

# Christian Faith and the Canadian Tar Sands

A KAIROS Reflection on Sustainability and Energy

**September 2008**

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## **An Invitation to Canadian Christians to a Dialogue and Discussion on the Canadian Tar Sands**

Energy justice and climate change are key KAIROS program components. KAIROS has identified the Alberta tar sands as one focal point in this area of programming and is organizing a delegation of Canadian church leaders to visit the Alberta tar sands in May 2009.

As a part of this program and in preparation for the church delegation, we have produced a reflection paper on the tar sands. We invite you to enter into the discussion about Christian faith and the tar sands.

How do you respond to the ideas and questions put forward in the reflection paper? What do you agree with? Where do you disagree? What else do you think needs to be said about Christian faith and the tar sands?

We invite you to provide your feedback—long or short. This feedback will help us to shape our policies and actions, not only about the tar sands, but about the whole issue of fossil fuels, climate change, human rights and other related justice issues.

Please send your written comments to our Ecological Justice Program Coordinator, Dorothy McDougall ([dmcDougall@kairoscanada.org](mailto:dmcDougall@kairoscanada.org)). We look forward to hearing all your responses. If you prefer to mail or fax your comments, you may do so at the following address and fax number:

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The tar sands have become a focal point in the ethical debate about Canada's position on climate change as well as on a broad range of other social, ecological and economic issues. The tar sands also present a wider window through which to view global energy issues that impact on both North and South. They have generated an intensive public debate about energy choices in Canada that will continue as tar sands developments are ramped up over the coming years.

The Canadian churches can join this debate and offer a theologically inspired values framework against which to measure the choices that need to be made regarding our energy future. Churches need to “analyze the values implicit in ...energy development, articulate the motivations and traditions of our Judaeo-Christian faith and apply them to the available options, and encourage all citizens to cooperate in seeking solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

KAIROS has made energy justice a central focus of our work since 2006 (particularly the impact of fossil fuels), advocating for an alternative energy paradigm for Canada. In May 2009, a delegation of church leaders will visit the Alberta tar sands to explore the theological, moral and ethical implications of oil developments there; to dialogue with local people working in or impacted by the tar sands; and to shape advocacy positions regarding government energy policies.

The purpose of this paper is to assist the delegation, and the KAIROS energy work, by identifying issues of concern for the churches, exploring the dilemmas posed by these issues, raising pertinent questions and providing some possible directions. It is worth noting that the tar sands are only one manifestation of an area of concern for the churches that stretches back more than three decades. In fact, the churches have a significant history of addressing energy justice issues that can inform our current challenges.<sup>2</sup>

The energy crises of the 1970s led the churches to engage in informed discussion and dialogue which resulted in a number of statements and recommendations relating to the production and use of energy and its ethical implications in Canada and globally. Three decades later, questions of energy and justice are once again paramount for the Canadian churches.

Many of the concerns raised earlier are reflected in current discussions: wealth disparities; impacts of fossil fuel use on vulnerable people including the poor, Indigenous populations, and those in the global South; ecological concerns (although climate change was not yet part of the churches' energy lexicon); and energy shortages and sustainability. Many of these issues have become more acute: from June 2007 to June 2008 oil prices have climbed steeply with basic commodities following suit, significantly

increasing poverty and hunger for the world's most vulnerable people. At the same time, oil companies and their shareholders have seen profits rise to meteoric records.

Since the Canadian churches entered into discussions of energy and justice 30 years ago, two new dimensions have been added to the already significant justice issues associated with energy.

The first is climate change and the threat it poses to all of Creation which may be the greatest challenge of our era. Impacts are already being felt by the world's most impoverished people, especially those who live in arid and coastal zones. Perhaps climate change, because of its many global implications, is the issue that compels us to come to theological terms with the interconnections that bind ecological and social justice in a deeper way than we have recognized in the past.

Secondly, energy-driven conflicts in places like Georgia, Nigeria, Sudan, Iraq and Colombia underscore the human toll resulting from increased competition to secure ever scarcer oil and gas resources.

