

The Good News

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Practicing Our Faith During an Economic Crisis

In the current issue of *Sojourners* magazine, editor Jim Wallis writes:

It's not often that most Americans are feeling the same thing at the same time, mostly talking about the same thing, and all worrying about the same thing. The last time might have been just after 9/11. But it is increasingly clear that most Americans are focused on the same thing right now. The collapse of Wall Street, the deepening economic recession (the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression, everyone keeps saying), and the clear threat of another depression now looming have become the overriding foci of the election. Every other issue than the economy is perceived as a distraction.

What is a Christian response to a deepening economic crisis like this? What should people of faith be thinking, saying, and doing? What is the responsibility of the churches to their own parishioners, to their communities, to the nation and the world? And where is God in all this?

In this issue of *The Good News*, we attempt to address these questions on two levels: (a) the personal experience of stewardship and (b) pastoral strategy during an economic crisis. We begin with a commentary on stewardship adapted from remarks presented to the congregation of the Central Congregational Church in Dallas, Texas, on October 12, 2008, by Philip W. Suomu, a friend of FYJ Wheeler, who submitted them.

Stewardship in Difficult Times

Good Morning. A couple of weeks ago, on September 27th, a member of the stewardship committee asked me if I would speak to you today on behalf of the stewardship campaign. I agreed to do so and then began thinking about which Bible passages I would use and what I would say about what the church means to me, why am I here, what binds me to the church, what do I get back, why do I give to the church, and how does the church nourish me? She told me the Bible passages for the campaign were from Proverbs 11, verses 24 through 26.

Let's hear what the Bible says in these verses, taken from the New Living Translation:

- Verse 24: Give freely and become wealthier; be stingy and lose everything.
- Verse 25: The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.
- Verse 26: People curse those who hoard their grain; but they bless the one who sells in time of need.

Everything was going fine in my thoughts to bring my message to you until the next Monday, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 777 points, the economic bailout plan was in disarray, and the entire financial world came crashing down. These events called out to me to change my plan on what to say today, so as to take into account what stewardship means in difficult times like these. I don't know about you, but I remember after the twin towers came

crashing down on September 11, 2001, I was in a fog for a short time. In times of trouble, it is nice to know where one can go for peace--and for me, that is the church.

I like having a church home, and I'm willing to pay for one. This is such a small expense compared to other retreats, such as the ones people have in the mountains or at the shore.

I like the fact that the pastors at the church are available to me if I should need their guidance, counseling, and prayers. It's sort of like an insurance policy. Many of us have been helped by them with hospital visits, funerals, marriages, and baptisms. All at no extra cost!

I like the church's being seen in the community as a house of God, where people in the neighborhood know, like the homes we grew up in, if they have to go there, we will let them in.

So, for me, I see my pledge as part investment, part insurance, part fellowship, but, mostly, a quiet place where I can go to hear the word of the Lord and try to understand how it will help me this week.

Now, as to the church budget, the largest items in it are for salaries and the facilities. Of note, while these items may be increased or decreased somewhat depending on the pledges received, these are mostly fixed expenses. This means the largest variable portions of the budget lie in Outreach, Religious Education, Membership Development, Music and Worship, and the Diocese. I believe we, as a congregation, should be allocating more funds to outreach, as that is one of the prime reasons we exist as servants of Christ. To allocate generously to outreach and these other variable-cost areas, we must first cover all our fixed expenses. So the more we pledge, the more increasingly visible our support of Christ's mission becomes.

In closing, I would like to read to you a little from the Gospel of Matthew, again from the New Living Translation. I will read Matthew 6, verses 24-27 and 31-34.

- Verse 24: No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.
- Verse 25: That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life--whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?
- Verse 26: Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are?
- Verse 27: Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?
- Verse 31: So don't worry about these things, saying, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?"
- Verses 32-33: These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.
- Verse 34: So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.

A Pastoral Strategy for an Economic Crisis

Jim Wallis continues:

What does the Bible say about all the issues now being raised [by the economic crisis]? What does our theology tell us about money and possessions, wealth and power, credit and responsible financial choices, economic values vs. family values, lifestyle and stewardship, generosity and justice, and both personal and social responsibility? What can Christian economists tell us about economic philosophy, the role of the market, the role of government, the place of social regulation, the spiritual consequences of economic disparities, the moral health of an economy, and the criteria of the common good?

