

GREVILLEA

May, 2009

Welcome to the thirteenth edition of **Grevillea** an e-magazine to stimulate your thinking!

Why "Grevillea"? The Macquarie Dictionary defines "grevillea" as any shrub or tree of the very large, mainly Australian genus Grevillea family. Many are attractive ornamentals and a number are useful trees. It is also worth noting that grevillea can be very toxic.

So Grevillea is an Australian e-magazine which will cover a large range of subjects as time goes on. We trust they will be interesting (not just ornamental), useful and stimulate (not irritate) your thinking. We aim to have articles that will be short, practical and worth your opening them as attachments.

This edition focuses on **Economic Responsibility**.

I have invited people from different backgrounds and perspectives to write on this subject. Stuart Elliot from Northmead admits to being a banker and offers insight into how the global financial crisis came about. Chris Bertinshaw, CEO at Parramatta Mission, writes out of his experience of having been a licensed investment advisor and now serving a large Christian enterprise. Rev Narelle Penman shares her thoughts by providing biblical and personal comment. John Cutts was an executive for a large international company before making a career change. He is now part time secretary of the Parramatta-Nepean presbytery as well as maintaining a small business with a partner. He writes a very personal article. Finally I offer some thoughts on economic responsibility as part of discipleship.

Email me if you have some thoughts to share. My email address is chrisw@nat.uca.org.au.

I hope you are stimulated by this edition of Grevillea.

Grace and peace
Chris Walker

A (Financial) Crisis of Faith

Stuart Elliott

I have a confession to make. I work in a bank. I know what you are thinking.... “How can someone who claims to be a Christian work in an industry that is only slightly better than the Colombian drug cartels.” You may be surprised to learn that the finance industry in Australia employs over 350,000 and even more surprised that a number of them are Christians.

It is probably fair to say that for many of us, the current Global Financial Crisis (GFC) is testing our resolve to continue this work of mission amongst the hostiles. The last two years have given us a very clear demonstration of the seven deadly sins in action.

Before going into the sins themselves, it is probably worthwhile giving you a little bit of background on the GFC; where it started, and how a few bad loans in the southern USA has resulted in a worldwide recession and a total reshape of the finance industry.

Our story starts in the 1980's when a group of smart young investment bankers developed a clever tool called securitization. Securitization works like this: you take a whole bunch of loans, wrap them in a nice package and sell them to an investor who wants a constant income stream. For the seller, they get paid immediately for loans rather than having to wait for all the repayments. For the buyer, they get a low risk constant income stream (all of the loan repayments) and they get it at a good price because they buy the risk of some of the loans going bad. Everyone wins!

Towards the end of the 90's a few of the bigger investment banks worked out they could do it with mortgages. Even though the size of a mortgage was small in comparison to a corporate loan, if you got enough of them you could make quite a decent package. Of course, the risk of mortgages going bad was slightly higher, but they were backed by property, so what could be safer?

During the early part of this decade demand for securitization was huge. Companies had a lot of money to invest and they wanted good returns. The way to get higher returns was to take more risk. So investment banks started to look for loans that had higher returns, this of course meant finding mortgages that were well above the normal rate. These were called ‘sub-prime’ mortgages because lenders were able to charge significantly higher interest rates than the normal retail banks. This was seen to be OK because the investment bank would package them all up (Securitized Investments, Collateralised Debt Obligations – the better the name, the more legitimate it sounds), and have the package rated by a ratings agency such as Moody's. Now, the investment banks paid these agencies so they had a vested interest in keeping a good working relationship. As long as the package had some good quality loans in it, it was likely to be rated at the higher end.

So attractive did these securitized mortgages become that the demand for them could not be met without opening mortgage brokerages on every corner. These guys were given significant incentives to sell as many bad loans as they could. They were convinced that the property market would continue to underwrite the deals they made and all would be well. Because of the great returns, Banks and investment houses

across the world were buying these investment vehicles with very little understanding of what lay beneath them. In many cases they were borrowing heavily from the money market to buy these investments.

From the perspective of the consumer, there was unprecedented access to money to buy property. Workers on as little as US\$30,000 were being lent every cent on properties valued at well over \$500,000. They were told that if they couldn't afford it they could just bring the keys back. For the broker, this was a goldmine. He could be paid for selling the same property over and over again, and if prices continued to climb he could make more each time.

