

## Letters from Overseas

### Kristine Greenaway Writes from Switzerland

December 2009

Dear United Church of Canada friends,

As I write this Advent and Christmas message, church bells are ringing. It is 3:00 p.m. in Geneva on Sunday, December 13, a moment which will be marked around the world with the sound of bells, shells, drums, gongs, or horns. They are sounding on this date and at this time to mark the conclusion in Copenhagen, Denmark, of an ecumenical service held in connection with the UN Conference on Climate Change in that city.

They will sound 350 times because 350 parts per million is the safe upper limit for CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere, according to many scientists and climate experts. Now the concentration is 390 ppm. Unless we are able to rapidly reduce CO<sub>2</sub> levels, we risk melting the Greenland ice sheet, provoking major methane releases from permafrost melt. Already predictions are that small atoll countries in the Pacific region, like Tuvalu and Niue, will disappear as ocean levels rise.

Member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in these countries are in the front line of the wave of destruction set off by lifestyle choices and industrial models in the global North. As the bells toll, our prayers for the churches in those countries rise amid the clamour.

In their open letter to Canadians on faith and climate change ([www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/091126](http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/091126)), written November 26, Mardi Tindal and David MacDonald explain why the United Nations Climate Change Conference is a place where faith and science must intersect:

“These talks will almost certainly determine the fate of coming generations. The future of our children is at stake. Finding a way forward will require that we attend to the best science available, so we are firmly grounded in reality. But it also demands that we recognize the spiritual values that have guided humans for centuries so we can work toward a vision of wholeness.”

WARC has urged its 214 member churches to join in the bell ringing as a signal of their commitment to global justice which includes climate justice. In a message issued to the media on December 11 about the UN Climate Change Conference, WARC’s general secretary, Setri Nyomi, wrote:

“We call on all our member churches to engage in prayer and actions that will have impact on the outcome of this summit. We ask that member churches commit to encouraging lifestyle changes that will reverse this trend. Let the churches take every action to urge their government leaders to make the right decisions for the sake of a more sustainable world.”

This call to respond to the challenge of climate change is rooted in WARC’s long commitment to environmental and economic justice. At WARC’s 24th general council in Accra, Ghana, member churches issued a declaration ([http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news\\_id=1157&navi=45](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=1157&navi=45)) which says:

“We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and well-being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation... Therefore we reject the

unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation."

As WARC prepares now for the 25th general council to be held in Grand Rapids, U.S., in June 2010, these words call us into a newer and deeper understanding of what it means for Christians to be committed to climate justice in relation to economic justice. What changes in how we hold meetings, do our business, manage our homes, and take our holidays are implied if we are to respond faithfully to the call to respect God's creation?

In June 2010 at the Uniting General Council, WARC will merge with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches. This communion of 80 million members in 108 countries must be heard wherever life-changing decisions are made: our homes, our parishes, our municipal councils, and at the national and international levels. With voices united, we can make statements of belief and issue calls to action. Better yet, with changes to our lifestyles, we can set an example so that the world might believe in the possibility of transformative change.

The ringing bells also serve to remind us here in Geneva that Muslims do not have the right to signal their faith and places of worship in Switzerland by erecting new minarets. In a recent vote, the majority of Swiss voted to deny Muslims the right to build minarets for their mosques. There was a time that no church in Geneva—other than a church following in the tradition of Calvin—was allowed to build a tower or a place of worship that in any way looked like a church. Today, Geneva is the site of ecumenical dialogue and cooperation among member churches of WARC, the World Council of Churches, and other ecumenical organizations. Now the challenge facing the Swiss is to show interfaith tolerance. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, which is an active participant in WARC, has led the way with public statements urging Swiss to be open to the stranger in their midst and to learn to live in peace and acceptance with those who are new to this country.

This is a time of change and expectations in our world. Social, economic, and environmental changes have prompted upheavals throughout this year and the turbulence will continue well into the future. In a few days, the season will change. And in the church, Advent marks the expectation of transformation and new beginnings signalled by Jesus' birth.

My role, as an overseas personnel associate of The United Church of Canada involved in an international, ecumenical ministry of communication is to help make the good news of that hope for transformation heard. Your support of the church's Mission and Service Fund makes that ministry possible. For that WARC is deeply grateful.

On behalf of WARC's General Secretary, officers, and staff, I wish you all the best for the Christmas season and a blessed New Year.

***Kristine Greenaway** is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with WARC in Switzerland. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.*

