

Dove Tales

Why Sabbath Economics?

By Ched Myers

“We read the Gospel as if we had no money,” laments Jesuit theologian John Haughey, “and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel.” Indeed, the topic of economics is exceedingly difficult to talk about in most First World churches, more taboo than politics or even sex. Yet no aspect of our individual and corporate lives is more determinative of our welfare. And few subjects are more frequently addressed in our scriptures.

The standard of economic and social justice is woven into the warp and weft of the Bible. Pull this strand and the whole fabric unravels. At the heart of this witness is the call to observe what this pamphlet calls “Sabbath economics.” At its root, Sabbath observance is about gift and limits: the grace of receiving that which the Creator gives, and the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift for a possession. The economic implications of this tradition as it is articulated in the Bible can be summarized in three axioms:

- 1 The world as created by God is abundant, with enough for everyone—provided that human communities restrain their appetites and live within limits;
- 2 Disparities in wealth and power are not “natural” but the result of human sin, and must be mitigated within the community of faith through the regular practice of redistribution;
- 3 The prophetic message calls people to the practice of such redistribution, and is thus characterized as “good news” to the poor.

The theology of Sabbath economics and its ethic of regular and systemic wealth and power redistribution—most clearly summed up in the Jubilee release of slaves, deconstruction of debt

and return of foreclosed land—is neither utopian nor abstract. It arose out of the concrete Hebrew experience of slavery in Egypt, and so is both *corrective* and *preventative*. I believe it continues to offer communities of faith today a Way out of our historical and persistent slavery to the Debt system, with its competing theology of meritocracy and its alienating and cruel practices of wealth and power concentration and social stratification.

Sabbath economics is an unfamiliar notion to First World churches in large part because it has

“An economy primarily driven by growth must generate discontent. We cannot be content or the entire economic machine would grind to a halt.”

—Paul Wachtel

been marginalized by biblical interpreters, whose silence has helped to legitimate the very Debt system that the Bible denounces. Skeptical of the Jubilee tradition as irrelevant, unrealistic or threatening, they have not found evidence for its practice in either Testament because they have not been looking for it. This is because, as theologian Wayne Meeks puts it in his excellent book *God the Economist* (1989), “Our theological imaginations have long been captive to the market-driven orthodoxies of modern capitalism”:

There is a deficit of theological work with regard to political economy. God concepts have been criticized in relation to racism, sexism, the technological mastery of the environment, and ordinary people’s loss of the democratic control of

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Mission Statement

The mission of Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Church USA is to proclaim and promote God’s desire for justice (Micah 6:8), Christ’s call to peacemaking (Matthew 5:9), and the Spirit’s reconciling work (Ephesians 2:11-22).



September 8-11, 2005 Hosted by members and friends of the Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA and The Society of Friends and warmly open to persons of all faiths, this conference is designed to be an energizing, multi-faceted, inter-generational gathering, with opportunities to build mentoring relationships and explore practical and intellectual approaches to peace and peacemaking.

Registration and information about the conference is available online at:
<http://www.plowsharesproject.org/php/HistoricPeaceChurchConference.php>

Conference goals:

- To feed the soul of the peacemaker with practical resources.
- To energize the peacemaker through workshops and dynamic, biblical worship.
- To build up the communities of peacemakers by providing a place to share stories and to create networks.
- To help us better understand the current powers and principalities and build a.nity networks in the struggle to change them.
- To address issues of peace and justice and how to maintain a healthy peace witness and community.

Topics and themes:

- Thoughts and preparation for long-term work
- History of the peace churches and peace movements
- Alliances, long term assets and energy
- Healthy peacemaking communities based in knowledge, connections and relationships
- New realities and perspectives
- The work of principalities and powers
- Media
- Consumerism

(Continued from page 1)

their lives. But not enough attention has been given to how God concepts in North Atlantic church and society relate to the deepest assumptions of the market society.

Yet the preeminent challenge to the human family in our time is the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power, and any theology that refuses to reckon with these realities is both cruel and irrelevant.