At the same time, a lucrative market was developing in derivatives of these securitized loans. Derivatives are essentially where investment banks bet on the price of something in the future and trade on that projected price. Others were trading on the stocks of the companies that were making all of these loans and others still were investing in hedge funds to protect losses (or bet against losses) in order to make money.

It is a bit like betting on a horse race, then betting on the bookie, and then paying someone else to insure against all of those just in case anything went wrong...and then someone else betting on how well you do out of this process...and so on, and so on.

While all of this sounds very confusing, the bottom line is that by the middle of 2008, over US\$50 trillion (more than the entire world economic output) was tied up in investments directly related to these bad loans, or the companies that had significant exposure to them. And propping them all up was a bunch of near worthless properties and 100's of 1000's of working families that could no longer afford their loans.

Once the property bubble burst and the sub-prime mortgage market collapsed, the intricate web of inter-related loans and bets ensured that the rest toppled like a house of cards. The extent of the problems has been so severe that some of the world's largest financial institutions have collapsed. Others have been bought out by their competition at low prices and in other cases, the governments of the wealthiest nations in the world have resorted to extensive bailout and rescue packages for the remaining large banks and financial institutions.

The flow on effect of this is that no one has any money to lend, or if they do they are being very circumspect about whom, and charging for the risk. The whole finance industry has lost confidence and this will continue. This means that business is finding it harder to finance its investments and is starting to make decisions to cut back on production. It is now flowing from the market economy (shares, stocks etc) into the real economy (jobs, prices, production) and we don't know how long or deep this will be.

But, back to the seven deadly sins...who in all this is to blame? Who has demonstrated the clearest examples of these cardinal sins?

While it would be awfully convenient to lay all of the fault at the feet of the investment bankers who created these weapons of mass recession (WMR), or the

mortgage brokers who deceitfully signed up the poor to loans they can't afford, or even the executives of these firms that are paid outrageously, it is time we looked at the role that we all play in creating the environment where something like this can happen.

Lust – our desire to have more, to acquire goods and build wealth drives the system. We are in love with a way of life that the world can not afford, yet we are not prepared to give up on this dream.

Gluttony – the 20% of people in the developed world consumer 80% of its output and we constantly demand more. When will we be prepared to give up something for the other 80%?

Greed – We laud it, applaud it and create celebrity out of it. Why are we surprised by its consequences?

Sloth – how many of us, in spite of our knowledge of all the wrongs, get up and do something about it. It is much easier to watch it all on our High Definition, Flat Screen, LCD TVs.

Wrath – Our indignant anger at the executives' salaries, while our superannuation funds are voting in favour of these because they are driven by returns and share prices, and we complain if our super isn't constantly getting double digit growth.

Envy – The desire that we all have to keep up with those around us and the feeling of failure if we “get behind the times.”

Pride – The self serving congratulations we give ourselves when we contribute the smallest amount to charity, support the bushfire appeals, put rubbish in the recycle bin. The list goes on....

As a sobering close, it is estimated that the US will spend about \$9.7 trillion dollars on direct and indirect bailouts related to the Global Financial Crisis. In comparison, the total debt of the world's poorest countries is \$500 billion, and it would take merely \$40 billion (that's less than half a percent of the bailout) to provide the necessities of life for all of humanity.

Global Priority	\$U.S. Billions
Basic education for all	6
Water and sanitation for all	9
Reproductive health for all women	12
Basic health and nutrition	13

Why can we find the money to fix a system so broken and flawed, yet we can not find the compassion to help our brothers and sisters who live in poverty?

Where is the faith, hope and love in that?

Christian Discipleship and Economic Responsibility.

Chris Bertinshaw

The issue that I will explore in this article is “investment decisions: what does a Christian need to consider?”

Firstly, let me state that while I once was a licensed investment advisor, I no longer hold a licence. It was relinquished over twenty years ago. My comments about investing are general in nature and readers are advised to seek professional advice before they make investment decisions. I’ll give you some hints on what to look for later.

