

## Ending Poverty: Are We Moving Forward?

New *Scorecard* shows some progress, much more for us to do

By Sarah Shepherd

"If poverty was a disease, we'd be pouring money into it. And it is: people are dying from it in this country." This was how Linda Lalonde, an anti-poverty community advocate, called for action against poverty in Canada on October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

Linda was one of seven speakers at "Ending Poverty Together: Real Stories, Real Solutions," an evening forum in Ottawa organized by Dignity for All and attended by over 80 people. It was opened by Leilani Farha of Canada Without Poverty, and Katherine Scott, writer of CPJ's new *Poverty Trends Scorecard*.

All speakers agreed with Senator Art Eggleton that "the time to act is now," and spoke to the value of cross-party collaboration, a multi-pronged strategy, and not seeing job creation as the only solution.

A press conference on Parliament Hill earlier that day included the launch of CPJ's latest resource, *Poverty Trends Scorecard—Canada 2012*. The Scorecard is an in-depth analysis of poverty in Canada that uses the latest data, compiled in 2010 and released this summer by Statistics Canada.

We'll be using the *Scorecard* in our ongoing events, meetings with decision-makers, and writing. We've also sent copies to government and civil society leaders across Canada who are committed to the fight against poverty. It highlights how various groups are faring: affirming what governments are doing well and naming what needs to be transformed.



The panel (from left): Art Eggleton (Lib), Chris Charlton (NDP), Geraldine King, Linda Lalonde, Don Meredith (Con).

This report shows that most Canadians have recovered since the recession. Although this is good news, it's also clear that we need to keep moving on anti-poverty work. Poverty continues to persist, particularly among specific groups, at levels that are unacceptable. The longer view shows that while much has changed since 1981—when CD players hadn't been invented, and only 0.5 percent of households had a computer—the overall poverty rate is still stuck near the 10 percent mark and certain groups continue to be disproportionately vulnerable. If we could decrease poverty at the same rate we've decreased cigarette smoking, it would have been eliminated by now.

### Signs of progress

It's good to see how well-designed government programs and grassroots activism have made changes for the better. Children and single parents are

slightly better off than they were in 2007, having bounced back from the recession. This follows longer-term trends, with poverty rates significantly decreased over the last 30 years. There's been an emphasis in recent years on expanding early childhood development programs, although not at the scale that is needed. Also, government supports such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the Child Disability Benefit have been implemented.

Poverty has decreased steadily among Canada's seniors over the past few decades, thanks in part to targeted government income security programs such as Old Age Security (OAS) and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) for low-income seniors. However, seniors are generally very vulnerable to economic instability. It's essential that we continue to advocate for vital supports to be maintained. One policy that CPJ has

...continued on page 3

# In Review

## Exciting Changes at CPJ



From left: Nate Wilson, Brad Wassink, Sarah Shepherd

There are three new people at CPJ now. **Nate Wilson** is part of the Laurentian Leadership Centre's Internship program, working on ecological justice issues. **Brad Wassink** is our one-year public justice intern, working on poverty, justice, and the *Dignity for All* campaign. **Sarah Shepherd** is the new Communications Coordinator, and will be working on *the Catalyst*, the e-newsletter, and social media. And **Karri Munn-Venn** has returned from maternity leave with a new daughter, Naomi. **Melodi Alopaeus**, our 2011–2012 intern, has gone on to study law. We thank her and wish her well in this new commitment to justice work.



From left: Naomi and Karri Munn-Venn

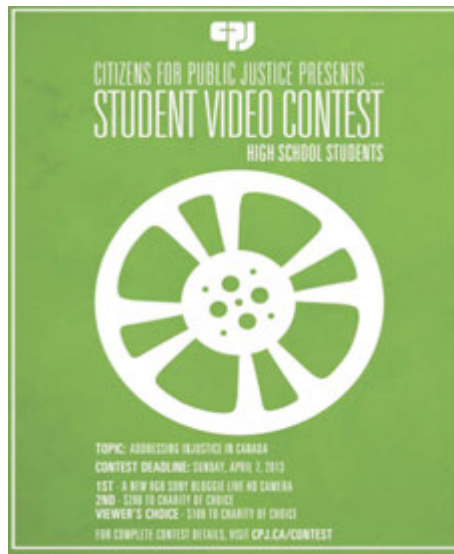
## Stay Connected!