Today the wealthiest 20% of the world's population receives almost 83% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% receive less than 2%! Collins and Veskel (2000), in their concise primer on economic disparity in the U.S. today, tell us that in 1965 the average U.S. worker made \$7.52 per hour, while the person

running the company made \$330.38 per hour. Today, the average worker makes \$7.39 per hour, the average CEO \$1,566.68 per hour—212 times more! This is “trickle up” economics: the transfer of wealth from the increasingly *poor* to the increasingly *rich*. And neoliberal policies of “structural adjustment” are not only hardening this income polarization, but also deepening psychic and social alienation. Whether through plant closings, the demise of the local grocery store or the crisis of the family farm, we in the First World are now witnessing the epidemic of communal displacement that has already devastated local culture, institutions and environments in the Third and Fourth Worlds. We Christians must talk about economics, and talk about it in light of the gospel.

“To live economically according to God's righteousness, the church should give up the notion that God is noneconomic.”

—M. Douglas Meeks,
God, the Economist

The good news is that our churches, according to Cornel West, “may be the last places left in our culture that can engage the public conversation with non-market values.” Indeed, the “subversive memory” of Jubilee justice has kept erupting throughout church history. It animated early monks, medieval communarians and radical Reformers. Even with the ascendancy of modern capitalism—with its fierce antipathy toward Sabbath economics—this vision has not



Peace and Justice
Support Network

Dove Tales is a publication created by the Peace and Justice Support Network, Mennonite Church USA, to resource individuals and congregations in our collective peace and justice work. Ideas, articles, and reports can be sent to the Editor. **PJSN Reference Committee:** Leo Hartshorn, Susan Mark Landis, Valerie Weidman, Dick Davis, Malinda Berry, Titus Peachey, Mark Frey, Yvonne Diaz Keeler, and Jorge Vielman. **Editor:** Leo Hartshorn, Minister of Peace and Justice, Mennonite Mission Network, 202 South Ann Street, Lancaster, PA, 17602, 717-399-8353, LeoH@MennoniteMission.net. **Designer:** Cynthia Friesen Coyle, volunteer, Americus, Ga. **Web site:** www.MennoniteUSA.org/peace. **Opinions expressed in DoveTales are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official positions of Mennonite Church USA or the Peace and Justice Support Network.**

been extinguished. We see it in tracts and tunes by the 18th century “Leveler” Thomas Spence in the struggle against the enclosures (i.e. privatization) of the Commons in early industrial England:

*Since then this Jubilee
Sets all at Liberty
Let us be glad
Behold each man return to his
possession!*

And we hear it in the 19th century spirituals of African slaves sung in American fields:

*Don't you hear the Gospel trumpet
sound Jubilee?*

Fortunately today, at the turning of the millennia, the vision of “release from the bondage of debt” is again firing the imaginations of faith-based activists.

Over the last ten years efforts to rehabilitate the Jubilee tradition for our time have been growing among those committed to redressing this longstanding and scandalous suppression of “good news” for the poor. This renewal movement is producing new readings of both the Bible and the economy, such as Ross and Gloria Kinsler’s *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Orbis, 2000), which are helping to animate popular struggles that range from local living wage campaigns in support of low-income workers to the international Jubilee Campaign that is educating and organizing in support of debt-relief for impoverished Third World countries. There is a groundswell of alternative consciousness around economics that one can see in the many small-scale experiments here and around the world with more just and environmentally sustainable business practices, technologies, land uses, financial systems, trade patterns, consumption habits, and income distribution schemes. This historical moment, then, offers a unique opportunity for the church to renew its spirituality and its mission to the world.

For the fact is, these are hard times for those trying to resist the triumphant march of a global capitalism that leaves in

its wake ever-increasing disparities between rich and poor. It is a struggle to find an alternative language and practice to the manic claims and absolutist grip of market thinking. That means this is a good time for the church to rediscover the radically different vision of economic and social practice that lies right at the heart of her scriptures. The Bible recognizes that inequalities will inevitably arise in “fallen” society—a realism it shares

“If our North American churches are to advocate for redistributive justice for the poor, we...will have to cease mirroring the dominant culture of global capitalism, with its empty promises of upward mobility and trickle-down justice.”

—Ched Myers

with the worldview of modern capitalism. Unlike the social Darwinism of the latter, however, the biblical vision refuses to stipulate that injustice is therefore a *permanent* condition. Instead, God’s people are instructed to dismantle, on a regular basis, the fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power, so that there is “enough for everyone.”