Secondly, I believe that Christian people should always begin their consideration of any issue by reflecting on the nature and being of God. Our doctrine of God is the major determinant of our behaviour, so it wise to begin there.

Scripture tells us that God created the universe by a decision of His will. D. Broughton Knox puts it succinctly, “mind controls matter and God’s mind controls everything that we see around us because he brought it into existence simply by his will and word” (Selected Works, Vol 1: The Doctrine of God, Matthias Press, 2000. p175).

To cut to the chase; everything we are and have has been created by God. We are his creature and all the things we possess are gifts from him. Jesus comforts us by teaching of God’s sovereignty. He tells us that even the hairs of our head are numbered and the sparrows that fall to the ground do so by the will of our Father (Matt 10: 29-31).

The early church, being founded in Old Testament doctrine had a strong concept of the sovereignty of God. When Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 they reported back to their people who raised their voices in prayer, beginning: “Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them...”(Acts 4: 24).

Immediately following the prayer they “were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (v31). They decided to pool their possessions and unite behind the common task of “testifying to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (v33).

Commentators have described this group decision (v32) as a kind of Christian love-socialism that freed the believers of the burden of possessions, but that is to miss the point of the context.

Chapter 5 begins with Ananias and Sapphira who sold some land. They withheld some of the proceeds and claimed that the amount they gave the Apostles was the total amount. They both lied regarding the sale proceeds and both died as a result. Their sin was not that they withheld some of the

money. In verse 4 Peter says that the money was at their disposal. The sin was the lie that the money they donated was the entire amount.

This group recognised that all that they had was God's. Some sold houses and put the money in the Apostles hands while Acts 12:12 implies that Mary, the mother of John Mark retained her house and made it available for the believers to gather and pray.

Christian people, recognising that all they have is given in trust by God, need to reflect carefully on what use they put their possessions to. Here are some tips on making investments.

Investors should always start with a plan. It will start with an assessment of where you are now, where you want to end up and then set out a course of action to get there. The course of action will vary from person to person according to your appetite for risk and your stage in life.

Financial plans are best developed with the assistance of a financial planner. The best place to find one is through the Financial Planning Association (FPA) web site <http://www.fpa.asn.au>. Anyone giving advice about financial products must be either an Australian Financial Services (AFS) license holder, a director or employee of an AFS license holder or an authorised representative of an AFS license holder. So the first thing to do is check the credentials of the person you choose to see.

The FPA outline a six-step financial planning process;

1. gather your financial information
2. identify your goals
3. identify financial issues
4. prepare your financial plan (called a Statement of Advice)
5. implement the recommendations based on your financial plan
6. review and revise the plan at regular intervals, or when circumstances change.

Given that the FPA definition of financial planning is “the process of developing strategies to help you manage your financial affairs so you can build wealth, enjoy life and achieve financial security”, Christians embarking on this task need to understand that it is very important to let your advisor know clearly what your financial goals are – because it maybe that your goals differ from your advisors’.

An important aspect of your plan will be protection. It will include protecting your family, your assets and your income. A principle of protection is that you need enough to restore you to the position you were in before an unexpected event occurred. So, if you have a mortgage of \$400,000 which costs say \$3,000 per month, you may consider having life cover for the main income earner that will pay out the mortgage in the event of their death and income protection that will pay the repayments in the event of inability to work due to illness. Most people are underinsured. “The average life insurance payout last

year was just \$90,000 a tiny sum that would go nowhere near paying off the balance of most mortgages” (Penny Prior SMH 3/5/09 p45).

Planners will do an analysis of your needs and take into consideration your family income, your debts, your usual expenses, possible additional expenses in the event of death or disability etc and then build up a protection plan to adequately cover your needs.

Retirement planning will be another component. Most plans will be based on a version of the Life-cycle theory of consumption and saving developed by Franco Modigliani of MIT, 1985 Nobel Prize winner in economic science. The graph below has consumption (C) being constant throughout the individual’s lifetime. During the working life, lasting WL years, the individual saves, building up assets. These will include both superannuation and other assets like the family home. At the end of the working life the individual begins to live off these assets, dissaving for the next (NL-WL) years, until the end of life.