Our e-newsletter has been renamed from *Ola!* to *JusticE-News*, with a new colourful format. Visit [www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca) to sign up for free and get your own monthly copy in your inbox! You can also connect with us on Facebook at [facebook.com/citizensforpublicjustice](https://www.facebook.com/citizensforpublicjustice) or follow us on Twitter at [twitter.com/publicjustice](https://twitter.com/publicjustice).

## CPJ on the Hill

The main event this fall was the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty event featured in our cover story. In addition, on September 27 **Joe Gunn**, **Simon Lewchuk**, **Nate Wilson**, and **Brad Wassink** met with Mr. **Dave Van Kesteren** (MP, Conservative, Chatham-Kent-Essex). We heard from Mr. Van Kesteren on the work of the Finance Committee and discussed our recommendations for the next federal budget. Mr. Van Kesteren encouraged us in our work at the intersection of faith and politics.

## High School Video Contest – “Injustice in Canada”



CPJ is calling on high school students to create a three-minute video: what's an issue of public justice you're passionate about? What do you want to see done about it? The winners will be shared on our website and prizes will also be awarded to the top three. If you are a student, teacher, parent, or youth leader, visit [www.cpj.ca/contest](http://www.cpj.ca/contest) to learn more and share this opportunity! Deadline April 7.

## Seeking Ideas for Coming Resource

Did you use our worship and action guide *Living Justice*? What would you find useful in next year's *Living Ecological Justice*? Visit [www.cpj.ca/survey](http://www.cpj.ca/survey) and give us your input!

## 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's 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?

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](mailto:cpj@cpj.ca)

vigourously critiqued has been increasing the age when people can access OAS/GIS support (from 65 to 67).

In most provinces, poverty rates have generally decreased since the recession. As described by Simon Lewchuk in our last edition of *the Catalyst*, several provincial governments, including Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, have tackled the issues directly with many new strategies. These include reduced income tax rates for those on a low income, new community housing, and support for people moving from social assistance into the workforce.



#### More work needs to be done

Although there has been progress on several fronts, some groups continue to struggle.

Working-age individuals who live on their own can be seen as "Canada's forgotten poor" with almost one-third of this group living in poverty. They are the farthest below the poverty line. Not coincidentally, this is the group whose government support has been cut back since the 1990s. Those forced to rely on social assistance now live in abject poverty, with few supports.

Newcomers—those who've been in Canada under 10 years—are extremely vulnerable to economic ups and downs. They bring qualifications for high-paying work from their home countries, but nonetheless frequently work in low-paid service industries. And these jobs—in restaurants, hotels, cleaning, and childcare—can disappear when belts are tightened. The *Scorecard* shows a higher poverty rate in this group than before the recession, and also makes it clear that

having a job doesn't guarantee exit from poverty.

For off-reserve Aboriginal people, the poverty rate has increased since the recession to one in six people, as numbers of those employed full-time, full-year have dropped. When people living on reserve are included (using older numbers from 2005) the rate of poverty increases.

People living with disabilities have had an overall decrease in poverty over the last decade, but only a very slight one, and it remains to be seen whether it will continue. Lack of workplace accommodation, lower levels of education, and higher costs of living to meet extra needs all factor into whether people with disabilities can live in dignity or not.

Throughout last winter the Occupy movement made headlines throughout North America, bubbling up from the grassroots with demands for systemic change and economic equality. A significant cohort of this group was made up of young people, sometimes with university degrees, unable to find work and struggling under debt. This group is particularly likely to be living on work that's part-time, without additional benefits, and without opportunities for advancement. If someone under 25 is the main earner for a family, they are even more vulnerable, with a one in three chance of living in poverty.

#### Beyond the numbers

When we go beyond what can be measured, we see that being impoverished does deep damage to someone's sense of dignity and self-worth, but also that coming together to eliminate poverty builds strength, resilience, and creativity. Many inspiring programs across Canada of whole communities responding to poverty together bear witness to this.

