

# Keeping the faith when the money runs out

BY SUSAN K. TAYLOR

**W**hether one believes that the United States is in “a recession marked by rising unemployment” or that we’re facing “the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression,” few can claim immunity from the recent bad financial news. Not even churches.

Economic problems are “spilling over into churches in huge ways,” says Clark Simmons, a regional representative for the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who spends many hours in churches across the South discussing financial matters. And he’s hearing a lot.

“The reality is that people are scared,” Simmons says. “We haven’t been through something like this and don’t know what it means.”

Hardship is growing more apparent as people lose their jobs, says Charlie Summers, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Va. The situation there is “now in the mode of headlines—‘Thousands of jobs lost,’” he said in an interview earlier this year. “I was sitting last night with the executive of a company that had evaporated around him” after more than 20 years.

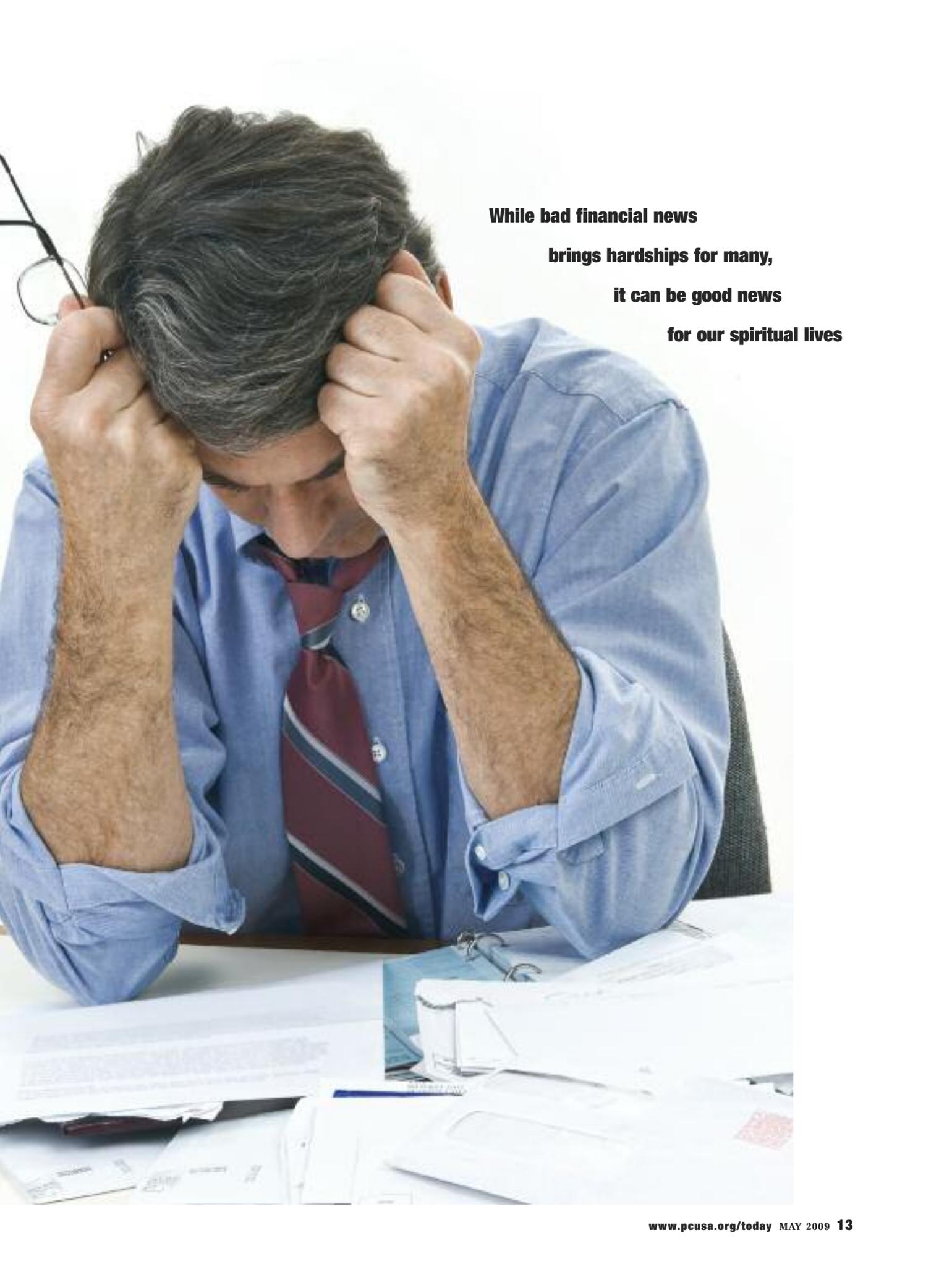
The spouses of five staff members of a single Richmond-area church were recently laid off, he reports as an example of the pervasiveness of the problem.