The global financial crisis (GFC) which began with the collapse of Lehman Bros on 15th September 2008 highlights the importance of planning. The world economic situation has turned around in very dramatic fashion. In July 2008 commentators were concerned about inflation. Interest rates were heading up to take some heat out of the economy. By January 2009 the concern was about deflation. Interest rates have fallen to record lows and the Federal Government has paid out billions of dollars in stimulus payments to keep the economy going.

Dr Chris Caton, in his annual economic update to the Australian Institute of Management reminded the members that the world economy has revived from every previous downturn. He predicted the following:

	Feb 09 Actual	June 2009 Predicted	Dec 2009 Predicted
AUD/USA	0.659	0.70	0.75
ASX	3544	4000	4500
Cash rate	3.25	2.5	3.00

This means that the exchange rate with the United States will strengthen to about 75 US cents for every Australian dollar. This will make imports from the USA a little cheaper and goods exported more expensive. The share market will build steadily, but modestly over the year and the cash rate will remain roughly steady during the year. The value of real estate is likely to stay flat although the first home buyers subsidy has put plenty of steam in the apartment and small house market. Since the subsidy will finish on June 30, there is some concern that home prices in this market will decline somewhat.

All this means that the context in which you will be considering a plan has received a severe shock but is likely to steadily improve over the foreseeable future. The only risk Caton could see on the horizon in February 2009 was that the USA was showing no sign of meaningful recovery. If they continue to struggle then the world economic recovery will be slower.

Now there are people around the world who have suffered great loss as a result of the Global Financial Crisis. Some had investments in companies that have collapsed. Some have lost their jobs as a result of the recession. Some are suffering from a substantial reduction in interest income that they were relying upon to fund their retirement. We ought to feel deeply for these people. While economic downturns are a financial 'natural' event, there is an evil side to them that is the result of sin. Before the financial industry collapsed, greed pushed participants into riskier and riskier deals. Venture capitalists talked of the number of deals they had done and never spoke of their quality.

As terrible events unfold us, let us turn to our Creator God who controls every event and who has promised that nothing will take place in our lives which is not for our ultimate good. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Difficult events like those being experienced during this GFC are a reminder for us to turn back to our Heavenly Father. "We need to thank him for the forgiveness that wipes away sin and thank him for the promise of hope for the future and especially the promise of eternity." (D. Broughton Knox, *ibid*, p 185).

Christian Discipleship in Today's Economy

Narelle Penman

Responsible stewardship and 'just' engagement in economic activity are foundational biblical and theological principles for the people of God. As the Hebrews are delivered from slavery and oppression in Egypt the question is: Will they create a new society of hope, justice and mercy, or will they create a new model of injustice? They enter a covenant relationship with God, with the ten commandments providing some rules for life within this covenant context. These stand as a critical principle of protest against every kind of exploitative social relation [public and interpersonal, economic and political].

In the commandment regarding Sabbath, we are told to match the rhythm of our lives with God's own rhythm. The observance of the Sabbath meant the people of faith not only rested from their labour,

but 'justly' rested their animals and slaves, and worshipped God as the primary source of their existence. Exodus 23:1-13 indicates that this justice was for all. Sabbath rest puts a distance from the abusive production schedules of the empire. In a consumer economy like ours, this requires the breaking of the vicious cycles of consumption as well as of production – allowing a refocus and re-alignment of the soul.

The Biblical Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee are also about justice and stewardship, of the land as well as the people. In economic terms the jubilee protected a form of land tenure based on an equitable and wide spread distribution of the land and prevented acquisition and ownership by a wealthy few. Thus enabling all of humanity to receive the benefits of God's creation and to act as co-stewards of its resources

“Socially the jubilee embodied a practical concern for the family unit. ... It aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintaining or restoring their economic viability. The economic collapse of a family in one generation was not to condemn all future generations to the bondage of perpetual indebtedness. Such principles and objectives are certainly not irrelevant to welfare legislation or indeed any legislation with socioeconomic implications” [Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992, Doubleday, III, 1029].

Theologically the jubilee proclaimed the sovereignty of God over time and nature, and trust in God's providence, God's redemptive action, and practice of justice.

