

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Episcopal Church meeting in Hendersonville, North Carolina, March 13-18, 2009 to the Church and our partners in mission throughout the world.

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

- Philippians 4:11b - 13

As the House of Bishops gather at the Kanuga Camp and Conference Center for our annual Spring Retreat, we are mindful of the worsening financial crisis around us. We recognize there are no easy solutions for the problems we now face. In the United States there is a 30% reduction of overall wealth, a 26% reduction in home values and a budget deficit of unprecedented proportions. Unemployment currently hovers at over 8% and is estimated to top 10% by the end of the year. There are over 8 million homes in America that are in foreclosure. Consumer confidence is at a 50 year low.

Unparalleled corporate greed and irresponsibility, predatory lending practices, and rampant consumerism have amplified domestic and global economic injustice. The global impact is difficult to calculate, except that the poor will become poorer and our commitment to continue our work toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 is at great risk. A specter of fear creeps not only across the United States, but also across the world, sometimes causing us as a people to ignore the Gospel imperative of self-sacrifice and generosity, as we scramble for self-preservation in a culture of scarcity.

The crisis is both economic and environmental. The drought that grips Texas, parts of the American South, California, Africa and Australia, the force of hurricanes that have wreaked so much havoc in the Caribbean, Central America and the Gulf Coast, the ice storm in Kentucky—these and other natural disasters related to climate change—result in massive joblessness, driving agricultural production costs up, and worsening global hunger. The wars nations wage over diminishing natural resources kill and debilitate not only those who fight in them, but also civilians, weakening families, and destroying the land. We as a people have failed to see this connection, compartmentalizing concerns so as to minimize them and continue to live without regard to the care of God's creation and the stewardship of the earth's resources that usher in a more just and peaceful world.

In this season of Lent, God calls us to repentance. We have too often been preoccupied as a Church with internal affairs and a narrow focus that has absorbed both our energy and interest and that of our Communion – to the exclusion of concern for the crisis of suffering both at home and abroad. We have often failed to speak a compelling word of commitment to economic justice. We have often failed to speak truth to power, to name the greed and consumerism that has pervaded our culture, and we have too often allowed the culture to define us instead of being formed by Gospel values.

While our commitment to the eradication of extreme poverty through the eight Millennium Development Goals moves us toward the standard of Christ's teaching, we have nevertheless often fallen short of the transformation to which Christ calls us in our own lives in order to live more fully into the Gospel paradigm of God's abundance for all.

Everyone is affected by the shrinking of the global economy. For some, this is a time of great loss—loss of employment, of homes, of a way of life. And for the most vulnerable, this “downturn” represents an emergency of catastrophic proportions. Like the Prodigal who comes to his senses and returns home, we as the people of God seek a new life. We recognize in this crisis an invitation into a deeper simplicity, a tightening of the belt, an expanded Lenten fast, and a broader generosity. God's abundant mercy and forgiveness meet and embrace us, waiting to empower us through the Holy Spirit to face the coming days.

In a time of anxiety and fear the Holy Spirit invites us to hope. Anxiety, when voiced in community can be heard, blessed and transformed into energy and hope, but if ignored, swallowed or hidden, fear and anxiety can be corrosive and lead to despair. We Christians claim that joy and hope emerge for those who have the courage to endure suffering. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul goes so far as to boast of his suffering, because “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Our current crisis presents us with opportunities to learn from our brothers and sisters of faith in other parts of the world who have long been bearers of hope in the midst of even greater economic calamity.

We can also learn from our spiritual ancestors, who found themselves in an economic and existential crisis that endured for forty years – on their journey from Egypt to Israel. While they groaned in Egypt, they murmured at Sinai – at least at first. And then after their groaning, complaining and reverting to old comforts of idol worship, they were given Grace to learn and understand what the Lord wanted to teach them.

They learned that they needed the wilderness in order to recover their nerve and put their full trust in God--and to discover their God-given uniqueness, which had been rubbed away during their captivity in Egypt. They adopted some basic rules that enabled them to live in a community of free people rather than as captives or slaves – the God given Ten Commandments. And perhaps most importantly, our spiritual ancestors discovered that the wilderness is a unique place of God's abundance and miracle, where water gushed out of a rock and manna appeared on the desert floor – food and drink miraculously provided by God.

As we go through our own wilderness, these spiritual ancestors also point the way to a deep and abiding hope. We can rediscover our uniqueness – which emerges from the conviction that our wealth is determined by what we give rather than what we own. We can re-discover manna – God's extraordinary expression of abundance. Week by week – in congregations and communities around the world, our common manna is placed before us in the Eucharist. Ordinary gifts of bread and wine are placed on the altar, and become for us the Body and Blood of Christ, which, when we receive them, draw us ever more deeply into the Paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

As our risen Lord broke through the isolation of the disciples huddled in fear for their lives following his suffering and death, so too are we, the Body of Christ called to break through the loneliness and anxiety of this time, drawing people from their fears and isolation into the comforting embrace of God's gathered community of hope. As disciples of the risen Christ we are given gifts for showing forth God's gracious generosity and for finding blessing and abundance in what is hard and difficult. In this time the Holy Spirit is moving among us, sharing with us the vision of what is real and valued in God's world. In a time such as this, Christ draws us deeper into our faith revealing to us that generosity breaks through distrust, paralysis and misinformation. Like our risen Lord, we, as his disciples are called to listen to the world's pain and offer comfort and peace.

As we continue our Lenten journey together we place our hearts in the power of the Trinity. The God who created us is creating still and will not abandon us. The Incarnate Word, our Savior Jesus Christ, who in suffering, dying and rising for our sake, stands in solidarity with us, has promised to be with us to the end of the age. God the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God for us and in us, is our comforter, companion, inspiration and guide. In this is our hope, our joy and our peace.