The repercussions ripple throughout people’s lives, Summers says. Anxieties around money “put tremendous stress on relationships. You have to worry about what to tell the kids.” Financial stress can even raise theological questions, as people ask, “Who is in charge? Is God?”

“There’s a sudden humility that is apparent in people who thought they were masters of the universe,”



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**While bad financial news  
brings hardships for many,  
it can be good news  
for our spiritual lives**

‘We see that our money is gone, but faith and community will still be here.’

DREW HENRY

Summers says. “We are not in charge, and this is comforting. We trust in God’s providence, and are reminded that someone else is in control. We are in good hands.”

Unemployment often creates a particular pastoral care challenge, says Summers: shame.

“We are so defined by the work that we do. We have been so dismissive that anybody not producing is worthless.” It hasn’t always been this way, Summers notes. During the Great Depression, “everyone knew talented people who were out of work because of things out of their control.” It’s time to reexamine our cultural link of employment to human value, he adds.

Similarly, Simmons emphasizes, “The job is not who you are. Our job is our calling, but it can be lived in many different places. It doesn’t have to be in a single place, a single company.”

“It goes back to where your faith and hope and confidence lie,” Simmons continues. “This could be a perfect opportunity to learn and realize that there is something much bigger that holds us and gives us confidence.” Humbly, he adds, “How you can convey that to someone who has just lost their job, I have no idea.”

### **Search for security**

“What do we want more than anything in the world?” asks Elaine Prevallet in a 1982 booklet, “Reflections on Simplicity” ([www.pendlehill.org/bookstore](http://www.pendlehill.org/bookstore)). “For most of us, the truthful answer is our own security.

“Any thing to which we look for security is transient; none is subject to our control,” the Kentucky contemplative and author continues. “If we set our hearts on them as the source of our security, we can never be secure, for we will always fear that they will fail us. And they probably will. . . . So our security has to be grounded elsewhere.”

Drew Henry, associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Ala., agrees. “Where do we put our security and trust?” he asks. “I think, to be honest, most of us put it in money.”

After the meltdown in the U.S. financial system, however, “people don’t trust money the way they

used to,” he says. “Some blinders have been taken off; the economy isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. At the same time, I haven’t seen people losing their foundation. Maybe [the economic crisis is] putting money in the place it needs to be. We see that our money is gone, but faith and community will still be here.

“I see people spending more time together. Part of working yourself raw is chasing another dollar. We’re not doing that as much. We’re doing things where money is not the center.”

The crisis is precipitating a reprioritizing, Henry says, from our churches down to our personal budgets. “We’re asking, ‘What’s essential?’ As people of faith, that’s a good question to ask.”

### **Painful decisions**

Some of those personal decisions can be quite painful, notes Margee Kooistra, a member of Market Square Presbyterian Church in Harrisburg, Pa. Kooistra meets regularly with about a dozen people, many of whom are also members of her church, to talk about questions of money and faith.