Nehemiah [5:2-11], together with many of the prophets, challenged injustice, exploitation and oppression which rendered worship meaningless [Amos 5:24]. Continuing the challenge, Jesus taught more on money and non-exploitive relationships than anything else [eg Luke 16:19-31]. Contrast is also shown between those who proclaim righteousness but fail to live it and those who find life as they let go of wealth [the rich man Luke 18:18-28 versus Zacchaeus Luke 19:1-10; teachers of the Law Mark 12:38-44]. The early followers of Christ modelled a just and compassionate community on the ability to share in response to a generous God who gives and risks all [Acts 2:43-47; 2 Cor. 8:1-15 and 9:1-15].

Needless to say our churches, society and economic systems are far from the biblical ideal. Some would argue that this is an impossibility in a modern and complex society and economy, but I would disagree. However, it requires vision and a major shift in focus, which won't come about by market, political or legal forces.

There have always been competing economic, social and political models. The demise of communism has seen an acceleration in the 'free market' model as the only 'true' means of sustainable economies. This has led to increased privatization of all manner of goods and services, including social goods such as education and health. It's disheartening to reflect on the fact that when we had unprecedented prosperity there was a reduction in support for public education, public health, services to the poor and the disabled, and there was continued neglect of indigenous people. In general a lack of compassion and support for the weak within our own society while there has been an increase in middle class welfare. Is it any wonder that there was no compassion for the plight of refugees, economic or otherwise?

The market is not an altruistic organism. It does not use or distribute human or natural resources on the basis of justice and equity for all. Its focus is profit and maximizing share value. The current financial crises has nothing to do with fundamentals and everything to do with speculation and greed. A lot of the problem within Australia is related to people borrowing against, and spending, unrealized capital gains on their real estate and share assets. Taxation policies [negative gearing and reduced capital gains tax] and extensive interest free purchasing options provided an incentive for debt.

There is a widespread belief in the need to have ever increasing growth in GDP. It needs to be recognized that the market system and society will not come to an end if this does not happen. In fact, it's more likely to end if it does – through the depletion of finite resources, and environmental effects, particularly through climate change. The problem is that economic models and GDP do not include environmental and social costs, so their purported outcomes are exaggerated. Yet this is the assumption that governments are working on worldwide.

In the unfolding of the 'global economic crisis' there has been a scramble by governments worldwide, to not only lessen the impact as quickly as possible but, to re-assure the public that regulations would be implemented to ensure that the unethical, recklessness and greed that led to the situation would not happen again. So the question is the same the Hebrew people of the Exodus faced. When establishing a new system will it be one of justice and equity or just provide an opportunity for a different power and abuse base. To date, the interventions have done more to prop up the current system, especially financial institutions, and to encourage consumption than to bring about reform. It is clear that there has been a willingness to privatize profits but socialize the losses – causing the wider community to pay the cost.

No matter what happens in today's society, natural disasters or human made financial crises, there is a tendency to want to find someone to blame and someone to provide a quick fix. Currently, it's all too easy to blame corporate greed, poor regulation and governance, for all the current ills and expect that governments are going to be able to provide the quick fix. The reality is you cannot legislate to overcome all the problems and we [individually and corporately as the church] need to take some responsibility for our own actions and seek to model an alternative. The world is ready and waiting for an alternative.

The Moderator has been challenging the Synod, and individual congregations, to reassess their use of church properties and resources. Issues of good stewardship, justice and risking new ventures for the sake of growing the kingdom are all a part of this challenge. Our faith is in God not property and resources – isn't it? If we are unable to be open to this, there is little prospect that we will be open to changing our personal financial habits – and little prospect that we have anything to offer a needy world.

I feel I am unable to preach on any matters of social justice unless I have first put my own house in order. Consequently, it is an ongoing process. I no sooner think there couldn't be anything more I need to adjust, when I am once again challenged. I have chosen not to take advantage of something just because it legal or available, but to see if it's just and equitable. For example, 30% rebate for medical insurance. I believe in a universal [not a dual] health system, where people have access and priority to health services on a medical needs basis, not on financial ability – and have therefore opted for no health cover. I re-assessed my position when the rebate was introduced and felt it inequitable. It gives money back to individuals and health funds and does nothing to increase service provision.