Ecclesial warnings from the early 1970s and 1980s to conserve fossil fuels and aggressively pursue alternative energy have gone unheeded. Pleas from church activists to Christians to make radical changes to patterns of consumption have been largely ignored. In a very real sense, we are no further ahead in solving energy-related problems. On the contrary, most societies have dramatically increased their dependence on fossil fuels. The ruts are deeper.

Within KAIROS, the churches have approved a paper entitled *Re-energizing the Future: Faith and Justice in a Post-petroleum World* as a guide for developing energy policy positions.<sup>3</sup> The tar sands must be viewed through the prism of this policy framework. In other words, while the tar sands present a new and unique manifestation of the energy dilemma, this paper attempts to apply past experiences and wisdom from the churches. As such it is not a "neutral" assessment of the arguments pro and con about the tar sands, but a continuation of a long tradition of concern that we now seek to apply to the largest fossil fuel project on earth.

### **What values inform our approach to the tar sands?**

There are many ways to frame discussions about the tar sands. Many of these approaches focus on the ecological impact and the "trade-offs" between protecting the environment and contributing to the economy and jobs. These ecological and economic questions are important to the churches and our understanding of our witness in the world, but other values must also be considered.

The following four core values and corollary questions are offered as benchmarks to assess the benefits and harm associated with the tar sands to help the churches in their deliberations:

1. Justice. We live in a world of gross disparities between rich and poor, a condition that runs counter to the vision of God. “Each of them will sit under their vine and under their fig tree, with no one to make them afraid...” (Micah 4:4). Access to affordable energy has become an important indicator of wealth and poverty.

- ♦ Do the tar sands promote a fairer distribution of energy between rich and poor, both within Canada and in the broader global community? Do they promote a fairer distribution of wealth in general between rich and poor?

2. Peace. We live in a world where violence, conflict and war are prevalent in many places. This violence is the antithesis of the state of *shalom* envisioned in the Bible where people are called to live in harmony with one another, with creation and with God. Oil, and control of oil, is a significant factor in many conflicts raging today.

- ♦ Do the tar sands promote peace either directly or indirectly? Do they promote violence and conflict directly or indirectly?

3. Sustainability and the integrity of Creation. Creation has its own inherent worth and value. We are called as Christians to co-exist in harmony with all that is. We are to live within our means so that we do not compromise the ability of future generations to care for themselves and for the earth to continue to flourish in all its diversity.

- ♦ What kind of ecological impact do the tar sands have? How will other species, biodiversity and ecological processes be impacted by the tar sands? What will be their chances of survival? What kind of ecosystems will replace the present ones with their many life forms within the tar sands region, and how will the change impact neighbouring and global ecosystems and the life supported within them? “God saw all that was created and indeed it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Do humans have the right to make such drastic changes which may have dire consequences for the rest of the creation?

4. Participation. The community of God is characterized by the full participation of all in building a just and sustainable society. Participation implies being part of decisions that involve communal resources and shaping the future direction of society. Particular attention must be focussed on those who have historically been marginalized in decision-making and power-sharing, such as those living in poverty, women, Indigenous people and racial minorities. As we broaden our contemporary understanding of our place in the larger context of the created order, we become ever more aware of how our decisions impact on other species and ecosystems. “Listen to the animals and they will teach you” (Job 12:7-10).

- ♦ Do the tar sands aid or diminish the ability of Canadians to share in decisions about their energy future? Who is making decisions about the tar sands development? How are men and women differently involved in decisions about the tar sands, in sharing their benefits and dealing with the negative outcomes? How have Indigenous people been consulted and involved in decisions about the tar sands? What will be the consequences for Indigenous cultures of the impact of tar sands development on other

life forms and ecosystems? How does the development of the tar sands diminish or enhance decisions to move to a more sustainable energy economy?

### **Enter the tar sands**

An “ocean of oil-soaked sand” in Alberta has pushed Canada onto the global energy map, prompting claims from our Prime Minister that Canada has become an “energy superpower.”<sup>4</sup> Like the gold rushes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alberta has seen an influx of money and labour in the frenzy to extract as much oil from the tar sands as possible. Estimates that the tar sands contain 173 billion barrels of recoverable oil place Canada’s oil reserves second in the world behind only Saudi Arabia.

