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## Are Faith Communities Changing the Climate?

By Joe Gunn

Our planet is struggling to come to grips with climate change:

- Food production shortfalls
- Melting glaciers and ice caps
- More violent weather incidents
- Plant and animal species extinction
- Infectious diseases spreading to new areas
- Rising ocean levels and increasing acidity of the waters
- Forced mobility of growing numbers of “environmental refugees”

Climate change has been described as the most serious crisis humanity has ever faced. If so, have the institutions of society charged with providing ultimate meaning and guidance for authentic living (i.e. communities of faith) been adequate to the demands of this pressing challenge?

Several faith communities in Canada are studying the issue (the Christian Reformed Church has established a taskforce). Others have already given various directions on climate change in synods and public statements (like the United and Anglican churches, among others). Several denominations have issued pastoral letters (like the Catholic bishops) without adopting strategic advocacy in the political arena. Still other faith communities have been mute, suggesting this matter is not a priority.

More recently, however, Canadian faith communities took a quantum leap forward. For the first time they worked together to draft and debate a document on climate change, defining the moral and ethical dimensions of the issue. *The Canadian Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change* was signed by 30 faith community leaders, including Mark Huyser-Wierenga, Chair of CPJ’s Board, and publicly released in a Parliament Hill press conference on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011. CPJ helped faith communities organize public events to make the issue known, including a conference on the Hill where almost 60 representatives of Muslim, Baha’i, Buddhist and various

Christian denominations engaged MPs and environmentalists. New signatories have since been added and the *Call* distributed to all Members of Parliament.

### Why Act Now?

From November 29<sup>th</sup> until December 9<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations will host a climate change conference in Durban, South Africa. Although such meetings are an annual occurrence, this year’s event marks the end of the Kyoto Protocol commitment period. The nations of the world must face the severity of global warming – but the prognosis for success appears dim. International resolve has been weakened by the economic recession as well as a political deadlock between the Obama Presidency and a Republican-controlled Congress.

For its part, Ottawa’s international reputation has been tarnished by our poor record on climate action. Canada is the only country that ratified, and then renounced, our commitments under the legally binding Kyoto Protocol. Canadian negotiators also managed another unique feat at 2009’s Copenhagen climate talks. Our country became the only nation that came home with a lower greenhouse gas emissions target than we had already committed to achieve. Then, in 2010, Conservative Senators killed a piece of legislation, the *Climate Change Accountability Act*, which had been passed by our Parliament. That vote was taken without any debate.

Finally, while the federal government ended funding for the EcoENERGY program to advance renewable sources, Ottawa continued to annually subsidize the oil and gas industry with approximately \$1.4 billion. Ottawa refuses to check the unrestrained growth of oil sands developments, even with the Keystone XL Pipeline now delayed in the U.S.

Canada’s faith communities spoke out because they believe that the Durban conference offers “the potential to be a transition point – where we, as a global community, change how we think and act to address climate change.”



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# In Review

## Living Justice Launched!



Dozens of supporters, Board members and MPs jammed into CPJ's offices on September 27<sup>th</sup>. The happy occasion was the launch of *Living Justice: A Gospel Response to Poverty*, CPJ's new booklet of prayers, reflections on poverty, and action suggestions. Readings from the book were delivered by two local authors, and the editors were on hand to celebrate this accomplishment. In the two months after publication, over 1,000 copies have been distributed. Order your copy, or **give a gift of *Living Justice* as a gift this Christmas**, by contacting the CPJ office.

## Can Faith Communities Change the Climate?



CPJ organized a public meeting allowing national leaders of faith communities to meet with over 80 of their constituents in Ottawa on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. **Jim Creskey** (publisher of *The Hill Times* and senior editor for *Embassy Magazine*) acted as moderator. CPJ's **Joe Gunn** presented a visual overview of the climate change debate. **Mardi Tindal** (Moderator, United Church of Canada), the Venerable **David Selzer** (Executive Archdeacon of the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa), **Senator Grant Mitchell** (Deputy Chair of the Senate Committee on Energy, the

Environment and Natural Resources), and **Lauryn Drainie** (Lead Organizer for Climate Action Network Canada) acted as panelists.