When there is debate about private versus public health there is no acknowledgement that comparisons are being made between two unequal entities. Private hospitals do not offer full services. They have no accident and emergency services; they have no teaching and training programs. They benefit from taking the profitable side of the business, and drain resources from the public system. As with so many of our industries, we are also failing to train sufficient people. Yet we are happy to exploit third world countries and their trained staff. I feel there would be greater equity if there was one not for profit system – so I have to live by that. In addition I have chosen to donate equivalent monthly health insurance premiums to Medecins Sans Frontieres [Doctors without borders]. This organization works in third world countries, war and disaster zones, and refugee camps, providing preventative services such as immunization, as well as more general and emergency care.

I try to take an ethical and just approach to all financial matters, including shopping and spending habits, through to salary, taxation and investment decisions. As I said earlier its not just if something is legal or available, but to if it's just and equitable. To this end, I would challenge all in ministry to evaluate what allowable items are just and ethical uses of our expense account. I am pleased to see that Synod has decided to limit the increase in stipends for the forthcoming year. Yet, if I had been asked prior to this decision, I would have indicated I felt it more appropriate to have no increase at all.

The current financial crisis is a wake up call and an opportunity. It is of our own making and how we respond will not only have implications for society but for the future of the church. Will our voice and action be one of self interest? Or one of justice?

Christian living in tough economic times

John Cutts

I am a baby boomer, a product of the post war economic good times. Live for today, let the kids worry about tomorrow. How does the slogan go: "live hard, die young, leave a good looking corpse" and let someone else clean up the mess. We as a generation of rampant consumers have lived hard, some are dying young, and we are leaving an economic corpse for our young to clean up. The current global financial crisis is a direct result of the out of control greed and consumerism eating away at today's society. We must have it now, the latest car, the latest phone, plasma and Ipod and internet connections so fast your eyes will water. Put in on the plastic, the never never, and when that fills up lets take out a loan to "consolidate the debt", meaning empty the credit card so we can fill it up again.

I recall when Sharon and I bought our house we had saved about \$20,000 and we went out and borrowed \$40,000, my father was horrified that we had gone into such an amount of debt. He was old school, a farmer, paid cash for tractors and utes, and if you did not have the cash you waited and made do until you did. You cannot image the reaction when he presented us with a gift of \$10,000 a few years later to "help with the mortgage" and being the real time boomers we were, we put in a swimming pool and carpeted the house. May not have been the smartest thing but hey, at 19 I never in my wildest dreams imagined being 30, we were young, in love and having a ball. Flying planes, racing cars, doing as we pleased, going where ever we wanted to. The thought of tomorrow never came.

As I worked hard at rising up the ladder as a manager and Sharon raised the babies our perspective slowly started to change and the vision of tomorrow started to become the reality of today. The pursuit of the next promotion, the striving to achieve the next bonus can become an all consuming passion, a passion that can cost dearly in the long run. The pursuit of the monetary dream comes at the expense of relationships, both with those around you in the physical and with the spiritual relationship with God. Very long work hours and imbalance in the soul can eventually destroy the individual and the relationships of those around you. All too soon the great Australian dream becomes an all controlling nightmare, as you lose touch with the real wealth, that of relationships with the ones you love and with the Saviour.

What brings you to check? An event, a sickness, something that kicks you in the guts and opens your eyes, heart and mind or, is it a slow shift in your mind as you look for something, something you are not sure of, but think there must be something.

For myself, two significant events changed my life for ever: loss of love and loss of job.

The need to stop, have a good look at yourself, ask some tough questions and then search for the answers led me to an understanding of God's grace, the richness of the human heart and the depth of true love.

I count myself as very fortunate; as I have found a place in my life for the grace of God as an active component of myself. With increasing knowledge and understanding, I changed, in the way I approached life, work and love. This change in the fundamental approach to things brought both reward and cost. Everything has a cost, even happiness.

As my personal life began to become enriched, my professional life was slowly starting to unravel. Because I was dealing principally with people as a professional manager I was relating to people in a different way, perhaps with grace and understanding and not with some of the old head kicker attitude I was well known for. Eventually this new found "niceness" was a component of the reasons for an organisational restructure where in an organisation of 350 people, two were made redundant, myself and my boss. Quotes like "we weren't the right people to take the business forward" etc, etc.