At a recent meeting, they talked about facing the economic downturn. Several reported managing reasonably well, she says, despite major drops in their invested assets. A couple of people reported significant salary cuts. One described feeling “traumatized by the hardship that so many are facing.”

Within even that small group people have had to postpone a well-deserved retirement, decrease travel, and let go of a long-held dream to buy a retirement home.

Churches are also making decisions about expenditures, from missions giving to staffing.

“In past recessions people haven’t given less,” says Jay Hudson, chief executive officer of the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program. “But because of the loss of jobs, we are seeing a decline in contributions, and many presbyteries are seeing declining mission giving from congregations.”

“I’m definitely hearing about the economic downturn at the presbytery level,” says Wendy Gist of Southern California. “Money is very tight and people are having to be creative about how

## AN ECONOMY FOR THE COMMON GOOD

# Grace over greed

Efforts to rebuild the global economy should include a moral dimension, say leaders of many of the world's churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They insist that charity alone will not help the poor, and bailouts for banks and businesses will not solve the world's economic crisis. What is needed is justice, and the creation of an economy that works for the common good of all people.

"Compared with most other developed countries, the United States has the lowest tax rates and the highest rates of debt, inequality and poverty," says Christian Iosso, coordinator of the PC(USA)'s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. He points to a document adopted by the 2008 General Assembly, "A Social Creed for the 21st Century," as a basis for what he calls "a needed rebalancing of the social contract."

Among other things, the Social Creed commits churches to work for:

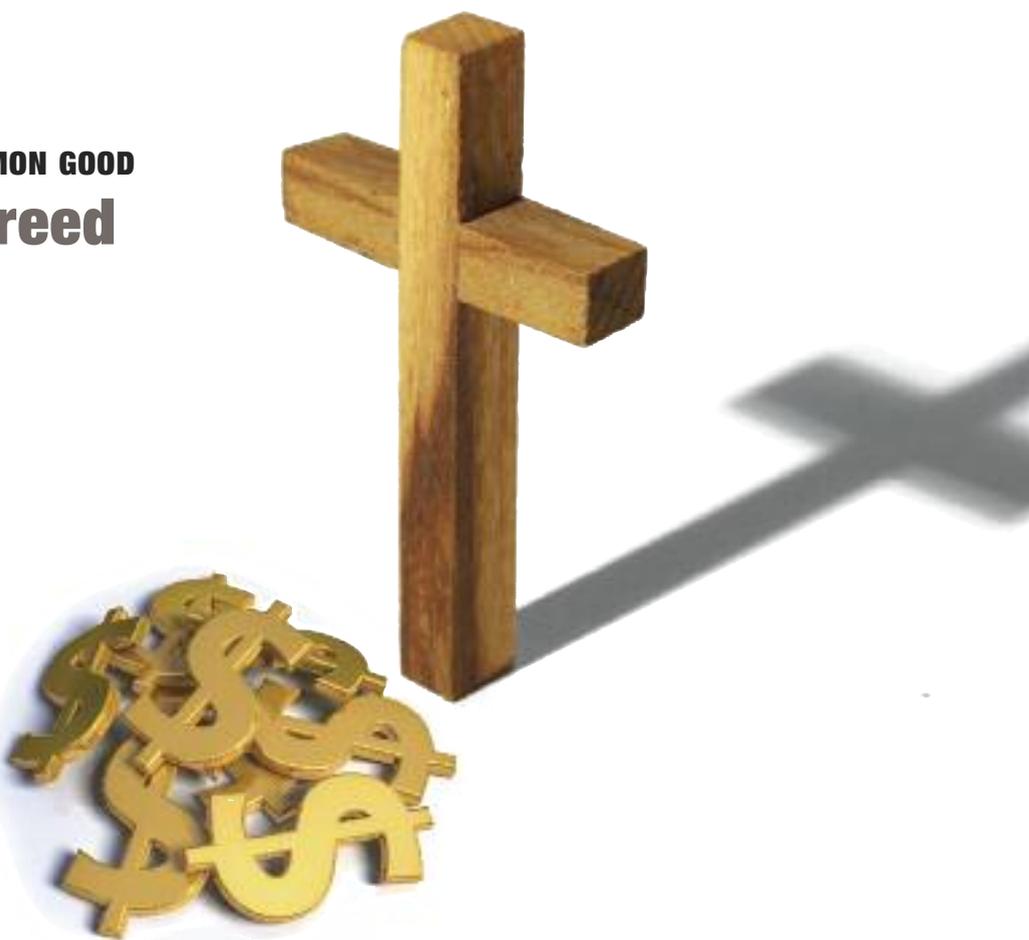
- Employment for all, at a family-sustaining living wage, with equal pay for comparable work