## CPJ on Top of the Hill

With one-third of the House of Commons seats filled with new members, CPJ has kept busy introducing our work to MPs. Concerning poverty issues, CPJ staff have met with NDP critic **Jean Crowder** and Liberal critic **Rodger Cuzner**. On ecological matters, CPJ has engaged Conservative **Stephen Woodworth**, Liberal **Kirsty Duncan**, Green Party Leader **Elizabeth May**, as well as NDP members **Megan Leslie** and **Laurin Liu**.

## Welcome to CPJ!



**Simon Lewchuk** has accepted the challenge of coordinating the *Dignity for All* campaign while **Karri Munn-Venn** is busy caring for her new child. (Baby Naomi has hinted that she'll allow Karri to return from maternity leave next September!) Some of CPJ's donors got to know our new Development Officer, **Rene Joergensen**, who travelled to the West Coast in November.

In September, three more interns joined our team:

- **Melodi Alopæus** of British Columbia began her year as our Public Justice Intern.
- **Anna Thede**, a graduate of King's College, Edmonton, who is currently seconded to St. Peter's Lutheran church, is assisting us with development of Lenten resource materials to use with *Living Justice*.
- **Shana Conroy**, a Social Work intern from Carleton University, is helping us develop our ecological justice efforts until the year's end.

## Citizens for Public Justice

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**Citizens for Public Justice's** mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice and stewardship.

**CPJ annual membership fee**, includes *the Catalyst*: \$50 / \$25 (low-income)

*the Catalyst*, a publication of **Citizens for Public Justice** (CPJ), reports on public justice issues in Canada and reviews CPJ activities.

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## Would you prefer to receive *the Catalyst* electronically?

Some CPJ members have expressed interest in having their copy of *the Catalyst* sent directly to their computer. Others appreciate having the newsletter mailed to their home.

In electronic form, *the Catalyst* is much more environmentally friendly, saves CPJ printing and postage costs, and you would receive it at least one week sooner.

If from now on you would prefer to receive an electronic copy of *the Catalyst*, simply contact us at cpj@cpj.ca

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### Scientific (or Political) Debates?

Some in the media have felt the need to provide "balanced" reporting on whether the accelerated levels of climate change we are experiencing are man-made. For every scientist who reveals the problem of global warming, a "climate change denier" is found to provide "the other side of the story." But at this point, is there truly another side, based on the science?

British journalist George Monbiot's 2006 classic book on the subject, sparsely entitled *Heat*, documented the tremendous efforts of the fossil fuel industry to discredit climate science. According to Monbiot, pliable scientists in the pay of big oil have received millions to question the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and climate scientists who have raised the alarm. Fortunately, these industry manoeuvres have not convinced everyone. A Conservative MP in Ottawa has been passing out copies of the September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011 Proceedings of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. It shows that 97 - 98% of the climate researchers who are most actively publishing in the field support the view that man-made greenhouse gases have been responsible for the warming of the Earth over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study goes on to report that those researchers who are unconvinced of the IPCC claims have climate expertise and scientific prominence "substantially below that of the convinced researchers."



The panel of Members of Parliament speaking at the Interfaith Forum on Parliament Hill included Elizabeth May (Green Party), Laurin Liu (NDP), and Kirsty Duncan (Liberal).

### The Spiritual Roots of the Crisis

The expertise of faith communities does not lie in the realm of scientific debate, however. Rather, the *Call* begins by identifying "the spiritual dimensions" of the crisis of ocean and climate change: "We recognize that at its root the unprecedented human contribution to climate change is symptomatic of a spiritual deficit: excessive self-interest, destructive competition, and greed..."

The *Call* notes how the world's religious traditions all teach us to look beyond ourselves, "calling on us to seek moderation and service to the common good." Acknowledging that all traditions must also seek "coherence" between their beliefs and their actions, the document states, "We, representatives of Canadian faith communities, are united in our conviction that the growing

crisis of climate change needs to be met by solutions that draw upon the moral and spiritual resources of the world's religious traditions."