For example, in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Montreal, St-Michel, *Le Chantier de revitalisation urbaine et sociale* (The Urban and Social Revitalization Workshop) offers job retraining, develops affordable housing, and runs programs for children and youth. Also, *Project Comeback* in Surrey, B.C., brings together over 20 organizations to provide a holistic response to unemployment.

**Myths and facts**

**Myth:** *People spend their lives living in poverty.*

**Fact:** One third of people living in poverty only do so for one year: this could be prevented with better support systems.

**Myth:** *Getting a job is a sure way out of poverty.*

**Fact:** 40 percent of people living in poverty are in a home where one person is working, and 12 percent in a home where two or more people are working.

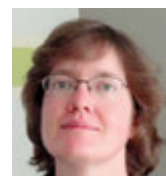
#### Moving forward

Just as poverty in Canada has many faces, so do ways we need to respond. Since 2009, CPJ has co-lead *Dignity for All: Campaign for a poverty-free Canada*, calling for a national plan to address poverty in Canada. Through the campaign, we have been working with grassroots and national organizations to develop concrete policy recommendations for such a plan. We have also been instrumental in encouraging dialogue amongst elected officials, a highlight being this past February's all-party panel discussion on poverty on Parliament Hill that helped lay the groundwork for the establishment of the All-Party Anti-Poverty Caucus.

CPJ continues to develop relationships with parliamentarians and federal officials on the Hill and speak into the political process through briefs and submissions to various parliamentary committees. Our recent recommendations for the 2013 Federal Budget ask the government to act for the wellbeing of everyone while sustaining the economy.

While the government needs to translate talk into action, we all need to be involved in eliminating this continuing reality for so many among us.

Sarah Shepherd is the Communications Coordinator at Citizens for Public Justice.





# A Sustainable Canadian Energy Strategy

By Father Mishka Lysack Ph.D.



In July 2012, a Senate committee released its 74-page study: *Now or Never: Canada Must Act Urgently to Seize its Place in the New Energy World Order*. Although rightly underlining the urgency of a national strategy, the report falls seriously short on protecting the environment and narrowly defines economic growth as resource exploitation.

Although claiming that “the environment must be vigorously protected,” the report is vague, offering little in the way of specific targets or objectives. Sections on renewable fuels, social wellbeing, and Aboriginal engagement are short and inconclusive. Meanwhile, shale gas, nuclear energy, and increased Arctic exploration and extraction all receive strong endorsement. Most tellingly, the Senate report moves away from discussing sustainable to responsible development, a subtle but important shift in language that mirrors the same messaging of the Harper government. In short, the Senate report paints a picture of business as usual: extract and exploit natural resources with only a casual afterthought given to protecting the environment.

However, polling suggests that a majority of Canadians prefer a sustainable economy that protects the environment. According to a Harris-Decima poll (1,005 Canadians surveyed on behalf of Tides Canada between July 5 and 9, 2012 with error interval of +/- 3.1 %):

- 82% of Canadians consider improving energy efficiency a priority
- 74% want the creation of more jobs in clean energy

- 67% want to reduce Canada’s carbon pollution to slow down climate change
- 83% of Canadians agree strongly or somewhat agree that setting aside part of oil wealth to prepare for a clean and renewable future should be a priority
- 66% of Canadians say that reducing our reliance on fossil fuels is a top or high priority, whereas only 33% say that exporting more oil and gas resources is a priority

So what are the key elements of an effective and sustainable Canadian Energy Strategy?

**Energy efficiency programs:** We waste large amounts of costly pollution-generating energy, resulting in a very poor 11th out of 12 country ranking in the recent *International Energy Efficiency Scorecard*. Through pricing, education, incentives, and targets, energy efficiency would reduce costs and greenhouse gas emissions. Manitoba provides leadership nationally through its Energy Savings Act (Bill 24). Successful programs, such as BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development) unite environmental sustainability, social justice, and community economic development by providing employment and training for people as they retrofit homes with insulation and energy/water saving features.

