

Pastoral Letter on the Economy

November 2008

Economic uncertainty has become a crisis of global proportions. People who went about business as usual in comfort and security only months ago are now dreading the prospect of financial collapse. Experts have lost their boldness in predicting the length or depth of the present financial crisis, as well as their confidence in pointing the way out of it. Prudence now calls for careful assessment of personal and social realities; wise stewardship of current resources; and proactive planning for future possibilities.

Historically, recessions have little effect on religious giving.⁽¹⁾ Yet, such times are a great opportunity for the Church to speak with clarity and conviction about the certainty of God's grace. The assurance of the people of God is in the faithfulness of our heavenly Father and our testimony to the world is that there is true security only in Him. Our faith is not in the stock market or in retirement accounts, but in the Almighty God who sustains His children in all situations. While some may panic and withdraw, the people of God confidently involve themselves in ministries that engage human needs and offer hope and redemption.

The Board of General Superintendents of The Wesleyan Church calls upon the Church to renew its demonstrations of being the people of God in the world. In financially troubled times, we call upon Wesleyans to lead lives that are *disciplined, generous, prayerful, courageous* and *creative*.

- ***Disciplined*** because many of us have consumed too much of the world's resources on ourselves. This can be a time to control our cravings and determine to live more simply.
- ***Generous*** because there are people who are (or will be) going without some of the necessities of life and we have an obligation to share with them in Jesus' name.
- ***Prayerful*** because the problems that plague our world will not be solved by throwing money at them, but by God intervening with justice and grace.
- ***Courageous*** because fear and panic are not becoming to the people of God. The peace of Christ allows us to approach life's difficulties with calm, deliberate, confident steps.
- ***Creative*** because the mind of Christ inspires His followers to think more clearly of how to minister to others and to society in ways that spread hope and holiness that transform culture.

It is time that we recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from our Father in heaven. "...Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (Deuteronomy 8:18).

It is time that we adjust our personal and business plans to include God's agenda. "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on

business and make money.’ Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

It is time that we show the world that God’s people are different. “...You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (2 Peter 2:9).

As the Scriptures indicate, the people of God have...

- A perspective about their stewardship of material possessions that is different than a culture of consumerism;
- A response to financial crises that is grounded in faith, not fear;
- Priorities for the use of their finances that are not governed by the size or regularity of a paycheck or investment earnings;
- A motivation of love for God and love for others that transcends economics;
- A grip on another world that remains firm when this world is shaken.

In our travels and conversations in recent weeks, the General Superintendents have made several observations about Wesleyan ministries and initiatives their leaders are taking:

- We have found that stories about the impact of the current international economic crisis vary from one locale and region to another. Each ministry must assess its own community circumstances and tailor responses to its own unique context.
- The pulpit is a powerful tool being used by pastors to guide congregations creatively in troubled times. Wise pastors do not hesitate to present biblical perspectives on faith, money and stewardship.
- This is a time for intensified discipleship instruction. Many people are re-evaluating their life styles in light of a needy world and are reconsidering their giving priorities. Effective churches will use this teachable moment for personal financial counseling, classes on how to get out of debt (especially personal credit card debt), or for small group Bible studies using books such as Richard Foster’s *Freedom of Simplicity* to enrich discussions.
- There is an increased sensitivity to and a more urgent need for compassionate, community-based ministries. Generous churches are leading the appeal for volunteers and donations to food banks, assistance programs for the homeless, job training for the unemployed, and poverty-relief services.
- Leaders and boards are reviewing current priorities, rethinking contingencies and anticipating alternatives. Resisting the urge to overreact, they are postponing unnecessary expenditures, conserving resources, and leaving margin for future possibilities.
- Great Commission churches are refocusing on their core missional priorities—evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, healthy church multiplication, and global outreach. They are not allowing the mission of God to be held captive by the world’s economy.

At Wesleyan World Headquarters, we are in frequent consultation with District Superintendents; members of the General Board; the Executive Board (which serves as the Church’s finance committee); our corporate investment committee; investment brokers and advisors; and the general officers who are members of the General Administrative Council and the persons responsible for managing general church budgets and programs. We are identifying ways to

conserve current assets and maximize available resources. We are keeping an eye on expenditures to avoid exceeding actual income. We are making conservative future projections—next year’s general church budget will be based on income levels of two years ago and will include across-the-board programmatic expense reductions. An alternative budget is being prepared to initiate new contingencies if even stronger measures are needed later. Most significantly, we remain confident that local churches will continue to act as faithful partners in The Wesleyan Church’s vision for fulfilling the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.

We encourage local, district and other ministries to consider proactive measures that reflect biblical principles, wise preparation, and responsible leadership.

- Pray for national and international political and business leaders as they strive to resolve the complex challenges of the current global economic crisis.
- Pray for and show Christlike compassion to those who are negatively impacted by circumstances beyond their control or by the consequences of their own choices. Intercede for the spiritual, emotional and financial wellbeing of those who trust God in these frightening times.
- Prepare realistic or flat budgets that focus on core missional priorities for fulfilling the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. Give due consideration to contingency plans that anticipate worst case scenarios.
- Prioritize expenditures and postpone unnecessary spending until the true depth of the crisis is known several months from now.
- Re-evaluate plans for major new expenditures or decisions not yet implemented that were made prior to the current crisis. Do not allow planned expenditures to exceed actual income.
- Provide transparent information about church finances and express gratitude to faithful givers.

Our confidence in a sovereign God releases us from fear and enables us to live boldly. As the people of God, we commit ourselves to doing the right things regardless of the cost. We take seriously our trust to be faithful stewards, convinced that all things belong to God. We choose to follow biblical teachings in the management of our finances. We reach out to help one another, as well as the “stranger” who is in need.

Few will escape the widespread, possibly long-term effects of the current economic crisis and its ripples through our world. However, Wesleyans prayerfully seek to be positive witnesses for Jesus Christ and examples of people upheld by His provision and promises. Our passion is to spread hope and holiness that transforms culture. Our prayer is that God will enable us to do so faithfully and fearlessly.

The Board of General Superintendents

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⁽¹⁾ “Religious Giving in Uncertain Times: Insights for Congregations and Faith-Based Nonprofits,” Nov. 20, 2008, The Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, <http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/LakeFamilyInstitute>.