### What Can Faith Communities Contribute?

In a 2003 article, Gary Gardner, Director of Research at the Worldwatch Institute, argued that the environmental movement needs the power of engaged religious communities to engender change. Gardner noted that faith communities can bring five strong assets to the effort to build a sustainable world: "the capacity to shape cosmologies (i.e., worldviews), moral authority, a large base of adherents, significant material resources and community-building capacity." Noted environmentalist Bill McKibben believes religious communities, because of their professed beliefs, "are the only institutions left in society that have even, shall we say, a prayer of mounting a challenge to the dominant culture." McKibben is convinced this would be healthy for the environment – as well as for the religions themselves.

#### The *Interfaith Call* ends with three demands from faith communities:

*We call on Parliament to adopt the following policy goals:*

- *In the spirit of global solidarity, take collective action by signing and implementing a binding international agreement replacing the Kyoto Protocol that commits nations to reduce carbon emissions and sets fair and clear targets to ensure that global average temperatures stay below a 2° Celsius increase from pre-industrial levels;*
- *Demonstrate national responsibility by committing to national carbon emission targets and a national renewable energy policy designed to achieve sustainability; and*
- *Implement climate justice, by playing a constructive role in the design of the Green Climate Fund under United Nations governance, and by contributing public funds to assist the poorest and most affected countries to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change.*

The international development agencies of faith communities have already lead many churches to the realization that unless climate change is addressed, the development efforts of the last 50 years will be squandered.

Canadian faith communities can change the inadequate response to climate change in our country. Will we rise to the challenge?

Joe Gunn is CPJ's Executive Director. To read the entire *Call*, and to download a petition in support of climate justice, please see <http://www.cpj.ca/en/canadian-interfaith-call-leadership-and-action-climate-change>



# Bill C-4: Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada's Immigration System?

By Gloria Nafziger

Julia and Marco paid a smuggler to help them flee their war torn country and travel with 20 people to the safety of Canada. Upon arrival, the group was designated a "human smuggling event." Everyone in the group, including 3 children, was automatically detained. No court in Canada reviewed the terms of their detention. While detained, Julia and Marco had very few opportunities to meet with a lawyer and prepare a refugee claim. Fortunately, after 12 months in detention, they were found to be Convention Refugees. However, they must now wait another five years before they can apply for permanent residence in Canada and sponsor their two year old daughter Heidi, whom they left behind. Julia and Marco will be separated from Heidi for at least 6 years. She will be 8 years old (or older) when she arrives in Canada, with little, if any, memory of her parents.

This fictitious scenario is one of the few positive outcomes which may come to pass under Bill C-4: it ends with a refugee family finding protection and being reunited in Canada. Even in this scenario, however, Julia, Marco and Heidi experience serious hardships, and international conventions are violated.

Bill C-4 purports to be a bill which prevents human smugglers from abusing Canada's immigration system. However, our current law already sentences those who organize human smuggling to life imprisonment. This makes Bill C-4's measures which target smuggling (such as providing mandatory minimum jail sentences for smugglers) largely symbolic.

In reality, this bill attacks the well-entrenched rights of refugees and asylum seekers, such as Julia and Marco, if they arrive "irregularly" in Canada as part of a group the government designates a "human smuggling event." The new sanctions include harsh powers of detention without timely review, denial to the appeal process, and serious limits on freedom of movement and family unity.

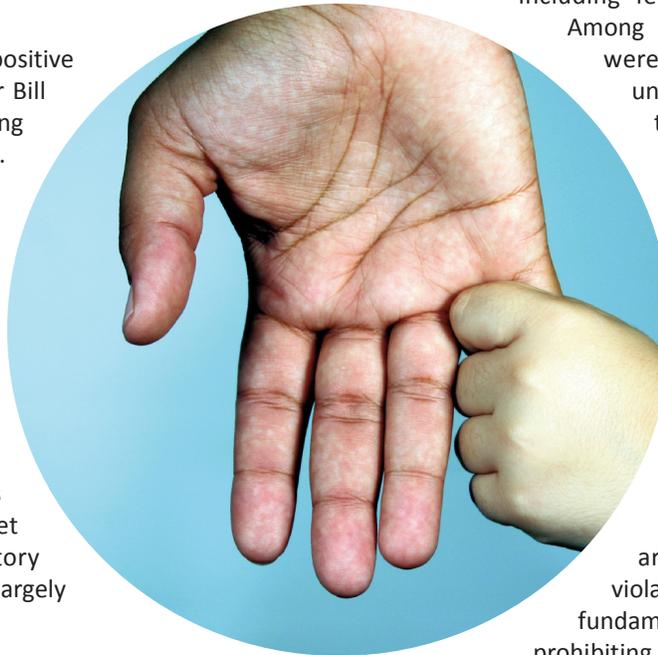
Bill C-4's detention provisions are particularly harsh. International human rights law provides that everyone has a right to liberty and security of person and that no one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention. If an individual is detained, they must be provided with a prompt court review to examine the need for and lawfulness of detention.