**Renewable energy:** We need to fully embrace this. Look at Germany: on May 26, 2012, Germany met nearly half its total weekend electricity needs by feeding 22 gigawatts of energy into its national grid from solar power alone. This is equal to 20 nuclear power stations at full capacity. Germany has established itself as a world leader in renewable energy through its innovative FIT (Feed-in Tariff), in its Green Energy and Economy Act to cut back on coal use, creating over 20,000 jobs in renewable energy.

**Conservation of nature:** We need to sustain the environment so that it can sustain us. Advocates, such as Nobel Prize laureate Wangani Mathai in Kenya and Vandana Shiva in India, have shown how reforestation and protecting seeds for

food can bring healing to creation as well as empower people to create just communities, where they control their own livelihoods. Canada needs to protect its water, soil, and ecological communities of animals and vegetation, if it is to be resilient in the face of accelerating climate destabilization.

**Pricing carbon:** We are passing the serious environmental costs of our consumer lifestyle onto the world’s poor and our children. Pricing carbon as British Columbia does, and insisting that polluters pay for their pollution, internalizes these costs into our economy and reduces impacts on the environment. Funds from this pricing could protect the poor as well as invest in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

**Sustainable infrastructure:** Like many other countries, Canada must invest in high-speed rail and transportation and energy smart grids and establish energy-efficient building codes.

**Pollution standards:** Strict standards for reducing and eliminating pollution need to be imposed not only to reduce the damage done to creation, but also encourage communities and the economy to transition from a consumer to a citizen society.

*The Now or Never Report* states that compromises are inevitable in the implementation of a national energy strategy. But its perspective goes far beyond compromise. To be truly democratic, an effective and sustainable new strategy would go beyond economic concerns. Instead, it would be what Canadians want and need: a Canadian Energy Strategy that truly considers the wellbeing of the Earth and public justice as its priorities.

Father Mishka Lysack Ph.D.  
is an associate professor  
(University of Calgary),  
focusing on renewable  
energy, green economy,  
advocacy, and faith and ethics.



# Northern Gateway about Canada's Moral Direction

By Will Braun

Prime Minister Harper says his cabinet will decide on the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline. However, it's more likely that a dozen or so small B.C. First Nations along the path of the \$6-billion project will determine its fate.

The half-dozen Indigenous leaders I spoke with when visiting communities between Prince George, B.C., and the coast all said four things about the project:

- they oppose it
- there is nothing Enbridge can do to make it acceptable to them
- they are prepared to fight it in the courts and by physically blocking construction
- they don't think it will be built

Not since Mohawk Warriors stared down tanks at Oka in 1990 has Canada seen this degree of Aboriginal opposition to a project.

If built, the Northern Gateway pipeline would link the Alberta bitumen sands with Pacific shipping routes by means of a 1,170-kilometer pipeline ending at a seaport in Kitimat, B.C. A federal panel is reviewing the project.

"We're at ground zero," says Russell Ross Jr., a Haisla First Nation Councillor. From the Haisla community of Kitimaat Village, the 800 residents can easily see across Douglas Channel to the site of the proposed marine terminal. Ross explains that his people face the triple threat of spills not only along the Kitimat River Valley portion of the proposed pipeline, but also at the proposed terminal and along the proposed supertanker route—a 125-kilometre stretch of channels and passageways between Kitimat and the open ocean.

He emphasizes "proposed," lest anyone forget that the outcome of the Gateway debate is far from certain. However, as significant as the looming confrontation could be, Gateway is about more than who will win the battle. It is about the moral direction of the country. The federal government is using Gateway to

test drive its vision for Canada, both in terms of Aboriginal relations and our response to climate change.



Photo by Dawn Paley [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

The crux of Enbridge's case for the pipeline is that access to diversified energy markets (primarily China) are "clearly in the national interest," to the tune of \$270 billion in national GDP growth over 30 years. It says pipelines are the safest way to transport crude, that large ships have used the Douglas Channel for decades (though not ships of the size proposed for the project) and that the tanker route is within standard guidelines for marine transport. The company promises extensive precautions, including world-class, state-of-the-art everything.

