

Statement in Response to the Economic Crisis

An open letter to Canadians from the Moderator of The United Church of Canada

Recently it was announced in the small town where I live that the mill is closing down. Everyone here—builders to bakers, teachers to preachers—works directly or indirectly for the mill or the already vanishing mines. A spirit of dread and anxiety is settling among us. It feels like a microcosm of what is happening to the economy across the country and around the world.

But we are not alone. Times of crisis can call out the best in human nature. During periods of war and the Great Depression, our grandparents bought bonds, rationed, rolled bandages, bundled clothes, helped their neighbours, and learned to distinguish between needs and wants. They pulled together as a nation. Solving the current economic crisis will also require our best.

Canadians are hurting. Our global neighbours are reeling. The economic situation is the harbinger of discomfort for some and of catastrophic suffering for others.

Canadian families are living with uncertainty, anxiety, and severe stresses that fray the bonds of relationships, harm physical and psychological health, and intensify social problems. Debt is rising. Savings are shrinking. Line-ups at foodbanks and shelters are getting longer.

We have a moral responsibility to care for those most affected—here and around the world. To do otherwise would be a marked departure from our identity as Canadians.

These are days of both hardship and opportunity. This crisis holds the possibility of being a historic turning point energized by renewed human creativity, adaptability, and spirit.

For example, many charities reported this Christmas that, in spite of the economic downturn, fundraising targets have been met or exceeded. Their success may actually be *because* of current economics. Suffering—of others and even our own—can evoke a deepened sense of gratitude and generosity in us.

But will suffering as a result of the economic crisis spur us to question the foundational values of our economic system, as well? Will we question a culture that has allowed profits to overtake the basic needs of so many citizens, as though stock value increases were the *purpose* of the economy?

We need to imagine a financial system that measures the worth of a company or institution according to what it produces and contributes to society, and then imagine laws and incentives that reflect that value rather than some imagined entitlement to an economic free-for-all.

We need to be clear that the needs of hungry children, homeless families, and the working poor supersede the demands of unfettered commerce. The “bottom line” needs to reflect values like love, kindness, justice, and care for creation.

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And while knitting sweaters for dinosaurs might have provided some temporary comfort, it would not have spared them from the ice age. Similarly, even if it is necessary in the short term, bailing out failing industries will not in the long term cure our economy. Stimulus packages that invest in economic innovation, in socially just and environmentally adaptive solutions, will ultimately accomplish far more down the road.

A poll was commissioned by The United Church of Canada late in 2008 to test concerns that the economic crisis would dampen Canadians' passion for environmental reform. Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed that Canada should take strong action on global warming, and 78% supported basing Canada's global warming targets on scientific consensus, despite possible economic consequences. Furthermore, 68% agreed that developing countries should receive assistance from Canada to deal with global warming. Only 36% of the respondents thought that the government should cut back on global warming efforts due to the economic downturn.

Canadians recognize that environmental protection is not a barrier, but the path, to economic recovery. In fact, it has been our stubborn refusal to acknowledge the rapid destruction of the planet that has led to our economic demise. More cars, bigger homes, and insatiable consumption are the cause of, not the solution to, our economic concerns. We cannot shop our way to prosperity. The planet will simply not allow it. That system is a crumbling pyramid scheme that rewards those at the top and is devouring everyone and everything below.

As a church, we are looking for ways to do our part—to care for the most vulnerable, meet the adaptive challenges, and welcome this difficult opportunity. I am calling on our members and congregations to give themselves to the challenges and be attentive to opportunities. That may mean practising the spiritual discipline of sacrifice for the well-being of others.

And I am calling on Canadians, in all sectors of society, to risk truly taking up leadership at this important moment in history. We cannot wait for government, industry, or financial institutions alone to resolve these issues. Every one of us needs to consider the part we will play, to consider what we can contribute to transformation, possibility, and hope.

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