A refugee who is detained will find it particularly difficult to get help to make a refugee claim. While detained, they will be dependent on the "managers" of the detention facility to

provide access to lawyers or social workers who can help them make a refugee claim and advocate for their emotional, physical and psychological well-being. While detained, it may not be possible to obtain the documents they require to support their refugee claim or for a victim of trauma to receive specialized care.

Detaining children is a serious concern. A 2010 study in the United Kingdom reported on 141 children who were in immigration detention for an average of 26 days. Despite this relatively brief detention period, researchers found that 52% of the children were psychologically harmed, with symptoms such as bed wetting, persistent crying and suicidal thoughts. 65% of the children showed physical health problems including fever, vomiting and injuries.

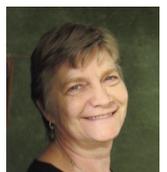
Among the detained parents, 71% were so depressed they were unable to adequately care for their children.



Canadian refugee policy currently provides for the immediate reunification of a refugee with their family. It is a policy which understands that social, economic and health problems can be avoided in the future by focusing on integration with a pathway to citizenship from the point of arrival in Canada. Bill C-4 violates this long standing and fundamental value of integration by prohibiting Convention Refugees from applying to be reunited with their immediate family members (such as their wives and children) for five years.

It is unlikely that refugees who need protection will find it once detained under the provisions of Bill C-4. Julia and Marco are more likely to be returned to their country and Heidi may never see her parents again. It is a dangerous bill which places refugees at risk and violates their rights.

*Gloria Nafziger is the Toronto-based Refugee, Migrants & Country Campaigner of Amnesty International*



# Why Were Poverty Concerns Absent in Provincial Elections?

By Simon Lewchuk

*“Poverty barely on the radar in provincial election”*

*“Party platforms thin on fighting poverty”*

*“Poverty being ignored in election campaign”*

Do any of these recent newspaper headlines sound familiar? This fall, Canadians went to the polls in seven provincial/territorial elections (NL, PE, ON, MB, SK, YT, NT). Noticeably absent in most of the campaigning, debates, and political rhetoric, however, was any serious discussion about poverty.



Why?

It's not as if poverty is going away. In the midst of a fragile economic recovery, many ordinary Canadians are continuing to struggle. According to Food Banks Canada's *HungerCount* survey, 851,000 people visited a food bank in March 2011. This is 26% higher than in 2008. For 11% of these people, it was the first time they've had to turn to a food bank (compared to 9% in 2010). Food bank use is only part of the picture, but when people can't afford to put food on the table, poverty demands attention.

Three of the provinces that just came out of elections – Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador – already have poverty reduction strategies. Yet even in these cases, there was little talk about how the parties would fulfill their commitments.

Is it possible that a lack of public will is to blame for poverty being left out of this fall's campaigns?

In the lead-up to the elections, the CBC conducted an online poll asking people to identify the issues that matter the most to them. The single most important issue in voters' minds was the economy (34%). Poverty wasn't even mentioned. The findings were similar to a public opinion survey conducted earlier this year by Angus Reid for the Salvation Army's *Dignity Project*:

- 29% of Canadians said the economy was the most important issue facing Canada today
- 20% said health care
- 9% said poverty.

In an interview with a Canadian newspaper, Rev. Brice Balmer (a contributor to CPJ's new book, *Living Justice: a Gospel Response to Poverty*) hypothesized that poverty was a non-issue because, "middle class people are worried about their own wallets," and are, "upset about more taxes".