And what about pastoral care in a time of economic crisis? How do we listen to people, just be present to them, comfort them, and perhaps help them to re-examine their assumptions, values, and practices? This is already a time of great anxiety for many. But how could it also be a time of prayerful self-evaluation, redirection, and even new relationships with others in our congregations and communities.

Sojourners is going to take up that challenge. We want to turn our blog and our website into Christian forums for a wide-ranging discussion and collective discernment of the issues of this economic crisis. We are already planning cover stories and articles for *Sojourners* magazine and a new Sojourners study guide on all of the above issues. We will be doing wider media messaging, interviews in television and radio, and op-eds in newspapers, while also making the economic crisis a focus of my own writing and speaking.

We will be asking Christian economists to address the fundamental issues of economic philosophy and policy. We will be seeking the best thinking of many theologians on the biblical and moral issues at stake. And we will ask pastors about the realities now facing the members of their congregations and what Christian formation means in a moment like this. We will together seek a pastoral strategy for an economic crisis.

And we want to get our Sojourners constituency and wider community talking, praying, and acting in this time of challenge and opportunity. We want to hear your stories. Prophetic action will be called for, and pastoral care will be needed, so we will begin a far-ranging conversation with you on the shape of both.

Let's start by making the *God's Politics* blog a public Christian forum on how we, as people of faith, should respond to this historic crisis. With the wisdom we can gather from many voices, the practical support we can offer each other, the creative solutions we can help forge, the prophetic leadership we can offer, and the care for each other that we can provide, we will try to act in the best tradition of the extended community that has been Sojourners for more than three decades. So we invite you to join the discourse and the discernment. And let's pray that we can learn together what it means to be faithful in a time such as this. (Those wishing to respond should visit: http://www.sojo.net/blog/godspolitics/?p=2767#disqus_thread).

Upcoming Events

Foods'n Fancies Annual Bazaar, Saturday November 22 from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. in the Parish Hall

This is the only major fundraiser for The Women of St. Mary's to fund its outreach initiatives. Please begin searching your attics and closets for items to donate for sale at this unique event.

Minutes from the Vestry Meeting

The Vestry met for its annual retreat on Sunday, October 5. The topic for this year's retreat was advance planning for St. Mary's 200th Anniversary in 2013. Among the items discussed were:

- Growing our membership, and retaining and engaging current members, are critical to maintaining a vital church. Suggestions for ways to do this include pairing up new/prospective and existing members, and a more robust adult education program.
- The Vestry will consider potential property projects that can increase our energy efficiency and reduce energy costs.
- As a parish, we should look at Outreach projects that can involve the entire congregation, e.g. bringing parish members from Santa Maria Virgen to St. Mary's, and offering Spanish classes to St. Mary's members.

More information will be provided at the Annual Meeting in January 2009. If anyone has an interest in serving on the steering committee for the 200th anniversary, please contact either Peter Chase or one of the Wardens.

Update on Katrina Activities

Last week, we shipped another trailer load of gently used furniture and appliances to the greater New Orleans area. This time, the shipment went to Houma, Louisiana, an area hit by Katrina and further devastated by Hurricane Gustav. The success of the program—more than 50 tons of household goods have been shipped during the past—is due in large measure to the donated services of Gentle Giant Movers in Somerville, Walter Mucha (pronounced “moo hah”), a local independent mover in Brookline and StoragePlus in Waltham. We have had extensive experience with all three companies and can attest to the quality and professionalism of their services. Please consider using these businesses should you have storage or moving requirements.

Prayer Book Memorials

St. Mary's has recently received a shipment of much needed prayer books. Please consider donating a prayer book as a memorial to, or in celebration of the life of, a loved one. The cost is \$20.00. Please contact Denise for further information.

About Town

Perry Blank, daughter of Tim and Tricia Blank, is a freshman at Duke University. Abbi Golledge, daughter of Robert and Susan Golledge and granddaughter of Gail Jessup, is a freshman at Georgetown University. Nathan Riley, son of Tom and Diane Riley, is a freshman at American University....Anne Rippey Turtle and John Turtle had a brief telephone visit with Anna-Britta Perkins in Sweden during their recent visit to Scandinavia. She enjoys good health and is contemplating a trip to the U.S.

The “Ask It” Basket:

Q: If Holy Communion is open to all baptized Christians, what is the purpose of Confirmation?

A: There are two principal sacraments of the Episcopal Church: Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Baptism is considered the complete initiation into the life of Christ. All Baptized are children of God. Confirmation is an adult affirmation of one's Baptismal vows.