Lauded by some as a fount for jobs and wealth creation, the tar sands have been described by others as “the most destructive project on earth.”<sup>5</sup> The tar sands region is described as the largest industrial zone in the world that may eventually cover 87,000 square kilometres. The separation of the oil from the sand requires prodigious amounts of water that is mixed with various toxins and which must then be disposed of.

But the worst damage is much less visible: Greenhouse gas emissions from the tar sands are the largest contributor to the overall growth of emissions in Canada. In terms of sheer volume, the tar sands alone emitted 40 million tonnes of carbon in 2007, more than the collective volume emitted by 145 countries.<sup>6</sup>

While there is broad agreement that the tar sands are responsible for very serious ecological and social problems, they also supply a crucial resource that has become essential to modern society. We may not like the greenhouse gas emissions, the toxic waste, the tearing up of the boreal forest, the impact on Indigenous people or the work conditions for imported migrant labour, but we have come to depend on fossil fuels for our transportation, heating our homes, taking vacations, growing and transporting food to markets and countless other human activities that are part of what we now consider to be the necessities of life.

Could Canada do without the tar sands? Could it produce and export less oil and gas? What changes to our society would be required without the tar sands industry? Which ones are the churches willing to lead the way on and advocate for?

### **Tar sands issues**

#### **I. Economic issues**

##### 1. Do the tar sands create wealth?

Those in favour of the tar sands argue that they make an irreplaceable contribution to the economy, specifically to that of the province of Alberta but also to other provinces through economic spin-offs. The tar sands have become a main engine in the Canadian economy, fuelling exports, generating tax revenues and providing livelihoods for a growing number of Canadians.

A study for the petroleum industry estimated that the oil sands generated \$59 billion in investments from 1997 to 2006 and projects a further \$80 billion by 2010.<sup>7</sup> The study estimates that the federal portion of tax income from 2000 to 2020 will be \$41 billion and that 6.6 million person years of employment will be created, 44% of which will be found outside of Alberta.<sup>8</sup>

The average breakeven point for oil companies operating in the tar sands is about \$35 per barrel. When oil prices shot past the \$100 per barrel mark in early 2008 heading to nearly US\$150, profit margins predictably followed suit. Shell, for example, reported a 74% profit growth on its tar sands operations in the second quarter of 2008 for a total of US\$351 million dollars.<sup>9</sup> First quarter profits in 2008 for the Canadian oil industry reached a record \$7.1 billion, a good portion of which was derived from the tar sands.<sup>10</sup>

(Looking beyond Canada, the picture is the same. In 2007, Exxon-Mobil, the largest publicly-traded corporation, made a record US\$40.6 billion. New records are expected for 2008. One New York investment firm called the profits created by the spike in oil prices “the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of capitalism.”<sup>11</sup>)

Based on this quick overview, it is clear that wealth is being created, and in large amounts. The critical question for the churches is, who are the main beneficiaries of this wealth? What portion, if any, of this wealth is accruing to poor people in Canada? And equally critical: What are the numbers on the debit side of the equation, both in terms of ecological debt and social debits?

Oil company profits from the tar sands accrue to their shareholders. While in theory anyone can buy shares in these companies, those who have discretionary income can afford to invest money for the sake of making more money. Institutional shareholders such as pension funds, including those of several major Canadian church denominations, are also shareholders in many energy companies. The rich annual returns provided by companies such as Imperial Oil, EnCana, and Nexen are very attractive for pension fund managers whose mandate is to maximize returns.<sup>12</sup>

Canada has some of the laxest rules in the Western world for foreign ownership. A Parkland Institute study estimated that about half of the wealth generated by the oil companies flows out of this country to foreign shareholders. Of the wealth that remained in Alberta, most went to the wealthiest 10% of families. Those with middle incomes saw only nominal income growth, attributable in large part to longer working hours. Most significantly, low-income people saw a dramatic reduction in their purchasing power.<sup>13</sup>

The frenzy of tar sands development in Alberta has pushed up prices for housing, food and other essential commodities, sharply impacting on people living on the economic edge. The city of Calgary has witnessed a 458% increase in homeless people as real estate prices have skyrocketed.