However, critics such as the Haisla say a spill or tanker accident is inevitable. They cite the company's grim record of spills as well as the weather, terrain, and seismic activity in the area. Also, the B.C. Ferries' *Queen of the North* hit a rock and sank at the mouth of the Douglas Channel in 2006 despite modern navigation equipment and that it had travelled that route regularly for decades.

Given their location and culture, the Haisla face higher risks than anyone, Ross says. For them, the connection to the waterways is immediate, real and deep. Many people eat salmon and other wild foods regularly. These foods are essential

to their ceremonies and their identity. They are "like a birthright," Ross says. Haisla culture and identity depend on a viable marine environment.

A full-bore rupture of the pipeline in the Kitimat River Valley or a tanker wreck in the Douglas Channel could devastate marine life over a large area for a long time. As a leader of a community located at ground zero, Ross would be negligent not to consider worst-case scenarios, which are dire.

When I ask him how he would feel about bitumen-laden tankers venturing deep into Haisla territory, he pauses, as if it's too hard to even consider. "I'd have to move away," he says, his eyes brimming with emotion.

Given the resolve and legal standing of the Haisla and other like-minded First Nations—which have never ceded title to their lands—and given the sheer moral cost to the government of potentially arresting large numbers of respected Aboriginal leaders, the project's future is in question.

With confrontation seemingly imminent, the tendency is for the public to merely pick sides. On a broader level, though, the issue should cause us to think more deeply about what kind of country we want.

In an age of supposed reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples, do we want First Nations to be continually forced to fight for their rights?

In an age of global warming, do we want our country to offer the world creative leadership toward a new energy future, or just ship loads of bitumen?

Will Braun is a writer and CPJ member from Morden, Manitoba. The above is adapted from an article in the November 2012 United Church Observer.



# Justice Camp a Catalyst for Change

By Murray MacAdam

"It takes a chain of courage to make things happen."

Theologian and environmentalist Stephen Scharper hit the nail on the head as he outlined how "ordinary" citizens can confront society's principalities and powers at the Shalom Justice Camp held in Peterborough, Ontario, this past August. It brought 85 Christians from across Canada together for six unforgettable days of hands-on learning, sharing, and worship.

In our elite-driven society, the ability of citizens to get involved and tackle major issues is downplayed. Dr. Scharper outlined how Rachel Carson, author of the landmark environmental book *Silent Spring*, courageously confronted chemical companies and helped spark a successful environmental campaign. Lois Gibbs, the sparkplug to clean up New York State's polluted Love Canal, was another environmental citizen hero who can inspire us today.

Dozens more examples of citizen action to improve society blossomed during the Justice Camp. It was the sixth Justice Camp held in recent years across Canada. A wide range of Christians participate in these camps, which are sponsored by the Anglican Church.

A Justice Camp is not a conference. Instead of participants passively listening to experts, Justice Camp lives out the belief that "the wisdom is in the room." Everyone has ideas and experiences to share, which leads to new action and renewed faith. So we participants shared university dormitory life, heard each other's stories, broke bread together, met local justice activists, worshipped, and had fun. Thirty Campers were aged 16 to 30, infusing the gathering with youthful energy, and reinforcing the goal of nurturing the next generation of justice-makers.

Lutheran justice advocate David Pfrimmer outlined how Canada's faith communities have had a greater positive influence on Canada's public life, such as advocating



From left: the Rev. Susanne McKim, Rosemary MacAdam, Allison Chubb, and Breanna Gordon enjoying time together. Photo by Murray MacAdam

for debt relief for Third World nations, than many of us are aware. It was an encouraging lesson at a time when many are concerned about a declining impact by faith groups on Canada's public life.

Also, Health Unit director Dr. Rosana Pellizzari affirmed how public policy changes are essential to ensure a healthy population. It's not enough to simply encourage individuals to eat a healthy diet to avoid obesity and other ailments. We also need to improve the social determinants of health and take bold steps, such as banning the advertising of junk food to children.