they are going to redesign programs." As a hunger action enabler, Gist connects churches in San Fernando and San Gabriel presbyteries to mission work involving hunger and poverty, including direct food provision.

"Every single church that I know of with a food pantry is seeing more people than ever before," Gist says. "There is a desperate cry for help to help cover the need that's coming to their door."

### What churches can do

The church's role, Henry says, is found in the question, "How can we be community with those people" who are fearful and hurting?



- Abatement of hunger and poverty, and enactment of policies benefiting the most vulnerable

- Sustainable communities marked by affordable housing, access to good jobs and public safety

- Adoption of simpler lifestyles for those who have enough; grace over greed in economic life

- Tax and budget policies that reduce disparities between rich

and poor, strengthen democracy and provide greater opportunity for everyone within the common good

- Equitable global trade and aid that protects local economies, cultures and livelihoods

**TO READ** the entire document go to [www.pcusa.org/acswp/socialcreed.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/socialcreed.htm)

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Summers says recent church staff meetings in Richmond have revolved around the question, "Where can we respond?" He's also talking about that question with other area clergy.

"This is going to be bigger than one congregation has the resources for," Summers says. Collectively, churches can better assemble resources and talk to more people about potential job contacts, support structures and survival advice.

First Presbyterian of Richmond is networking with other groups and churches to provide discussion groups, job resource links and other support structures, while looking for ways to help

people preserve their privacy when that's important to them.

"It's like Alcoholics Anonymous," Summers explains. "You may not want to go to AA at your church, but you will go to AA at someone else's."

Summers also stresses that the church must be "finding ways in public worship to recognize the reality of the situation, and not go on as if nothing has changed. We're all in this boat together." To hear that from the pulpit makes it easier for someone to ask for support, he says.

Summers emphasizes the need for people with financial anxieties to talk to someone, as the talking helps people feel less powerless.

Recognizing how difficult it can be for someone accustomed to financial independence to admit fear, much less outright need, Henry says, "We're trying to watch subtle signs, like pledge information. Is a regular giver unable to meet their

pledged commitments? That can help us make pastoral determinations of 'Where does this person need us right now?' We don't want people to slide under the radar."

Over and over, Henry returns to the theme of community, encouraging people to "lean into the community that's here. Let us walk with you through this.

"We believe in the God of abundance, not scarcity," he says. "The model of creation and of human life itself is life abundant. The resources are given for life each day—the dawn, food, everything we truly need."

But we live in an economy that proclaims scarcity, where we are taught that there is never enough. "As Christians, we are called to live beyond the idea of scarcity," Henry declared, "and [to proclaim] that abundance is for everyone, not just for a few."

## WHEN THE FINANCIAL CRISIS HITS HOME

# 10 ways to cope

**1** Talk to someone you trust. Talking helps shrink our anxieties to their proper proportion and can help us find solutions to problems. This conversation may also be a gift to the people you've chosen to talk to, as they are facing the same economy you are and may be wanting to talk to someone themselves.

**2** Reject language that suggests we are defined by money. Japan's 10-year economic stagnation of the 1990s is regularly described as "the lost decade." Lost? Really? No doubt, people worked and learned. Children were born and people died. People grew things and

created art and loved their neighbors. That's hardly a decade lost.

