

## Do Justice

*"Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8*

### A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the April edition of Do Justice as we continue to discuss issues of social justice from a Christian perspective.

#### Economic growth and COVID-19

It has been interesting to see how quickly the debate about COVID-19 has moved from health to economics. Yes, there are major economic impacts from the actions that have been taken by New Zealand and other countries to prevent the virus spreading throughout the world. New Zealand's market for lobsters in China has suddenly dried up. Large amounts of unprocessed timber from New Zealand and other countries have become stuck on the wharfs of Chinese ports and the number of tourists first from China and now virtually the whole world, has dramatically dropped.

The wide-ranging requirements to self-isolate on returning from overseas will certainly have significant economic impacts. Air New Zealand has already made very large cuts in its services as they anticipate demand dropping very quickly and the Government has moved to help them. Tourism and the hospitality industries have already been hit hard. The government has already announced a major mitigation package.

The economists, or at least some of them, would have us believe that we are heading for a recession as bad as the Great Depression of the 1930s, and world growth will stop. The dramatic drop on the world's stock exchanges also appears to contribute to the air of doom. The real question that needs to be asked at this time is not, "How can we get back to world economic growth?" but rather, "How can we have a sustainable and equitable economy?"

Despite the Zero Carbon Act and the Wellbeing Budget, we in New Zealand are still committed to economic growth as a desirable outcome for the country. But how can continuous annual growth in economic activity be possible in a finite environment? There are only so many natural resources in the world and if we continue to use them up at the present rate required to maintain or increase economic growth, then they will inevitably run out. Ultimately, economic growth will destroy the earth. How can we, as Christians, support such a policy? Within this vast and complex world, we have been given a role to 'serve and preserve' God's creation (Genesis 2:15) not to destroy it.

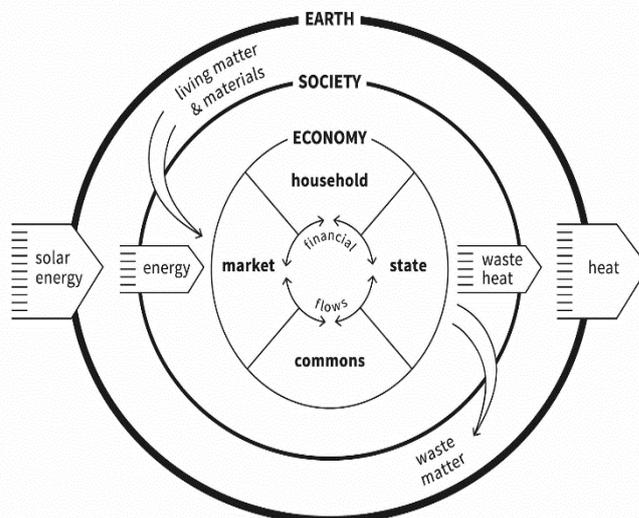
It seems that economic growth has become an 'article of faith' for many politicians and political commentators from all sides of the political spectrum. In New Zealand the only party that

appears to question the ongoing need for economic growth is the Greens and they still appear to go along with it as the price for inclusion in government.

Economic growth over the last few centuries has had a dramatic, positive effect on the lives of millions of people, initially in Europe and North America and in recent decades in Asia, particularly in China. But there are still parts of the world where poverty is the norm, and even within so called 'developed' countries there are still many families and individuals who struggle day by day. We live in an enormously unequal world with a very small number of very rich people who are the main beneficiaries of continuous economic growth.

The dramatic developments in mid-March make it even more important to consider an alternative to the continuous growth agenda. We still live in a finite world; we still have climate change; we still have inequality. What are we going to do?

What would a sustainable and equitable economy look like? A number of economists and other thinkers have suggested possible models. One of the most comprehensive responses to the challenge of an alternative to the continuous growth agenda has come from the British economist Kate Raworth in her book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to think like a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economist*. In our May 2017 edition, we commented extensively on this book and again in our December 2019 edition. The events of the last two months have shown how timely Kate Raworth's book is.