There is action being taken, however: while the recent elections were mostly pre-occupied with concern about the economy, faith communities were hard at work mobilizing public attention to poverty issues. The Religious Social Action Coalition of Newfoundland and Labrador (an interfaith group representing Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist organizations), for example, created a website to inform voters about poverty in the province and track which candidates and party leaders pledged to take meaningful action on the issues (<http://candidatesagainstpoverty.ca>). In Ontario, the Social Planning Network of Ontario and the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition launched a campaign in over 20 communities across

the province that saw election-style lawn signs reading *"Let's Vote for a Poverty Free Ontario"* placed in front of churches, social organizations, businesses, and residences.

These examples highlight that when issues of poverty and human dignity aren't being discussed, faith communities can take the lead in shifting the discussion to where it ought to be.

In the wake of May's federal election and the recent slew of provincial/territorial elections, Canadians face a period of relative political stability. Such an environment can be conducive to significant policy changes. We have a tremendous opportunity to influence the political agenda and see real progress made in the fight against poverty: our politicians need to hear from us.

There a number of ways we can make our voice heard. We can organize events in our community to educate others and start a conversation. We can join the efforts of grassroots organizations working to create change at a local level. We can call or meet with our elected officials to tell them we're concerned about poverty and want to see action taken.

A very concrete – and simple – way we can let our government know we're concerned about poverty is by encouraging people in your family, church, or community organization to sign a petition supporting Bill C-233, the *Poverty Elimination Act*. Visit [www.dignityforall.ca](http://www.dignityforall.ca), print off a copy, collect signatures, and present it to your MP. Petitions are a powerful way to tell your elected representatives what you – and, therefore, they – should care about!



*Simon Lewchuk is a Policy Analyst at CPJ.*

# Activists Say NO to the Keystone XL Pipeline

By Tony Clarke

On September 26<sup>th</sup> 2011, 225 persons crossed a barricade erected by police on Parliament Hill. I was among them. We were drawing our line in the sand, defining what is right and what is wrong, and saying “NO” to the Keystone XL Pipeline in a peaceful protest. 117 of us were arrested and charged with trespassing. It was the largest number of people arrested for civil disobedience activity on a single day in the history of Canada.

Why were we protesting against the construction of this pipeline at this time? In part, we were in solidarity with activities at the White House, resulting in

the arrest of more than 1,200 people over a two week period in late August. But the resistance manifested on Parliament Hill was more about the environmental and social damage of the Athabasca tar sands and how the Keystone XL Pipeline will further accelerate these trends.

The mega tar sands project is considered to be the largest industrial development and the single most environmentally destructive project of its kind on the planet today. Production of dirty crude oil from the Canadian tar sands is expected to double or even triple over the next 15 years. The building of the Keystone XL Pipeline will transport an additional 590,000 barrels per day of raw bitumen from the Athabasca region of northern Alberta to refineries and markets as far away as Texas and other points in the United States.

The Canadian government has approved the Keystone XL Pipeline project. However, the US government has announced that their decision will be delayed until after the next presidential elections. We need to continue manifesting our opposition in the hope that the US will say “NO.” We need Washington to disagree with Ottawa, because the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline will accelerate the:

- ongoing devastation of the Boreal forest which is nature’s carbon sink in the Athabasca region
- depletion of one of the most precious freshwater systems in the world
- contamination of river and ground water causing high incidents of rare cancers for Indigenous peoples living downstream who depend on this water for their food and livelihood
- spewing of millions of tons of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, thereby making the tar sands Canada’s (and perhaps the world’s) fastest growing global warming machine.



*Protesters on Parliament Hill prepare themselves for peaceful civil disobedience at the Keystone XL Pipeline rally.*

In an age of climate change, Canada needs to make a U-turn in our energy policies and strategies. Instead of maintaining our societal dependence on (and addiction to) dirty, non-renewable, fossil fuels as a prime source of energy, we need to be making the transition now to clean, renewable sources of energy.