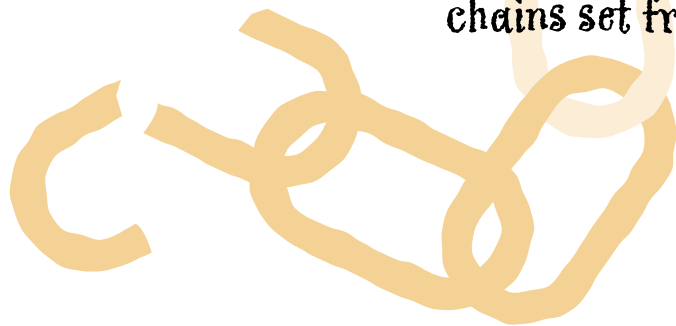
May this ancient biblical vision indeed animate new possibilities for our history, as invoked in the prayer of the nineteenth century abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison:

*God speed the year of jubilee, the
wide world o'er!
When from their galling chains set
free,
Th' oppressed shall vilely bend the
knee*

*And wear the yoke of tyranny, like
brutes, no more—
That year will come, and Freedom's
reign
To all their plundered rights again,
restore.*

This is an excerpt from The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics by Ched Myers and used with the permission of the author. Ched Myers works with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries (www.bcm-net.org), where The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics can be ordered. BCM builds capacity for faith-based witness for peace and justice. Ched is also a founding member of the Sabbath Economics Collaborative (www.sabbatheconomics.org), a network of theologians, educators and activists working on issues of faith and economic justice.

**God speed the year
of jubilee, the wide
world o'er! When
from their galling
chains set free...**



Resources on Economic Justice

Compiled by Leo Hartshorn

Books

- Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consuming Culture* Intervarsity, 1998.
- John B. Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on Global Economy* Pilgrim Press, 1994.
- Stephan Hart, *What Does the Lord Require? How American Christians Think About Economic Justice* Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ross and Gloria Kinsler, eds., *God's Economy: Biblical Studies from Latin America* Orbis Books, 2005.
- M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* Fortress Press, 1989.
- Ched Meyers, "...and they distributed it to whoever had need." : *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* Tell the Truth Press, Church of the Savior, 2001.
- Andre Resner, Jr., *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice* Chalice Press, 2003.
- Paul Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life* New Society Publishers, 1989.
- Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* Free Press, 1994.
- Robert Wuthnow, ed., *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior* Eerdmans, 1995.

Websites

- Alternatives for Simple Living—www.simpleliving.org
- Call to Renewal—www.calltorenewal.org
- Sabbath Economic Collaborative—www.sabbatheconomics.org
- American Friends Service Committee—www.afsc.org
- Mennonite Central Committee, Washington Office—www.mcc.org



Remember to come to the Peace and Justice Support Network sponsored events at **Charlotte 2005!** For more information go to: www.MennoniteUSA.org



Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference Peace and Justice Committee

In the fall of 2004 a new discussion group came online. For no cost you can visit the site at pnmc-peaceandjustice@yahoo.com. Sign on and you will have access to discussions and resources from all around the Northwest. Recent discussions have been lively. If you have been looking for information about the draft, Sunday school curriculum, immigration, nuclear disarmament, peace theology or any other peace and justice topic, one e-mail to this group generally brings a healthy variety of resource ideas.

Also in the fall of 2004 PNMC Peace and Justice Committee was awarded a *Sharing the Peace* grant from Peace and Justice Support Network, Mennonite Church USA. The \$1000 grant will fund (with matching money) a Peace Pavilion. This high quality display will feature a standing 6 foot tri-fold panel with photos and white boards, a *Peace Partners* notebook filled with resources from various peace and justice organizations, and a library of books and resources to purchase. The Peace Pavilion is designed to be checked out by churches or groups as a tool to use at various events as a way to bring resources to local communities. PNMC Peace and Justice Committee will unveil the Peace Pavilion at the PNMC meetings this summer and hope to see it travel widely to Mennonite Central Committee festivals, county and state fairs, community events, churches, and other places where peace and justice resources are needed.

Matt Friesen, Chair
Pacific Northwest Mennonite Church
Peace and Justice Committee

Conference Peace and Justice Events

ACC Peace and Justice Committee Presents 2004 Peace Mug Award

The Atlantic Coast Conference Peace and Justice Committee awards a “peace mug” annually to a person or agency that exemplifies Christ’s love to persons experiencing adversity and injustice. It was presented to Doug Burkholder of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster (CMCL) at the Fall Assembly



(10/23/04). Doug is active with the Lancaster Area Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (LAVORP). He has also been very involved with taking high school youth to Nicaragua with the Witness for Peace program and has another trip planned for July '05. Professionally Doug has a Masters in Social Work degree and works at Phillhaven Hospital in the adolescent day treatment program. He serves as a youth advisor for his congregation and is gifted in and committed to connecting with youth and nurturing their spiritual and peace-making journeys.

East Pennsylvania Congregations Attend Second Annual Peace Gathering

How many Mennonite Peacemakers does it take to fully occupy the Deep Run East Fellowship Hall? Answer: Who has time for fellowship with so much work to be done for Peace and Justice in the world? All peacenik jokes aside, The Peace and Justice Committee of Eastern District and Franconia Conference was encouraged to see so many persons from area Mennonite churches come out for its 2nd Annual Fall Gathering on Saturday, November 20. From 9 a.m. until 1 in the afternoon participants gathered for a time of reflection, learning, sharing around the making peace in the name of Christ. But make no mistake; there was plenty of fellowship to be had in the hall that day.

The morning opened with the Peace & Justice Committee chair, Bob Walden, introducing the work and training of The Fellowship of Reconciliation. In an hour, participants were given a tantalizing preview of the five basic premises of the training: A Look at Violence; What Nonviolence can do; Social Change Movements; Community Organization; and Action Planning. With such a limited window of time, it was no surprise to hear many participants say that they wished for more than a small portion of

the training that morning. Therefore, Bob encouraged each person present to consider how the full 20 hour training could benefit the work of reconciliation in our home churches and communities.

After enjoying a time of refreshments and conversation with individuals from Philadelphia—and others from the conferences who came near and far to attend the gathering—the group was then introduced to the speaker that morning. At the invitation of the P&J Committee, Daryl Byler, director of the MCC Washington D.C. office, spoke and facilitated a brilliant conversation on being a Christian Peacemaker in today’s political and social climate. While offering encouragement and biblical reflection on God’s saving and restorative work throughout history, Byler also encouraged those present to share where they encounter both frustration and hope in their work for peace.



Perhaps the most poignant and compelling point that Byler brought to the morning was his counsel to remember Sabbath in our lives. Byler stated that those who work for peace tend to overextend themselves, leaving little room in their own lives for peace. He went on to say, as peacemakers we need to learn balance in our lives in order to see social and political dilemmas with a fresh, loving and creative spirit. When we however approach our work and life without the rest and perspective that Sabbath grants, we are instead prone to reacting to conflict and social woes with fear and desperation. The power of Sabbath was made vividly clear to Byler during his 40 day fast in the days leading up to the start of the American War in Iraq, when his anger toward the administration and over the entire situation was instead turned to deep sadness.

The biblical vision and reflection offered by Daryl Byler and the participation of all those who gave of their time to attend the Fall Gathering are vital reasons for why the Peace & Justice Committee of Eastern District and Franconia Conference continues to serve as a resource and catalyst for peacemaking in the name of Christ for Mennonite congregations in Eastern Pennsylvania and beyond.

Written by Ryan Kolb, The Peace and Justice Committee, Eastern District and Franconia Conferences.

*Editor’s note—If your conference peace and justice committee has news about a special event you would like to share with the wider church, please send reports, including writer’s name and contact info, along with photos to the editor.

PJSN Finances update

Thanks to your donations, PJSN had a teeny surplus at the end of our fiscal year—but we squeezed expenses to the bone because we were nervous about income. Our gratitude to you, our donors, is great! But we dream—what might we do with an additional \$10,000?

Last year, almost 450 people contributed to the work of PJSN, although nearly 2000 receive our mailings. Just think what additional work we could accomplish if each of you reading this Dove Tales sent a donation! Here are some of our dreams:

- ✦ to provide additional “Spread the Peace” grants to congregations reaching out into their communities;
- ✦ to create new resources, especially to encourage our youth to be Christian peacemakers although they receive weekly mailings from the military;

- ✦ to hold a gathering local to your community to increase centeredness in Jesus’ peace and give you tools for these times;
- ✦ to have the PJSN Reference Committee meet in the western part of the United States so we can learn to know you better spread out into your community to serve congregations on Sunday;
- ✦ to begin a pilot project for urban peacemaking and community development.

Care about increased visibility for peace and justice in Mennonite Church USA? We do—but we need your donations, ideas and prayers. Please use the envelope enclosed.

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