

A simple response to a financial fracas

How a smaller economy could be better for everyone

Josiah Neufeld
ChristianWeek Staff

As Canada settles into a recession, governments are begging their citizens to spend and their banks to lend. So Canadians can't be blamed for wondering whether they should be sitting on their wallets or spending like mad to counteract the panic.

Mark Burch sees tremors in the economy as an appeal to Westerners to adopt a more sustainable style of living—while we still have choice.

"Spending our way out of a depression? That's not going to work, because that's how we got into this jam," says the Winnipeg author, educator and researcher.

"People are losing their homes; they're losing their cars; they've lost part or all of their savings and many of them are soon to lose their jobs, and the government seems to think that these people want credit, that they want to get further into debt... To me that seems hilariously delusional."

Economy of small

How to live with less is a lesson Burch has been trying to teach Canadians for decades.

He's written books, published essays and taught university courses on voluntary simplicity. He also co-directs a cooperative called SPARC (Simplicity Practice and Resource Centre) that educates communities on how to live happier, less materialistic lives that leave gentler marks on the planet.

SPARC workshops offer practical instruction on such things as eating nutritiously for less, celebrating sustainably and living ecologically. SPARC also organizes study circles on the history and philosophy behind simple living.

Burch's vision isn't a society of hut-dwelling ascetics, nor is it just a cheerful belt-tightening while we wait for the return of affluence. He sees our current predicament as a call to craft a smaller and better economy—one where people value wealth less and sufficiency more, where fewer dollars circulate, corporate earnings are modest, interest rates are lower and everyone's happy with a smaller slice of pie.

"The difference would be that people would like it that way," says Burch. "They would come to the point where they'd say: We'd rather not rape every resource out of the environment; we would

really prefer to have some wilderness; we kind of like clean air; we'd rather not go to war this year, thank-you. So were going to live differently so those things wouldn't come about."

Shrinking pangs

Jonathan Wellum, CEO of AIC Limited and a senior fellow of Cardus, a Christian think tank, doesn't push simple living per se, but he's adamant that Christians have a duty to live within their means.

"It's painful, but it's healthy," says Wellum. "There are too many retailers selling too many products that are completely unnecessary."

Christians would be wise to pay down their debts, live on what they earn and invest strategically, he advises. "Living a simple life doesn't preclude being an investor and being an owner of a business and hiring people... Investing in business and investing in savings is a very prudent use of capital and I think it is honouring to God."

Part of the reason neither Burch nor Wellum worry that a sudden attack of frugality will sink the economy is that there's no danger it will happen overnight.

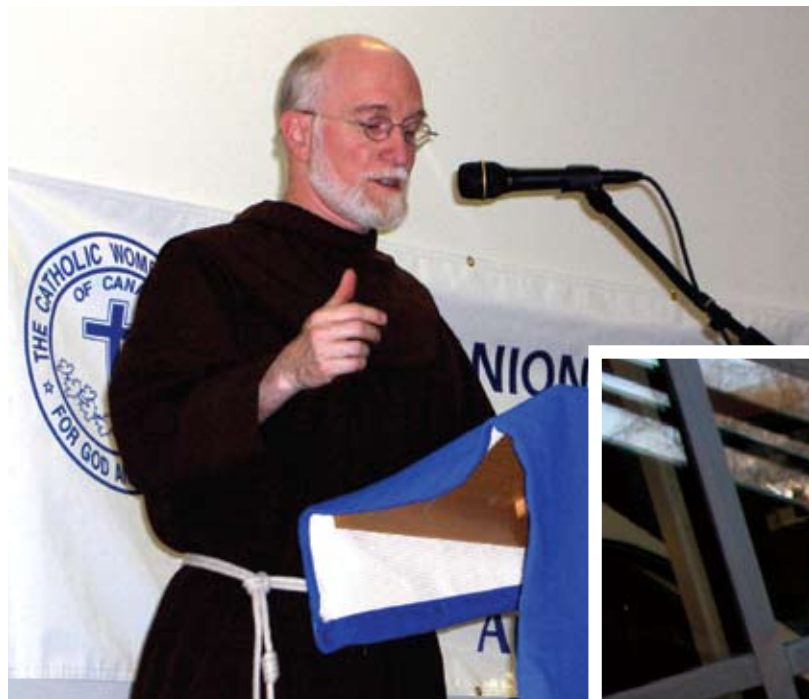
"I'm nowhere near as optimistic as a lot of the economists who think this will all turn around sometime early in 2010. I think it may be a decade before all the debts are forgiven or paid," says