We also need to rethink how we extract natural resources, how we produce products and services, and how we

transport people and freight. In other words, we need to be paving the way now for the transition from a largely brown industrial economy to an authentic green economy future in a way that provides decent, clean jobs for all.

For these and related reasons, I believe Ottawa’s decision to approve the Keystone XL Pipeline and accelerate the development of the Athabasca tar sands to be morally unacceptable. For several years now, we have done our research, written briefs, raised public awareness and lobbied on Parliament Hill to no avail. As concerned citizens with a heavy conscience, we have little choice left but to formally withdraw our consent through acts of non-violent civil disobedience.

In doing so, we are walking in a long and proud tradition established by people like Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. In Canada, this tradition involves the Indigenous peoples and the Canadian women who put their bodies on the line in various struggles, including the mobilization to stop the clear-cut logging of Clayoquot Sound in British Columbia.

It’s imperative to continue this kind of direct action until our goal is achieved. By signing the Kyoto Accord, Canada committed to reduce our greenhouse emissions by 6 percent below 1990 levels. Instead, we have been steadily increasing our emissions ever since. Now, Ottawa is unwilling to make a second round of commitments as required under Kyoto.

Therefore the September 26<sup>th</sup> action is not a one-shot event but the beginning of escalating direct action resistance for climate justice leading up to COP17 in Durban this December and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro next year.

*Tony Clarke is the founder and Director of the Polar Institute in Ottawa and author of “Tar Sands Showdown: Canada and the New Politics of Oil in an Age of Climate Change”.*



# The Growing Influence of Political Conservatives in Canada

CPI's Joe Gunn interviewed Dennis Gruending on his recent book, *Pulpit and Politics: Competing Religious Ideologies in Canadian Public Life*. Dennis Gruending is a former Member of Parliament and is the author of the award winning blog, *Pulpit and Politics*.



CPI: *Your new book discusses the growing influence of political conservatives in Canada among certain faith communities. On what kinds of issues do you see this influence manifested?*

DG: The largest issue was same sex marriage. The religious conservatives lost, but it galvanized them and on a range of other issues, they won. These included the public childcare initiative negotiated by Paul Martin, which the religious conservatives did not like. When Mr. Harper won in 2006 he replaced it with a tax credit to middle class and wealthier families. Also, many religious conservatives are unwavering in their support for Israel, and Mr. Harper has given them what they wanted. These are but a few examples.

CPI: *How was this change accomplished?*

DG: Change has been happening gradually since the 1960s, as the religious conservatives became increasingly concerned that society was moving in a direction they didn't like.

When Preston Manning ran for office, he struck a chord with many of them, especially in western Canada. This happened when, internationally, religious conservatives were becoming embedded in a wider conservative movement, of which the United States is a prime example.

In Canada, the Reform Party's suspicion of government resonated with people who thought government was encroaching in areas that should be left to family and church. This political support has now been transferred to the new Conservative Party, which came into being when the Reform-Alliance group swallowed up what remained of the Progressive Conservatives.

CPI: *How have voting patterns among different faith communities changed in recent elections?*

DG: The May 2011 election featured four parties (five in Quebec). Religious conservatives voted as follows:

- 55 per cent of Protestants voted Conservative. That is significant but also quite consistent with recent elections. Religious conservatives tend to be political Conservatives as well – although I certainly know some who are not.
- 39 per cent of Catholics voted for the NDP. There is a long tradition in Canada of Catholic voters supporting

the Liberals but that has been breaking down in the elections since about 2000. This result can be attributed largely to the NDP sweeping Quebec, where most people are (at least nominally) Catholics.

- 52 per cent of Jewish voters voted for the Conservatives. Jewish voters have traditionally supported the Liberals but that, too, has been changing.