## 2. What about jobs?

Employment is very important in combating poverty. The tar sands have produced many new jobs and have attracted people from all over Canada and indeed beyond our borders. According to Alberta government statistics, approximately 147,000 people are employed in the mining and oil and gas sectors in Alberta.<sup>14</sup> Many of these jobs offer excellent pay, but with difficult overall conditions such as arduous physical work, long hours and isolation.

Indigenous communities in northern Alberta, like elsewhere in Canada, have struggled to find good employment. Some of these communities, particularly in the Fort McKay area, have benefited significantly from jobs and other economic spin-offs related to the tar sands industry, providing an overall boost to their economic health. Other communities downstream and further away from the epicentre of the tar sands, such as Fort Chipewyan, have seen few benefits in terms of jobs and are very concerned about livelihoods that depend on healthy ecosystems.

Alberta does not have an adequate workforce to fill the jobs created by the rapid development of the tar sands. Accordingly industry and government have worked together to bring in many workers from other parts of Canada and beyond. In Canada, many of the new tar sands workers are from the east coast, particularly Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, provinces hit hard in recent years by the closing of the fisheries and coal mines. In 2006, 3,686 Nova Scotians migrated to Alberta, triple the number from two years earlier.<sup>15</sup> The economic and social impacts on the small communities have been unprecedented as young educated residents and many men have left in search of sources of income. Shops and restaurants have closed, municipal tax bases have been badly eroded, and the very survival of some East coast towns is in doubt.

However even the influx of workers from other provinces has not been enough to fill all the jobs. Accordingly, the federal government, working closely with Alberta, has created new programs to facilitate the quick import of qualified workers from places such as Mexico, China and the Philippines. In 2007, Alberta brought in about 1,600 foreign workers. The total number of temporary foreign workers in 2006 was 22,392, triple the number from a decade earlier.<sup>16</sup>

The problems associated with importing workers from abroad are familiar: unscrupulous recruiting agencies charging exorbitant fees, sub-standard living conditions, threat of deportation and lack of support for people who often do not understand their rights under these programs and have difficulty communicating their needs, given language and cultural barriers. Temporary workers have no access to immigration services and no guarantees of how long the work will last. When the work runs out, some enter the underground work economy where they are even more vulnerable to abuse.

The Alberta Federation of Labour has investigated numerous cases of abuse and identified loopholes that often leave temporary workers with few earnings. “If you are an employer and you can hire a worker where you can get half of the wages back on rent, that’s a bonus . . . . They find these ways to nickel and dime them. There are guys that come here, work here for six months, then go home without having earned a penny.”<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Gender in the tar sands

What do these jobs look like when viewed through a gender lens? Overwhelmingly, those benefiting most from the oil and gas jobs are male. For example, current male/female ratios are 79% to 21% for geoscientists and 96% to 4% for trades. Overall only 28% of jobs in the oil and gas industry are held by women (compared to an average 47% in other sectors of the Canadian economy).<sup>18</sup> Tar sands work camps are dominated by a machismo culture and the few women who work within this culture are often subjected to sexual harassment.<sup>19</sup>

An even darker side of women's work and rights is associated with the high rates of prostitution that exist in tar sands centres such as Fort McMurray and Edmonton. While prostitution rates in Fort McMurray and other tar sands centres have yet to be researched, anecdotal evidence suggest the numbers have increased substantially. For example, the pages in the local Fort McMurray phone book devoted to "escort services" have gone from one to 11 in recent years.

Not only are women not benefiting from an oil sands job bonanza, they face new hardships as a result of the new jobs. For example, as Atlantic Canadian men leave for Alberta, women are left with fewer choices since many must place their own careers on hold to care for families and maintain households on their own. Families spend long periods of time separated from one another.

