

*Building on various activities on economic justice issues over the years, this commentary was published from Oct. to Dec. 2008 in newspapers from Oregon to Virginia, and reprinted by various groups since then. It is available on the Resource Center website which offers other commentaries, resource guides, and links. Feel free to pass this on to colleagues and friends. We're happy to see your comments, and thoughts on next steps (email below). Shalom! Glen*

## Delving deeper, nourishing hope

by Glen Gersmehl

For many, a new administration offered hope amidst all that is tottering around us: stocks, mortgages, financial institutions, automakers, job and retirement security, family budgets....

Economists and politicians debated and are implementing bailout and stimulus measures. Both their initial policy focus on bankrolling the culprits, and their lack of engagement of this democracy's citizens on crucial issues that affect us have left much to be desired.

For example, a key instrument behind the crisis, concocted in just the past decade, are the mortgage 'credit default swaps.' CDS brought huge profits to a few while lethally fragmenting accountability and our ability to fix problem mortgages. Did even one in 1000 voters feel knowledgeable about derivatives like CDS? Was the public interest central to shaping their form? Yet in just a decade the CDS market grew to six times the size of the stock market.

A democracy must do better to educate and involve its citizens on such important issues. If we as concerned citizens are serious about change we need to do our part to greatly expand education, activity, and commitment – ours and others – in justice and peace groups, faith communities, and civil society which history shows are central to real change. And to be meaningful, our efforts must embrace at least a few deeper, underlying concerns such as:

**1. Equality:** In 1960 the average CEO of a major U.S. corporation made 20 times as much as the average worker in his company; 25 years ago it was 40 times; today it's 500 times. In the past decade the richest 1% received 3/4 of our nation's income gains while most of us lost ground. Such inequality threatens our social fabric, our common future, our democracy.

**2. Work:** While salaries and "golden parachutes" of top executives are in the stratosphere, crucial jobs like childcare remain grossly underpaid. Thirty years ago, equal proportions of the U.S. and Canadian workforce were unionized, about 25%. Canada's is the same today; ours is half as much. It's a key reason why few workers feel anyone is looking out for them.

**3. Casualties:** In recent years, the number of children living in poverty grew 50%. Our retirement accounts lost \$2 trillion. Women and minorities were hardest hit by job losses. 47 million Americans lack health insurance. Under 20% of federal entitlements and tax breaks go to the poor yet budget cuts often target programs serving them. Policies here and around the globe invite high levels of consumption by the well-off while neglecting the needs of the majority and of the environment both of which cry out for our sustained attention.

**4. Spending priorities:** In addition to the human suffering, Iraq War costs will exceed \$2 trillion. A small fraction of that amount could have ended world hunger. Which would have been more beneficial? Which would have made us safer? Even military leaders insist we must expand development aid to help those in need (defense gets 100 times as much).

**5. Media:** National and regional media are increasingly owned by large corporations while news programming has declined in length, budget, and seriousness. We're offered vastly more messages

to buy than to budget wisely or live simply. Our ability to be responsible citizens also suffers. For example, Americans on average believe the federal budget spends 80 times as much money on development aid than is true.

**6. Democracy:** The number of corporate lobbyists in DC has doubled since 2001. The money political campaigns must raise for ads, mostly from corporate sources, has grown even faster. Our democratic process looks like "one dollar, one vote." Corporate interests have done well while we've neglected healthcare, education, jobs, sustainability, infrastructure....

**7. Values:** Those pastors, mystics, and mothers were right. Our deepest human yearnings are fulfilled by relationships, not new products or amusements. Giving is more rewarding than getting. Simple living can help save both our planet and our sanity. Cooperation and community offer benefits not encouraged by competition....

If taking on such deeper problems seems daunting, consider: Are they any less deserving of serious talent and resources than went into those perilously complex credit default swaps?

Time and again, history shows that social problems get solved partly by electing effective leaders... and mostly *after* inauguration, as citizens roll up their sleeves on behalf of their deepest concerns, finding insight and support in their faith communities, women's groups, unions, advocacy and community organizations, ethnic associations, and rural networks.

What we each can contribute isn't especially mysterious or difficult: talking with friends, proposing educational forums, acting on alerts to lobby elected officials, delving deeper into the issues with others, sharing emails, building our network, experimenting with simple living, nourishing hope, and supporting one another along the way. Expanding such activity in our week-to-week life is more crucial than may be apparent. Indeed, *it's what hope looks like*.

We face serious problems. Will they demoralize us? Or help focus our determination to do our part for change? Can we join with others to reclaim our common future and our ailing democracy? What person who cares about our children and our nation could ignore this challenge? Indeed, *who would want to miss out* on doing what we can? 2-09

Useful information appears regularly on such websites as [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org), [thenation.org](http://thenation.org), [fpif.org](http://fpif.org), [forusa.org](http://forusa.org), and [sojo.net](http://sojo.net). Insightful authors to look for include William Greider, Gretchen Morgenson, David Korten, Joseph Steiglitz, Elizabeth Warren, Paul Krugman, Naomi Klein, and Robert Kuttner. For links to effective citizen efforts, inspiration from past movements, resource guides, and this piece to email: [www.pjrcbooks.org](http://www.pjrcbooks.org) ...to comment: [ggersmehl@hotmail.com](mailto:ggersmehl@hotmail.com)



*Author background:* Glen Gersmehl has three decades experience working on public policy concerns like these, and has played a key role in achieving major reforms in health care, social services, and international security. He has presented testimony or worked as a consultant for twenty government agencies and legislative committees, as well as for policy groups such as the Federation of American Scientists. He serves as national coordinator of Lutheran Peace Fellowship and previously directed the nation's largest community leadership training center. Glen holds a graduate degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and has written hundreds of articles for popular and academic publications. He's taught three dozen university courses, appeared widely on media news and talk shows, and led countless workshops and trainings for community and religious groups, universities, military units, and consultations ranging from the National Policy Studies Institute and the UN to a White House conference.