

## **Global Debt**

An on-going component of the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative is the global campaign to cancel the debts of the poorest countries in the world. Jubilee 2000 began in Britain in 1997; CEJI launched its petition to cancel the unpayable debts of the poorest countries in September 1998. In a very short period of time, there were close to fifty Jubilee coalitions around the world.

For many Canadian churches, the debt burden of poor countries had been a concern since the mid 1980s. This campaign gave a new impetus to this long-standing concern, which actively engaged the local constituency of the churches that became personally involved. There were 640,000 Canadians, including 8,000 Presbyterians, who signed the debt petition leading up to the meeting of the industrial countries in June 1998. Globally, over 22 million signed the petition. In 1999, the leaders of the G7 promised as much as \$100 billion in debt relief. In December 2000, Finance Minister Paul Martin announced a moratorium on payments from a number of Highly Indebted Poor Countries until the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and creditor countries work out a permanent plan to cancel poor countries' debt completely. Many Canadians welcomed this announcement. At the same time, members of CEJI urged Mr. Martin to persuade other G7 leaders that the punitive structural adjustment programs (a condition for debt cancellation) should be dropped.

The Canadian moratorium applies to seventeen countries; eleven will benefit (they owe \$696 million). The other six countries (that owe \$370 million) are excluded because of their respective governments' very poor human rights records. Since Canada is owed less than 0.5 percent of poor country debt, Jubilee coalitions have been urging other governments and multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to emulate Canada's decision.

## **Emerging Lessons**

In June 2001, the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative comes to an end. Member churches and ecumenical partners are considering ways to continue some of the initiatives, including the debt cancellation campaign.

CEJI members are reflecting on the lessons that might be drawn from this ecumenical project. Individuals and congregations across Canada have had a positive impact on public policy. Inspired by scripture, we have sought to insert a theological and ethical dimension into the global debt crisis, which continues to hurt the most vulnerable. The scale of citizen involvement across Canada on this issue has not been lost on the government.

Changing public policy requires time and patience. Involvement of citizens across the country demonstrates that an active constituency supports the Church's initiatives to speak out on public affairs and enhances credibility with our elected officials.

In surveys, meetings and informal conversations, Justice Ministries is learning that Jubilee has been an educational process for members of the church who have become involved. The Jubilee Initiative has invited members of the church to reflect on scripture and become involved in issues, which touch our global community and our environment. By offering a theology based on hope and transforming love, the Jubilee Initiative has contributed to the church's mission to speak to the pain and brokenness in our world.

This spring, staff and members of Justice Ministries Advisory Committee contacted laypersons and ministers across our church to reflect on how we might build on the Jubilee experience. Justice Ministries' hope is that there is at least one congregation in each presbytery involved in a Jubilee activity by June of this year. To date, at least one congregation in 42 out of 46 presbyteries has been involved in a Jubilee activity. Participation was the most extensive where the presbytery, an interested minister, staff person or lay volunteer provided leadership.

## **BIOTECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN CLONING**

### **Ecumenical Co-operation**

In the past year, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been an active participant in an ecumenical project to learn and reflect on the opportunities and challenges presented by biotechnology. The Biotechnology reference group within the Canadian Council of Churches

(CCC) sought to extend the learning within Christian communities across Canada. The CCC played an important role in organizing two forums on biotechnology: one on November 2, 2000, which was hosted by First Presbyterian Church, Winnipeg and a second (co-sponsored by the Edmonton and District Council of Churches) January 19, 2001 at The King's University College in Edmonton. Justice Ministries actively promoted both forums in the presbyteries.

These events were well attended. Participants appreciated learning about biotechnology and reflecting on the theological and ethical dimensions. Scientists who served on panels at these forums welcomed Canadian churches entering the public discourse about biotechnology. Reports of these forums are available from Justice Ministries. In the coming year, the Biotechnology Reference Group is planning another forum. One outcome of these forums is the emergence of a growing national network of Christians from diverse backgrounds interested in carrying on these conversations.