A key element of Justice Camp involves participants immersing themselves for three days in a small group to learn more about a specific issue such as violence, homelessness, Aboriginal concerns, and the poverty-food connection, and what can be done in response. CPJ staff person Karri Munn-Venn helped organize a political advocacy strategies group which kicked off its program with local justice advocate Linda Slavin introducing the Social Planning Council, a dynamic environmental group called Peterborough GreenUp, and the advocacy work of the Peterborough Public Health Unit.

Justice-making can be tough work. The lack of progress can be discouraging. At Justice Camp we were reminded of how far short we often fall in breathing Jesus'

vision of new life into our broken world. When Dan Haley, director of a halfway house for former inmates, told our advocacy group: "I probably get more support from the Hell's Angels than I do from the churches," it stung.

Campers found joy in the midst of this, however, via the Justice Camp's dynamic creativity. Spirited worship, led in part by CPJ member and theologian Sylvia Keesmaat, revived us and deepened our call to God's vision of shalom. As our worship service ended on the Camp's first night, with the echo of "Alleluia" wafting through St. John's Anglican Church, God's Spirit seemed to hover above us. No one moved to leave. No one wanted this holy moment to end.

As Shalom Justice Camp wrapped up, participants were already thinking about how they could take new learnings back to their home congregations and communities, and act on them. None of us returned home as the same person we were before. As one participant said, "We came as strangers and left transformed, and as friends."

Former CPJ staff Murray MacAdam does social justice for the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, and helped organize the camp.





# Faith, Funding, and Federal Politics

By Joe Gunn

Award-winning journalist Marci McDonald, author of *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*, has argued that Prime Minister Harper “has quietly but determinedly nurtured a coalition of evangelicals, Catholics, and conservative Jews that brought him to power and that will put every effort into ensuring that he stays there.”

Reginald Bibby, a leading expert on religious trends, states what the politicians have already noted. The demographic “winners,” he says, are growing in numbers: Roman Catholics (44% of Canadians), evangelicals (11%), and Muslims (2%). Mainline Protestant groups and Catholics in Quebec have suffered the largest loss, and a growing number of people reject religion altogether.

Whereas politicians have always appealed to religious believers in an effort to gain election, there has recently been a preference for the Conservative party within the Christian community. An April 2006 Ipsos-Reid poll suggested that there was a 24 percent jump to the Conservatives among weekly Protestant church-goers, bringing the number up to 64 percent in that year’s election. As Mr. Harper won his first minority government, for the first time in Canadian history more Catholic weekly attendees voted Conservative (42%) than Liberal (40%). The 2011 election, in which the Conservatives won their long-coveted majority government, may have further highlighted this voting trend among Christians (with the possible exception of Quebec).

## Follow the money...

Interestingly enough, this trend is highlighted in how some religious groups, but not others, are finding new financial favour with the federal government.

A novel aspect of Conservative policy has been supporting some Christian schools with funding for construction projects, research, or energy sustainability in buildings, and even development of sports fields. Described by the Evangelical Fellowship’s magazine as an “unprecedented move by the federal government,” a dozen private Christian universities and seminaries, both evangelical and Catholic, have been made eligible for the first time to receive millions of dollars in government funding.

The Conservatives also announced a new Office of Religious Freedom in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Some critics complain this policy prescription of the Evangelical Fellowship is a blatant attempt to appeal to religious conservatives. With a \$5 million price tag, the office is being compared to the only similar entity in the world, located in Washington, D.C., which has been accused of a too-exclusive focus on persecution against Christians.



In the global development realm, important religious charities have barely survived funding cuts implemented by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). These changes have reduced and constrained many church activities and programs. In late 2009, the ecumenical group KAIROS was denied its multi-year CIDA grant of over \$7 million. In 2012, the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (D&P) received

notice that its funding request would be reduced by almost 70 percent. (D&P had long been attacked by religious and social conservatives for its progressive development work and major advocacy campaign to clean up the activities of Canadian mining companies overseas.) And, over the past four years, all four of the Canadian Friends’ Service Committee’s (Quakers) project proposals have been rejected.