**3** Think of three ways to spend time that don't involve spending money. For many of us this is a challenge, as we've gotten into the habit of eating out for entertainment or shopping as a way of spending time with friends. Here are three to start: play music with a few other folks; walk your dogs together to spend time with your friends; play cards or a board game rather than taking the family to a movie. Share your three ideas with three friends and get them to think of three things. Now you have a list of 15, including the three above.



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## Counting blessings

This time of economic turmoil is “clearly throwing people back on their spiritual resources,” Summers says. For example, he says, “People are actively counting their blessings.”

A member of Kooistra’s group observes that surviving a life-threatening illness puts an economic crisis in perspective, and gives one “faith that things will be okay.”

Simmons says people at the church where he is a member and elder, Druid Hills Presbyterian in Atlanta, Ga., have been discussing walking by faith and not by sight. “Faith tells us that the sky truly has not fallen,” Simmons says. “We still have family that keeps each other together.”

A particularly important spiritual resource, Kooistra says, is to continue focusing on others. With admiration she tells of one woman in the Harrisburg, Pa., money and faith discussion group

who has been going through personal struggles in recent years and had to take a salary cut. And yet that woman devoted her Christmas to coordinating home stays for a group of about 30 foreign students.

“Do we live from self-centeredness, or acknowledge our interdependence?” Kooistra asks. “I see such a yearning to come together. The spiraling economy may be an opportunity to do that.

“We are all interdependent,” she adds. “Our financial situations, our environment, our families and jobs are all part of the same beautiful web.”

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*Susan K. Taylor is a Louisville, Ky., freelance writer and a member of the board of directors of Ministry of Money, an organization that helps people explore the intersections of money and spirituality.*

## MORE ONLINE

See a list of helpful resources on money and faith at

[www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today)

**4** Don't feed the fear. Don't frequently check your online account statements or the day's market reports. Forego the television news, or watch it critically, with awareness that many news sources intentionally fuel fear. The world will turn without you knowing every detail.

**5** Count your blessings. In financial-speak, assess your whole-life portfolio, thinking through all of your forms of assets, not just the ones invested in financial markets. What makes up your total portfolio? House? Pension? Time—do you still have several years of working life in which to continue to earn? What about your education, work experience and other forms of human capital that support you? Your

health? What about your family and community? What about your faith? Ultimately, we are supported by so much more than our 401(k)'s.

**6** Don't make drastic changes in your portfolio or other assets. If you feel something needs to be changed, talk it over with a financial professional who knows your whole financial situation. That person can help you respond more objectively and think long-term about appropriate changes.

**7** To cut back spending, ask yourself, “What's the real purpose in spending this money?” And then think of potential alternatives to meet your real purpose. For example: Why are you eating lunch out for the third time this week? To avoid getting up

10 minutes earlier to put together a lunch? (Save \$15 for 10 minutes work; that's \$90/hour.) To spend time with a friend? (Could you walk a few blocks together instead?) To impress a potential client? (Offer fair-trade coffee and a thoughtful presentation instead.)

**8** Pay for more things in cash. Studies show that people spend less when they use cash. Don't use debit cards either. It's handling the cash that makes people more aware of how much they are spending.

**9** Continue to give. Besides allowing us to care for others, giving cultivates the spiritual discipline of letting go, of remembering where our treasure truly lies. This is as important—or perhaps more

important—in challenging economic times as in times when it's easier to give. An excellent way to help the vulnerable and impoverished of the world, those hit hardest by the faltering economy, is by giving to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering ([www.pcusa.org/oghs](http://www.pcusa.org/oghs)), which supports the Presbyterian Hunger Program, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Self-Development of People.

**10** Remember that you are part of a community. If you have a job, look around you for people who have lost their jobs. What can you do to help? If you have lost your job, let others help you, as hard as that may be. Mutual caring is the mortar of community. You are not in this alone.—*Susan K. Taylor* □