In August 2000, the Canadian Federal Court of Appeal approved the patent rights on the genetically modified oncomouse. The oncomouse has had a gene inserted to induce cancer and was developed for use in cancer research. The President and Fellows of Harvard University launched the appeal when a lower court denied an application for a patent on the oncomouse, its progeny and all non-human mammals (from a shrew to a whale) that may be similarly modified in the future. Harvard holds patents on the technology for making the genetic modifications but is seeking a patent in Canada on the genetically modified mouse itself, all of its progeny and all non-human mammals that may be produced by similar modifications in the future.

The Commission on Justice and Peace of the Canadian Council of Churches wrote to the Prime Minister requesting that the federal government appeal this decision. The Commission noted that its members did not necessarily have positions on this issue. Commission members did agree that this matter should not be dealt with by the courts, but was the responsibility of Parliament. A Parliamentary review must also include consultation with Canadians. The government has taken leave to appeal this ruling which means that the ruling by the Federal Court of Appeal is in abeyance.

Some observers assert that genetics is pushing the limits of legitimate private ownership and ask whether we have crossed an acceptable threshold? Are we at risk of commodifying life? The tension lies in striking the appropriate balance between the rights of the patent holder and the common good.

### **Comments on the report**

The 126th General Assembly approved a recommendation that congregations and presbyteries discuss Justice Ministries' report on Human Cloning and Biotechnology and submit comments to Justice Ministries by January 31, 2001. (A&P 2000, p. 341) The recommendation suggested that the courts of the church draw on members of congregations with experience and expertise in biotechnology and human cloning. Comments were received from eight presbyteries, two congregations and five individuals. Four presbyteries have indicated that they plan to take up this issue in the coming months. Justice Ministries extends its gratitude to members of the church who have given this issue time and thought. What follows are highlights of the responses received to date.

#### **Highlights of Comments on the report**

##### **1. A Theological Framework**

Several respondents felt that the report's theological framework, which stressed the concept of forbidden knowledge, was too restrictive. An alternative framework would have focused on our fallen nature, which causes us to misuse the knowledge we acquire. Others underscored that we are called to be wise stewards of God's creation. God intends us to share the bounty of the earth. Wisdom needs to be pursued along with knowledge. The church should not be anti-science but should be a voice of caution.

##### **2. Human Cloning**

The Church needs to continue to voice its opposition to human cloning. As one respondent remarked, "most geneticists would have no hesitation in supporting a ban on the cloning of complete human individuals".

### 3. Gene therapy

Genetic therapies, while still at the experimental stages, offer potential in treating some diseases and in repairing tissues. Nonetheless, there are some therapies that raise ethical concerns. Several respondents commented on the procedure that could allow parents to remove undesirable traits or insert desirable traits by manipulating genes at the germ cell. This involves inserting genes into the nucleus of sperm, eggs or early embryos. The new genes become part of the genetic make-up of the individual who develops out of that sperm, egg or embryo as well as her or his biological descendants. The prospects of “designer babies” should caution us to the ways that genetic engineering can be used inappropriately. The Church should speak out against such use of these techniques.

### 4. Privacy

As new genetic procedures are developed, society will need to consider genetic privacy. Safeguards need to be in place to protect individuals, population groups, communities and nations from various forms of discrimination based on their genetic make-up.

### 5. Genetically modified organisms

Differing views were expressed about the long-term effects of genetically modified products. There is still a great deal that is not known about the environmental effects and impact on the health of humans. Some felt that there needed to be more adequate monitoring by regulatory bodies. Other respondents commented that some genetically engineered seeds reduce the amount of herbicides and pesticides that farmers use as part of their crop management programs. What policies and procedures are in place to monitor the effects of herbicide tolerant seeds? There were differing views about the risks of crossing the species boundary. What is the potential for new allergens to develop? Several respondents asserted that all products containing genetically modified organisms should be labelled, thus offering consumers an informed choice.