In response to the cuts, many groups have noted the “advocacy chill” stalking faith-based groups. Some are responding by noticeably softening their critical stances towards the federal government on crucial issues. Recently, some Catholic bishops expressed the view that the education campaign of D&P was overly political, so the campaign materials were pulled out of circulation and the campaign stillborn. A postcard to the Prime Minister, calling for a Parliamentary review of CIDA’s aid policy, was scrapped. As well, in October 2011, when over 60 faith communities signed the historic Interfaith Call to Action and Leadership on Climate Change, three organizations (the Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Fellowship, and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs) refused to offer their support.

The nexus of faith, politics, and federal funding preferences will continue to bear watching in the years ahead.

A much longer version of this article will appear in *The Philanthropist*: [www.thephilanthropist.ca/index.php/phil/issue/current](http://www.thephilanthropist.ca/index.php/phil/issue/current)



Joe Gunn serves as executive director of Citizens for Public Justice.

## Peace on Earth, Joy to the World!

By James Loney



“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...’”

Luke 2: 10–14

Whenever an angel appears, usually with a message that changes everything, its first words are always, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid, Mary. Though you have never been with a man, you will conceive and give birth.

Do not be afraid, Joseph. Take Mary as your wife, the child she carries is a miracle.

Do not be afraid, women at the empty tomb. The one whom you love has risen.

Do not be afraid, shepherds keeping watch in the night. A saviour has been born to you.

It was almost twenty years ago. I was on an extended retreat at a monastery in California. I had just turned 30 and was in a time of deep inner searching. My spiritual director gave me a little book to read, which I took reluctantly.

The Superior General of the Camaldolese, in the introduction, asked “What is the Gospel?”

*Gospel*, from the Old English *gōd-spell*, means *good news* or *glad tidings*.

I thought it was a good question. What exactly is this “good news” that gets proclaimed every Sunday in boiler plate platitudes and soporific sermons?

I will never forget his answer. “The Gospel,” he said, “is the liberation of every human being from every kind of bondage.”

Fast forward ten years. Christmas Eve 2005. I was sitting in a handcuffed row against a wall in a plastic lawn chair, one of four men held in a gloomy, paint-peeling room somewhere in Baghdad. No one knew where we were or if we were dead or alive. One of us was killed, Tom Fox, an American Quaker from Virginia, two weeks before our release.

We were a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation that had gone to Iraq in opposition to war, to document life under occupation and meet Iraqi peacemakers, and had been taken hostage by Iraqi insurgents. The captors told us we would be released once a ransom was paid. They told the world we would be killed unless all Iraqi prisoners were released, what hostage negotiators call *an unrealistic demand*.

After singing all the Christmas carols we could remember, Tom told us the story of that first Christmas. We had no Bible. It was all from his memory. *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.*

Those words, *do not be afraid*. I clung to them like a drowning man who has just been thrown a lifeline.

Mostly it was a white noise, a stench you can become accustomed to and forget. But it was always there, the Fear, ready to seize my body with uncontrollable shaking, flood my chest with hot spurting

acids, turn me into unflinching stone. How I hated it.

I remember looking down at my handcuffs, full of rage at the theft of my life, certain that I could burst them open by clenching my fists. *Do not be afraid*, the angel said. I took a deep breath. A feeling of ease spread through my body.

I began to think about the newborn Christ child, and every newborn child, the melting you feel inside, how you just want to cradle and smell and kiss her, put your finger up and say to everything, *Shhhh, the baby is sleeping*.

Peace! This good news of great joy—liberation of every human being from every kind of bondage—the Gospel is peace!

Peace, where you do not have to be afraid. Peace, the cry of every child’s birth. Peace, the birthright of every child. Peace on earth, God’s glory in the highest!

My handcuffs dissolved and the walls around me opened like that Palestinian night sky in another time and place of occupation. I felt strangely free.

Merry Christmas, sisters and brothers! Joy to the world! This is how the Gospel is born—liberation of very human being from every kind of bondage. Not by chariot war horse or sword, not by tank or gun or fist. No, not through these, but wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger she waits, like a helpless newborn, peace, a world without fear, yearning for us to pick her up and love her into existence. The Gospel has no other way.

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