My replacement was a person well known for his qualities, very similar to the qualities I used to exercise. So, here I was fat, fifty and fired! What a shift in the economic circumstances, double 6 figure salary, new car every three years, overseas trips, etc etc to out the door in approximately 10 minutes. Have to say at this point in time, the redundancy made a difference, 6 months off, great time around the house, plenty of time with Sharon, who I might add at this time, was far stronger than I, kept my brain from going to mush, kept my spirits from going to spirits and generally propped me up in my time of need.

Then the job seeking starts, what a soul destroying process that is for anyone over 50, the corporate world does not value age and experience just youth and degrees. Then I saw an advert for the position of Presbytery Secretary for Parramatta Nepean Presbytery and thought, why not? God has been good to me (since I found Him) why not see if you can give a bit back.

In 2006 Sharon was accepted as a Candidate for the Ministry of Deacon and was to start at UTC in 2007. So there we were, a full time student, and a half time Secretary now earning less than I used to pay in taxes, Sharon said, "The Lord will provide". Now when she said that, I nearly slipped into my old cynical self! Well, we are still at it, some additional part time work, the Generosity of the Board of Education with student grants, frugal fiscal management, 10 year old car, don't own a telly since the old one blew up, lost a lot of money invested in shares, married off both girls (bonus there, good sons in law), got 3 fabulous grand kids, blah, blah, blah.

Sharon was right, the Lord has provided for us, not a monetary richness but a time of exploration as we each seek a path ahead in His service. As Sharon comes close to completing the core phase of her studies and I learn more of the workings of the

Uniting Church we have learnt to adapt to change, put off the wants, live with the needs, love with all our hearts and above all else trust in the Lord.

Economic Responsibility and Discipleship

Chris Walker

The Global Financial Crisis has highlighted that we really do live in one world and the importance of economics in international relationships. While wars, natural disasters, severe poverty, and the risk of disease all create headlines, the global financial crisis affects not just some nations and communities but all of us. Unless you had almost nothing to begin with, like so many people in the two thirds world, you were impacted by the problems of financial institutions, the sudden collapse in share prices and the prospect of a significant increase in unemployment. While Australia is in a better position than most Western nations, we have gone from budget surpluses, a growing economy and low unemployment to a situation of recession and concern for the economic future. The Australian government has responded with huge stimulus packages which has meant going into large debt which we collectively will have to pay off.

The World Council of Churches' response

As previous articles have explained, the global financial crisis was bound to happen given the way the economic system was operating. Elenie Poulos the national director of UnitingJustice has recently been at a conference on the global financial crisis in Cuba. It was for a meeting of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, an advisory body of the World Council of Churches. The people at the meeting understandably were very critical of the neo-liberal, unchecked, capitalist system. They spoke of its economic agenda as 'moneytheism'. This did not mean they were totally opposed to the capitalist free market system. They were against unchecked greed and extreme capitalism.

They focused on making a transition to a less aggressive and selfish form of capitalism and the need to close the gap between real and virtual money. They want to see a reworking of the international economic framework so that ethics and social justice are acknowledged as fundamental. From a Christian perspective there is a need for the economic system to recognise that God's economy is based on equity, social justice, sustainability and peace among the nations.

Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann's thoughts

Walter Bruggemann in an article in *Sojourners* magazine similarly says we need to analyse the crisis and develop alternative economic practices. He identifies three qualities that led to the global financial crisis. The first is autonomy in which individualism reigns supreme without consideration for others. This, however, leads to anxiety as others are seen as a threat. There is a great deal of insecurity. The response is greed, the desire to increasingly get more to try to overcome the anxiety.

He proposes an alternative biblical perspective on economics. Living by God's covenant binds the individual self to God and to one's neighbours. God is a God of abundance not scarcity. God is a generous God who readily provides all that is needed. Living by generosity would mean turning from acquisitiveness to solidarity with others. It would mean seeing others not as threats and competitors but rather as

brothers and sisters, with a special concern for those who are most vulnerable in society.

In terms of actions, living by this alternative biblical perspective calls us to desist from acquisitiveness and emphasise sharing. The sharing can be carried out in many ways from face to face acts of caring to changing the tax structure, so that people's needs are met and there is a priority for the poor rather than the rich. Primarily it would involve an alternative economics that turns from selfish greed to reliance on a generous God.