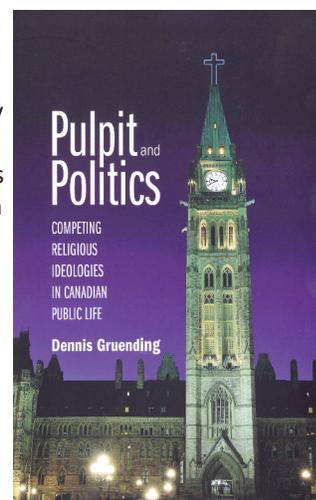
CPI: *Many faith communities see the link between the biblical basis for serving the poor, but fewer demand effective poverty elimination efforts from government. Should faith communities refrain from playing an advocacy role? Or does the advocacy role need to be undertaken differently?*

DG: Our political institutions are secular and should remain so, but faith communities have an important advocacy role to play. Religious faith can inform political decisions about the division of wealth in our society, as well as about education and race relations, to name just a few. Some people see this in very personal terms: i.e., being good to their families, to people in their church and perhaps to co-workers. However, they are not convinced government has a big role to play, for example, in the eradication of poverty. Other people of faith see a more social dimension – looking at how to advocate for a more broadly based impact on society. Both perspectives are important and I believe people of faith need to be involved in our public discourse: they must hold governments accountable.

CPI: *What should CPI do to get the public justice message out to faith communities, including communities with many members who might be described as religious conservatives?*

DG: I think you do an admirable job although I know your resources are stretched.

I have no sage advice but I will offer an observation. CPI has a reputation for respecting people and their opinions, and for being politically non-partisan in the work they do. This is an important role to occupy. I hope that your supporters, some conservative and some of a more liberal bent, will continue to support you in what you do so well.



# Drawing Near to Weakness: God's Call to Respond to Emotional Poverty

by Rebecca Warren

*My grace is made perfect in your weakness.* ~ 2 Corinthians 12:9

There are few places in society where people gather with the express intention of focusing on their weakness. Even though in worship we confess to one another and to God that we have sinned, we rarely spend time in the service detailing the specific ways we have fallen short. Likewise, we rarely spend time in lament, weeping over what is broken beyond repair. And yet the call of God is to embrace our places of weakness, to name them and grieve them together so we might be open to the possibility of grace, healing, and redemption.



Several times a year I volunteer as group facilitator for a local family centre that brings people together in times of crisis to offer education, encouragement and support. There is a refreshing openness and honesty in those meetings that comes from the common recognition of need. The families are done pretending things are fine; they have come because they are looking for help and aren't afraid to admit it. You find a similar recognition in twelve-step groups, where the first thing that happens after someone says their name is an admission of weakness: "I am an alcoholic." There is no attempt to hide it in pious language or excuses. The need is stated clearly, without apology. I think this honest recognition of weakness is one of the reasons support groups can be places of life-giving, authentic community.

Most of us struggle to have that same openness when facing our own emotional poverty. When we see someone on the street with an obvious mental illness, we most often turn away as they talk loudly to themselves or cry openly in public. We are embarrassed not just for them, but somehow also for ourselves. While we are much more practiced at keeping our public face in control, we know there is another part of us where we talk loudly to ourselves about our fears, where we cry openly at night and feel the weight of all that we keep in. When we are faced with the raw facts of our own deep need, we turn away and stop listening to the cry of our own souls. We hide our pain by working too hard or doing too much in a frantic desire to prove our competence. We repeat again and again the mantra "I am fine," as if repetition will make it so. We hide under a veneer of competence and strength.

Yet if we are to be transformed as people of faith, if we are to take seriously the statement that God's grace is made perfect in our weakness, we need to be willing to come near to those places of emotional poverty, both in ourselves and in each other. As Henri Nouwen points out, "As long as we relate primarily to each other's wealth, health, stability, intelligence, and soul strength, we cannot develop true community. Community is not a talent show in which we dazzle the world with our combined gifts. Community is the place where our poverty is acknowledged and accepted, not as something we have to learn to cope with as best as we can, but as a true source of new life."

We can come near to emotional poverty in ourselves and others with freedom because we have a high priest who understands our weakness, who always draws near to the lost, the wounded, and the poor, who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7). Because of the work of Christ on the cross, we are freed to draw near, to love recklessly, to embrace the broken, foolish, and empty places in ourselves and find there not only the beginning of true community, but also the transforming power of God's unimaginable grace.

*Rebecca Warren is Assistant Director of the Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion & Public Life at the University of Alberta, and is a contributor to CPJ's worship resource, "Living Justice" of which this article is an excerpt. To purchase copies of "Living Justice," see [www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca)*

