

Sign us up!

by the Reverend Dr. Gary B. Reiersen

No matter what your skin color, your age, your economic status, your religion, no matter where you live — we all received the same call. We've been asked to serve. We've been asked to take responsibility. We've been asked to sacrifice. And most importantly, we've been asked to look after one another.

No matter what your politics — Republican, Democrat, Independent — we as a nation have been asked to pull together. What we face — the financial crisis, two wars, staggering unemployment, a stunning number of home foreclosures, and the growing gap between what is just and what is simply not — will require us all.

It will take more than a government rescue plan to fix this turmoil. It will take a country, a people, risking real relationships with others unlike themselves, asking: What can I do to help?

A double whammy

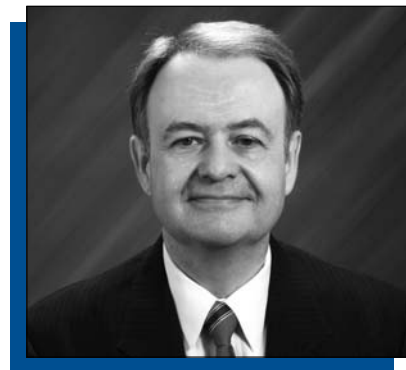
At the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC) — a family of social service programs that help struggling Minnesota families living in poverty — this economic crisis means we experience a double whammy. Precisely because we serve the groups hardest hit, we see a profound increase in community members who need help. This, at a time when our supporters may have fewer resources to give.

Today, we see a 13 percent jump in food-shelf use in central and southwestern Minnesota, a projected 28,000 more Minnesota families facing foreclosure this year alone, and a looming state budget deficit. Fixed-income seniors are losing retirement funds exactly when they can't afford to. Small businesses and families are losing cash flow and wages. And many others are just plain losing hope.

Already GMCC is bracing for funding cuts to our programs that help immigrant families, young American Indian families find affordable housing, and unemployed parents find work. Like many Minnesota families and businesses, we are tightening our budget and trying to do more with less. So we are realistic.

Reason to hope

But we wanted you to know that we see real reason to hope. We see the call being answered.



Rev. Gary Reiersen, President
Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches

Our retreats that train volunteers to work in homeless shelters, abuse centers, and in meal lines, are seeing more and more people sign up to train and help. More volunteers than ever before have signed up this fall to rake lawns for low-income Minneapolis seniors through our HandyWorks program. And our FoodShare program is increasing its goal to raise 10 million combined dollars and pounds of food for the state's food shelves this March. That number is huge and has never been reached. But if ever there was a time food shelves needed us to try, this is it.

Our reason for hope isn't naïve. We have real people power in this community, in this state, in this country. The volunteer pool is an extraordinary resource that Minnesota's faith community brings to any community need. Last year our 25,000 volunteers put in 311,000 hours of volunteer service and impacted 294,000 Minnesotans. Using the calculation of Independent Sector, that volunteer power is valued at more than \$6 million.

People power boosts capacity

Our capacity to tackle a problem — even one as overwhelming as this economic crisis — is dramatically increased when we have at our disposal vast, committed, and compassionate people power.

Something happens when people encounter each other in person. Personal relationships, even for a brief while, can shatter misperceptions and build powerful forces for good. Rolling up your sleeves alongside someone else to work together on a difficult project, even if that someone is very different from yourself, creates community and builds bridges at a time of deep divisions and growing cynicism.

British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch inspired people to see — really see — and to understand others and the circumstances in which they find themselves. This is what I note in volunteers serving the poor through our programs: a willingness to understand, to be open, to see people for themselves in a mutual quest for good.

In these challenging months ahead, we will all be asked to answer the call — to pay closer attention to our neighbors and risk real relationships. So, sign us up. We're ready!

To help answer the call, visit www.gmcc.org/ot/donatefs.cfm

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