the face of the global financial crisis some of our political leaders say social and ecological justice are luxuries we cannot afford but the truth is we can no

longer afford to ignore the groaning of creation.

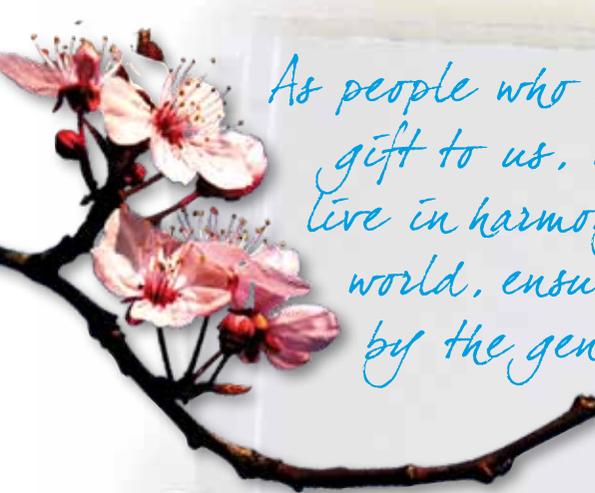
We must urge our governments to adopt policies that enhance the quality of the rivers and the land, the sea and the air and protect endangered species and all forms of life. We can call for increasing investment in the conservation and protection of forests, rivers and oceans, and the development of efficient and renewable sources of energy, ecologically and socially-appropriate technology and low-carbon transportation infrastructure. We can encourage our policy makers to prioritise the wellbeing of the poorest in our world — those who will suffer most as a result of climate change.

As people who receive the planet as God's sacred gift to us, we have a particular responsibility to live in harmony with and care for the natural world, ensuring that God's gift will be enjoyed by the generations to come.

PRAYER

*God of life,
Help us understand
that your gospel is not just
the proclamation of individual redemption
and renewal
but also the renewal of society under your reign.
Help us act to end injustice
and to restore right relationship with you,
between human beings
and with the whole of Creation.
For you are with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.*

(Adapted from the bishops of the Anglican Communion, Lambeth 2008.)



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Resources

SOCIAL JUSTICE NETWORK OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Find past Social Justice Sunday resources, and information on the social justice work of the NCCA and its member churches.

http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/social_justice_network

ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

Find information on Vinnies' services assisting people affected by the global financial crisis and their social justice work.

<http://vinnies.org.au>

UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Resources for the global financial crisis, including prayers for ourselves and others, here and overseas.

<http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/52-gfc>

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Find information and resources on the programs of the WCC, including the AGAPE (Alternative to Economic Globalisation Addressing People and Earth) process.

<http://www.oikoumene.org>

KAIROS CANADA

Canadian church-based social justice movement. Find worship and information resources on ecological justice, human rights and trade issues.

<http://kairoscanada.org>

NEW ECONOMICS FOUNDATION (UK)

Creating new ways of measuring progress towards increased wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

<http://www.neweconomics.org>

CENTRE FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The CPD's Real World Economics program presents a range of scholarly articles arguing that we need to

incorporate a broader, more balanced understanding of human nature into the economic principles that underpin policy development.

<http://cpd.org.au/category/all-articles/economy>

WHAT WOULD JESUS BUY?

Plenty of resources and links to get you thinking about society's obsession with over-consumption and how we might move down an alternate path.

<http://www.whatwouldjesusbuy.org.au>

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Proceedings from The Economic Crisis: Towards Sustainable Economies and Livelihoods conference, which aimed to reflect theologically on the root causes of the current economic crisis and the response of the churches in terms of their prophetic, pastoral and partnership roles and responsibilities.

<http://www.ctbi.org.uk/371/>

INTERFAITH WORKER JUSTICE

Find their toolkit for congregations on unemployment and the economic crisis. The Interfaith Worker Justice is a network of people of faith that calls upon our religious values in order to educate, organise and mobilise on issues and campaigns that will improve wages, benefits, and conditions for workers, and give voice to workers, especially workers in low-wage jobs.

<http://www.iwj.org/>

CARITAS IN VERITATE

Pope Benedict XVI's first social encyclical addresses themes vital to the wellbeing of humanity and reminds us that authentic renewal of both individuals and society requires living by Christ's truth in love.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/

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