### 6. Patenting

The Human Genome Project (HGP), which is mapping the genetic structure of the human species, is leading to a rush of patenting. The HGP is a public consortium of scientists from six countries. An American corporation has mapped a similar sequence of the human genome. Several responses expressed concern about the power of the corporate sector and the issue of private ownership over life forms, including agricultural seeds. Given the global nature of the industry, some respondents asserted the need for an international regulatory framework to clarify rules pertaining to the ownership of life forms. There was a consensus that human life forms should not be patented; there is a need to develop legislation, policies and practices that ensure the responsible and ethical patenting of other life forms.

### 7. Global responsibility

A number of respondents commented that we should not lose sight of the north-south dimension of genetic engineering. There is a need to protect and enhance the biodiversity of our global commons. Will genetic engineering help to close the growing gap between rich and poor or will it widen the gap? One commentator remarked that “Christians need to work at finding ways of making these new resources available to all people.” Vitamin enhanced rice is an example of what is known as the third generation of genetically modified organisms. Will this product help reduce hunger? Will the availability of this product be market driven or will there be ways of making it available to those who would benefit from it, regardless of ability to pay?

### 8. Research

Over the past decade, government cuts in research funding to public institutions have led to greater dependence on private sector funds. Governments should not be beholden to corporate interests.

### Some Lessons

Discussions were enriched where courts of the Church involved members with experience and expertise. The comments on the study guide, *Finding Our Own Voices*, which Justice Ministries prepared to accompany the report on biotechnology and human cloning, have been positive. The study guide was published as an insert in the October 2000 issue of *The Record*. More copies are available and also on the website, [www.presbyterian.ca/justice/findingourvoice/index.html](http://www.presbyterian.ca/justice/findingourvoice/index.html).

### Some Conclusions and Next Steps

There is general agreement that the church has a legitimate role to play in public discourse. The church needs to dialogue with scientists. It is appropriate for the church to query what motivates the research. Will the outcome serve human needs and respect our global commons?

There is unanimous opposition to human cloning. Respondents advise caution about patenting life forms.

There needs to be a balance between the imperative of the market and the common good. In this respect, government must ensure that there is adequate legislation to protect wider community interests and the eco-system. At the same time, biotechnology is becoming an important sector of the Canadian economy both for the domestic and the export markets.

### Emerging Issues

The Church cannot keep up with the pace of development in genetic engineering. We can draw on our faith and our theology to establish ethical guidelines to help us assess these developments. While genetic research offers much hope and potential, many scientists advise caution in assuming that genetics will provide all of the answers. Dr. Patricia Baird, a geneticist at the University of British Columbia and chair of the 1993 Royal Commission on Reproductive Technology reminded her audience in a recent lecture:

Genetic constitutions, even if they could be replicated, can never overcome human nurture, human experience and the million and one other environmental factors that from conception give shape to a human being.<sup>2</sup>

In the following section we outline some issues currently under discussion, which may require monitoring and response in the near future.

#### Stem Cell Research

A controversial area of research concerns stem cells. These cells are found in the highest concentration in embryos and fetuses. Stem cells have been described as the blank slates of our bodies. As embryos grow and develop, stem cells reproduce rapidly and change, growing into highly specialised heart, blood, kidney or other cells. Once they change or differentiate, there is no going back. Adults have small numbers of stem cells in their bone marrow but they do not reproduce as quickly as they do in the embryo stage. Stem cells could be used one day to grow new hearts, kidneys or spinal cord nerves for transplants.