less intact environment and large inventories of resources and fossil fuels that the economy could emerge into... which I don't think will be the case this time. We're going to emerge into resource scarcity and into higher levels of climate variability which will make restarting the economy in its old pattern much more difficult, in my view."

Spirituality of simple

A materially spare life can also clear the way for a richer spiritual life, says Franciscan Friar Gerry Clyne. "It frees up a person for greater quality of prayer and a greater availability for ministry."

All this economic hand-wringing hasn't caused him to rethink what he owns—mostly because he doesn't own a thing. The vehicle, guitar and cell phone he uses for his work as a Franciscan vocational director belong to a board of lay trustees. So do his clothes and toothbrush, though he doesn't share those with the brothers at his friary in Cochrane, Alberta.



Franciscan friars, such as Gerry Clyne, absolve themselves of worldly possessions upon taking their oaths of poverty.

And he agrees it's high time we shrink our economy to a more responsible size.

"The problem is the escalating level of debt," says Wellum. "It's not sustainable. The key issue is a society and culture that has become so materialistic that it's reaching for things and buying them in advance using credit."

Interest rates were low; credit was easy to come by, and buying with hypothetical money became the norm, says Wellum. "And that is never a good thing. I think the pulling back we're seeing now is good."

In December, 34,400 Canadians lost their jobs and economic forecasters predict another 200,000 job cuts in 2009. Governments on both sides of the border are preparing to go billions of dollars into debt trying to fend off a depression.

The International Council of Shopping Centres reported the steepest decline in Christmas shopping in the U.S. since 1970.



Mark Burch practices and preaches voluntary simplicity. He is also the University of Winnipeg's campus sustainability coordinator.

Burch. "What I've always hoped for is a gradual progressive evolution of values and consciousness."

That may take a generation.

But there's another reason why Burch is convinced we need to embrace small—and soon.

Every other time Americans have embraced a more frugal existence (usually because of a war), says Burch, "there's always been a more or

Franciscan vows of poverty aren't for everyone. But hopefully it's a witness to the world of "the priority of spiritual principles," says Clyne. "Especially in Franciscan spirituality, simple living has to be accompanied by a sense of joy. That speaks to fact that happiness is not ultimately derived from accumulation of material."

REFRESH!
AN ANNUAL CONTINUING EDUCATION CONFERENCE
MAY 12 - 15, 2009

THROUGH LEARNING, COMMUNITY, WORSHIP, ART AND PRAYER, THINK ANEW ABOUT YOUR CALLING TO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF CHRIST'S PEACE.


ART FILM COMMUNITY WORSHIP MUSIC PRAYER


FOR CHRIST IS OUR PEACE, WHO HAS MADE US BOTH ONE, AND HAS BROKEN DOWN THE DIVIDING WALL OF HOSTILITY (COL 3:16)

FOR FULL CONFERENCE INFORMATION CONTACT:
WYCLIFFE COLLEGE | 5 HOSKIN AVE | TORONTO ON | M5S 1H7 | TEL: (416) 946-3547
WYCLIFFE.REFRESH@UTORONTO.CA | WWW.REFRESH.WYCLIFFECOLLEGE.CA

NEW THIS YEAR:
WINDRIDER@WYCLIFFE – A CONVERSATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND FILM.
WWW.WINDRIDERTORONTO.CA


WM. PAUL YOUNG
 Author of The Shack


JOHN SENTAMU
 Archbishop of York


GRAHAM CRAY
 Leader in Fresh Expressions, UK

Media Sponsor:
CHRISTIANWEEK

CHRISTIANWEEK

What on earth is God doing today?

www.christianweek.org