This diagram above from Raworth's book consists of two rings. The inner ring of the doughnut represents the resources we need to lead a good life: food, clean water, housing, sanitation, energy, education, healthcare, democracy. Anyone living within that ring, in the hole in the middle of the doughnut, is deprived of these essentials. The outer ring of the doughnut consists of the Earth's environmental limits, beyond which we inflict dangerous levels of climate change, ozone depletion, water pollution, loss of species and other assaults on the living world. Once there is an unbalance between the rings, then there is a danger of dramatic change until a new balance is achieved with or without humankind. For some time we have been living with imbalance, continuous growth sucking up more and more of the world's resources for the benefit of the very rich and powerful who have used the free market to their own advantage.

It is interesting to see how country after country has responded to the economic challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused. Around the world finance minister after finance minister have turned their backs on the free market approach of the neo-liberals to instigate basic Keynesian solutions. John Keynes, a British economist working in the 1920s and 1930s, argued that governments should inject resources into the economy during times of trouble. This is exactly what the New Zealand Government, and many other governments around the world, are doing. But Keynesian economics will only address the immediate challenges we are facing. Keynes also believed in economic growth year by year, although in a more equitable way.

One of the most interesting aspects of the present situation has been the ability of finance ministers to find enormous sums of money to deal with the problems stemming from a small virus. However, when advocates call on similar amounts of money to be spent on moving to a sustainable economy and society, the funds suddenly disappear.

COVID-19 will be tamed within a couple of years at the longest. A vaccine will be available and produced in great quantity so that the virus is no longer a threat. Governments are already providing funds for the research into the development of a vaccine or vaccines. Large pharmaceutical companies should not be allowed to patent and excessively profit from the production of these vaccines.

Over the last few days, we have been inundated with advice from governments, health boards, banks, companies, NGOs and churches on what we can and should do as far as COVID-19 is concerned. One from the Methodist Church of New Zealand encapsulates our Christian ethic very well. It finishes with

- *Prudence* - Carefully discern the best course of action not just for ourselves but for the good of all. Ask: **What action does God want me to take?**
- *Justice* - Seek fairness for everyone, especially those who need it most. Ask: **Who is not getting the help that they need?**
- *Temperance* - Find a healthy balance between self-care and care for others. Ask: **Do I err toward selfishness or an unhealthy co-dependence?**

- *Fortitude* - Persevere in times of trial and difficulty. Ask: **Do I have the courage to do the right thing even when the going gets tough?**

### What you can do

- **Stop the spread.** Even if you are not particularly concerned about the risk to yourself or your own family, these tactics will protect others who may be more vulnerable. Many of us will carry the virus before having any symptoms (and may never develop any)
  - **Wash your hands well for at least 20 seconds with soap and water.** Sing the refrain to Michael Joncas' song "On Eagle's Wings" ("And he will raise you up...") while you wash.
  - **Avoid touching your face.**
  - **Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue.**
  - **Follow the guidance of local officials.**
  - **Stay home if you become ill.**
  - **Don't take what you don't need.** Hoarding worsens the situation and can lead to more infections and more impacts for the most vulnerable.
    - **Leave the masks to others.** Masks only make sense for health care workers and those who are infected. They are not guaranteed to prevent transmission.
    - **Do not overbuy supplies.** Retailers are being wiped out of disinfectants and other supplies, leaving some who most need them without. Be prepared but be thoughtful and reasonable.
    - **Advocate for the vulnerable and targeted.**
      - **Have compassion for those most at risk.** Stand up for those who need the most help and make sure they are being cared for, without judgment.
      - **Fight racism.** Discrimination against those with Asian background only hurts the situation.
      - **Proactively love your neighbour!**
      - **Check in on isolated or vulnerable neighbours** and offer to help with specific tasks such as shopping, child or pet care, cleaning, etc.
      - **If you are in a position of power, use that power for the good of all.** Allow workers to work from home or take time off, limit large gatherings, follow government guidance, etc.
      - **Thank those on the front lines who are protecting us, such as health care workers, police, firefighters.** Be gentle and kind with them.
      - **Pray for all those affected by the crisis.**