The best source of stem cells for experiments has been aborted fetuses or unused embryos discarded from in-vitro fertilisation clinics. The British Government recently approved changes to legislation to permit research on human embryos as sources of stem cells for treating degenerative diseases. This research may lead to treatment for diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, multiple sclerosis or strokes. The Canadian government is planning to bring forward a White paper or draft proposals that would be studied by a special Parliamentary committee before being enacted into legislation. The list of issues the government is concerned about include the use of human embryos for stem cell research in the first 14 days after conception, gene therapy to alter future generations and sex selection of babies for non-medical purposes.

Does stem cell research using human embryos less than 14 days old violate the sanctity of life? Is this instrumental use of the fetus consistent with the dignity of the individual?

Canadian scientists in London, Ontario, recently announced that they have made important strides in finding a way to make adult stem cells reproduce in the laboratory much as they do in a human embryo. If their research is successful, then it will remove ethical barriers that now make stem cell research so problematic.

#### World Trade Organization

One matter which did not receive attention in last year's report on biotechnology to the General Assembly concerns the review within the World Trade Organization (WTO) of Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property and particularly article 27.3 (b). This article states that WTO member states "may exclude from patentability, plants and animals other than micro-organisms, and essentially biological processes for the production of plants or animals, other than non-

biological and microbiological processes.” The language is ambiguous and allows some jurisdictions to sanction private claims to ownership while other jurisdictions may exclude them.

Some major American pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies would like the wording changed to compel all WTO members to change their laws so that private companies could patent discoveries of seeds, plants or animals. Critics of this agenda point to a growing number of cases in which corporations and other institutions in the industrial world have taken out patents on life forms (especially plants) native to the Third World with few or no benefits returning to the Third World. Policies are needed to protect the heritage of countries. Provisions are needed to ensure fair benefits sharing.

#### Food and Biotechnology in Canada

In January of this year, an expert Panel on the Future of Food Biotechnology, under the auspices of The Royal Society of Canada submitted its report to Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Environment Canada. These bodies had requested The Royal Society to establish a panel to provide advice on the Canadian regulatory system and the scientific capacity the federal government requires into the 21st century to ensure the safety of new food products developed through biotechnology. The panel was asked to assess the risks of these products to human and animal health and to the environment.

The report, “Elements of Precaution: Recommendations for the Regulation of Food Biotechnology in Canada”, contains fifty-three recommendations. Some key concerns were:

- the risk-assessment methodology: the panel recommended that Canadian regulatory agencies adopt the “precautionary principle” as a framework for assessing new technologies including genetically modified foods.
- the secrecy surrounding testing of new genetically modified products: the report was critical of such secrecy and recommended that external review of genetically modified product approvals be introduced as well as increased access to the results of the tests.
- lack of independent research: the panel was critical of the inadequate levels of government support for independent research on the safety of food biotechnology. According to the panel “the increasing domination of university research by the commercial interests of the researchers and their industry partners removes incentives for reliable scientific research on the safety of these products. Government regulators need a body of such research to protect the public interest and the environment.”

#### **The Role of the Church**

The Church has spoken out against human cloning. The Church communicated this matter to the federal Minister of Health following the 126th General Assembly. The federal government has stated that it intends to table legislation this session to legally ban human embryo cloning in Canada.

Justice Ministries will establish a small working group of individuals from across the Church with expertise (theological, ethical and scientific) in genetic engineering to work with Justice Ministries. The working group would work together via the internet and occasional conference calls. There would be a review of the working group for the 128th General Assembly.

There will be a variety of forums where the Church may wish or may be asked to participate. In the coming months, legislation will be tabled in Parliament on which the Church may wish to comment. Health Canada has initiated a public consultation process on xenotransplantation. This is an experimental procedure that involves transferring animal tissues or organs into humans to extend human life. Another organisation seeking public input is the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee, which was established as an advisory body by the federal government.

#### **HEALTH CARE**

In last year’s report to General Assembly, the section on health care considered the potential impact of the global trade talks known as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). There is some concern that our health care system would be treated like other services, leading to foreign for-profit health care corporations becoming involved in Canada’s health care system. Recent statements by the federal government, which have stated that health care and education