Jesus on money and greed

As Christians we are called to give economics and money due consideration. The Bible in fact has a good deal to say about financial matters. Jesus recognised that even in a society in which the majority of the people were poor, money could readily become an alternative master to God. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). When a man in the crowd asked Jesus to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him, Jesus replied that it was not for him to make a judgment. But he went on to say, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:13-15). In the first letter to Timothy, we are warned that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

John Wesley's advice on money

Money can, however, be used to do a great deal of good. So it is not a matter of regarding money itself as evil. Rather we are to see it in its place and not to exaggerate its importance. John Wesley gave sound advice in his famous sermon on "The Use of Money." I will summarise what he recommended.

He offered three plain rules. The first is '*Gain all you can.*' He qualified this in saying that we are to do so in ways that are not at the expense of others, or our own health. He expected that people will gain money in legal and ethical ways. Apart from these considerations he commended the gaining of money by hard work and using one's intelligence. The second rule is '*Save all you can.*' He warned against spending money gratifying one's desires and recommended avoiding unnecessary expense. The third rule is the most important. To stop at gaining and saving all you can, would mean nothing if it does not lead to the third rule, '*Give all you can.*' He emphasised acting as a steward not as a proprietor. He said that as faithful and wise stewards, people are to provide for their own needs, for their family and household, for the household of faith, and, as people are able, to do good to all people. He asked people to reflect on how they spend their money. In doing so is the person acting in character? It is in obedience to God's Word? Is it in agreement with what we know of God's will through Jesus Christ? Is it something God would commend? If doubts remain he suggested using these questions in prayer. He said we are to render to God not a tenth, a third, or a half, but all that is God's in how we use money.

My approach

In my own experience, I am convinced that as a disciple of Jesus we do need to give God first priority and recognise that finally everything comes from God. If we are

fortunate to have some resources then it is important to recognise that we have a responsibility to use them wisely. That means all our resources not just our discretionary income.

Nevertheless, in terms of giving it does help to have some guidelines. The biblical tithe or tenth is still a useful standard. It is what I use. Another way of putting it is to think in terms of proportionate giving. Out of our total income what percentage, at this point in time, are we able to give away. The percentage might vary according to circumstances though if giving does not have an element of sacrifice we are probably not giving enough. This is a much more helpful approach than an ad hoc one.

For myself at this point in my life I am in a better financial position than when I was younger with growing children to provide for. I have benefitted from receiving some inheritance money allowing my wife and me to pay off our house mortgage for example. It also meant reassessing, and increasing, how much I felt we should be giving away each year. I seek to live fairly frugally as Wesley recommends but recognise the need to provide for my family and myself. Fortunately I do not have to be as careful as I was when I was a student for a number of years with limited finances.

Here are some guidelines that I use in relation to giving. Giving is a priority. So it is not a matter of looking at what I have left over, but what I believe I should set aside for the church and other organisations. A percentage of my giving goes to the local church we attend as that is the basic unit of the church. That means giving every week not just when I am present. I am conscious that costs continue each week. I am not paying for my entertainment but to support the ministry and mission of the local church of which I am a member.

I give to a number of other organisations on an annual basis. Concern for people's well being in other parts of the world means I give to the Christmas Bowl appeal, Lent Event and UnitingWorld projects. Giving to the Alan Walker College with its courses in evangelism, counselling and peacebuilding comes into this category. I want to see indigenous Australians have a better future. So I contribute to Shalom College in Townsville which is an important part of the work of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. When I became concerned about the environment a number of years ago, I decided to join Greenpeace as I agreed with their non-violent actions to draw attention to issues. It also means getting their newsletter on environmental matters.

My wife and I also have some other causes we support and are open to special appeals though we do not give to everyone who asks. I have outlined the reasons for giving to the main ones above. I prefer to be a consistent giver to them and give to others as we see fit.

How we use our money and our giving is an important part of our discipleship.

Uniting in Worship has this prayer, "We bless you, Lord God, creator of the world; from you every good and perfect gift comes. Accept these offerings of ours as firstfruits of our love and gratitude, and enable us to give ourselves wholly in the life of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord."