

An Open Letter on the State of Our Economy
The Rev. Josh Pawelek, President
The Greater Hartford Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice
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As I watch Connecticut's lawmakers struggle with dire news of economic recession, and with the awesome and painfully difficult task of having to make enormous cuts in state spending in order to produce balanced budgets, I feel tempted to give in to apathy and, in my worst moments, despair. I feel tempted to accept the notion that progressive ideas like universal healthcare and supportive housing—ideas that seek to protect and empower society's most vulnerable members—must be shelved until we have crawled out of these hard economic times.

I feel tempted, but I will not give in to this temptation. I refuse to believe this recession requires us to abandon the poor, the struggling, the marginalized and the suffering when it comes to our legislative priorities. I refuse to believe this recession requires us to stop demanding policies and programs like universal healthcare that may ultimately be very expensive, but will benefit every citizen and make our state more healthy, efficient and productive. I refuse to believe this recession requires us to set aside our vision of a more just and caring society.

Rather, I believe this recession requires all of us to step back and think very carefully about the values we want to see dwelling in the heart of our communities and the heart of our state. With hindsight, it is easy to see that the values of greed, deregulation, selfishness and "anything goes" profiteering lie at the source of our current economic woes. It will not be easy to jettison these values from our collective economic life, for they are deeply embedded. Yet we have before us an opportunity to finally reject these destructive values and replace them with values I believe are more dear to American hearts: justice, mercy, compassion and sacrifice.

We need to remember that tax revenues from corporations and wealthy Wall Street financial brokers who happen to live in Connecticut are not the only factors in producing a healthy economy. We need to remember that healthy people also help produce a healthy economy. We need to remember that affordable, accessible housing and excellent educational opportunities also help produce a healthy economy. We need to remember that whatever reduces violence in the home and on the streets also helps produce a healthy economy.

It would be shameful to see Connecticut crawl out of this recession in two years only to discover that while corporate profits, CEO compensation and state coffers are soaring once again, the plight of poor people remains chronically unchanged. So I am challenging Governor Rell and our legislators to keep those in poverty in mind as they make the spending cuts necessary to produce a balanced budget this year and in the coming years.

If we're going to maintain essential services for the poor, we need money. Why should raising taxes at such a time be a taboo subject? Our leaders ought to raise certain taxes in the short run that could be reduced when the economy turns around. Make adjustments to the personal income tax such as eliminating and reducing exemptions and raising marginal rates on very high income households. Increase the corporate tax and the insurance premiums tax. Increase the cigarette tax, beer and wine taxes and the gas tax.

Close loopholes. Beyond taxes, increase recycling and reduce out-of-state trash shipments. Accelerate rehabilitation of non-violent (drug) offenders. Restructure government through privatization and consolidation. Engage in more regional cooperation to reduce municipal costs. Consolidate all housing programs into one entity. Create a stellar “Buy CT!” program. Retrieve unclaimed bottle deposits. Channel older workers' talents to help fledgling businesses, provide mentoring, tutoring and early child education as these workers prepare to or are just retired. Reduce all paper margins to 1/2 inch and print on both sides of the paper.

In any of these proposals there is something for someone to oppose. But that takes us right back to the values of greed and selfishness that got us to where we are, and blinds us to the needs of the poor and impoverished. It's time for us to consider the common good. It's time for our elected leaders to boldly call on all of us to make sacrifices together so that we can get through this difficult time.

But I am not only challenging our elected leaders to think and act in ways that create justice and health for all people over the long-term. We are foolish if we believe politicians can solve all our problems. They can't. Government can only do so much. Mindful of President Barak Obama's inaugural invitation to a “new era of responsibility,” I challenge all of us to discern within the spheres of our influence what must change so that justice, mercy, compassion and an ethic of sacrifice can live at the center of our collective life.

I challenge all of us to imagine and work for a society that finally refuses to tolerate poverty. I challenge all of us to imagine and create a society that finally values accountability and high ethical standards over deregulation and shady legal loopholes; that finally values the social good over excessive private gain; that finally values generosity, sharing and sacrifice over greed and selfishness; that finally values human lives and human well-being over the need to maximize profits. I challenge all of us to imagine and work for a society wherein we truly are the keepers of our brothers and sisters.

We are in the midst of a potent economic recession. But that is no excuse to allow a recession of our hearts. Let us not give into the temptations of apathy and despair. Let us have faith that the widening and expanding of our hearts in this very moment is the first step to creating not only better economic circumstances for all, but a more just, merciful and compassionate society.

May it be so.