In Alberta, the economic boom has put enormous pressure on affordable housing and other social services. Given that women are disproportionately represented in the poor, shortages in housing and shelter spaces are increasingly issues related to gender as well. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters reports a severe shortage of spaces for women, noting that in 2006, 25,000 women and children could not be accommodated.<sup>20</sup> Even workers for women's shelters are difficult to find as social agencies struggle to compete with the oil industry for employees in a severe labour shortage market.

In summary, what should the churches say about the wealth and jobs created by the tar sands? The unequal sharing of this wealth and the justice issues that surround employment should cause them to question the familiar argument that jobs must trump other factors in assessing the tar sands. The fact that these jobs have been created does not mean they could not have been created in other sectors where they do less harm to the environment, where people do not have to leave home communities and countries to gain employment and where men and women would benefit more equally.

Canadian governments of whatever political stripe have by and large adopted a fossil fuel energy economy. But as the churches have pointed out in the past, there are other options. Canada could emulate the energy path of Germany, a country that has created 240,000 jobs in the renewable energy industry, 140,000 of them since 2001.<sup>21</sup> Germany's thriving renewable energy industry has required public subsidies. Canada could redirect the subsidies it currently gives to the fossil fuel industry – estimated at \$1.2 billion per year – to our own renewable industries.<sup>22</sup> These alternatives require further investigation. If the

Canadian churches are critical of the tar sands, it is important to explore and support these alternatives.

Finally, the fossil fuel industry and its supporters attempt to shape the economic argument for the tar sands as the need to “balance the environment and the economy.” A new public relations offensive launched by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers in the summer of 2008 admits that there are ecological detriments in tar sands development but coyly poses the question: “Can we balance the environment and the economy?” Of course, their own answer is yes, but there is an assumption embedded in the question that must be challenged – namely that the environment and the economy exist separately from each another. In fact, our ecosystems are the source of all economies and the paramount question then becomes, can any economic activity be carried out in a way that does not compromise the long-term sustainability of the ecosystems on which it relies? Or to use language that people in the global South have introduced, what kind of ecological debt is being incurred, and who will have to pay it?

## **II. Going into ecological debt**

It is difficult to comprehend the sheer scale of the tar sands projects. The development has been compared to the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, the Great Wall of China and other historical megaprojects. It has even been called the world’s first “gigaproject.” The ecological impacts have been documented and described by Canada’s environment organizations and need not be detailed here.<sup>23</sup> They can be broadly summarized in three areas:

### 1. Stripping the boreal forest

The “easy” oil in the tar sands lies just beneath the surface and is mined by stripping away the boreal forest and the fragile layer of soil underneath it (referred to as “overburden” in the oil industry). As well as the destruction of wildlife habitat, the removal of the boreal forest compounds the problem of climate change by removing a carbon sink. Currently, about 3,000 square kilometres have been leased to oil companies for tar sand mining operations of which 480 have been strip mined. The end result resembles a moonscape.

### 2. Emptying the Athabasca River

Separating oil from the sand requires prodigious amounts of water– up to 4 barrels for every barrel of oil produced. In 2007, tar sands companies were granted approval to withdraw 120 billion gallons of water for their operations, the majority of it from the Athabasca River. Most of that water, combined with the waste sand and toxins used in the extraction process such as benzene and naphthenic acid, ends up in gigantic tailings “ponds” (now covering 130 square kilometres) that can be seen from space.

Meanwhile Indigenous communities downstream from tar sands operations are reporting increased illnesses in both people and wildlife, including elevated cancer rates. There

have been documented increases in toxins in the Athabasca River such as mercury and arsenic.<sup>24</sup> A study ordered by Fort Chipewyan's Health Board found that 30 to 40% of walleye fish in the lower Athabasca river had levels of mercury that exceeded levels deemed safe for human consumption.<sup>25</sup> Dr. John O'Conner, who served Indigenous communities along the Athabasca River for many years, has documented five cases of bile-duct cancer in the small town of Fort Chipewyan, a rare illness that normally strikes only 1 in 100,000. He was subsequently accused of raising undue alarm by a medical regulating body and has since left Alberta while the provincial government and others investigate his claims.

That the tar sands have very serious impacts on surrounding ecosystems is undeniable. The question is, can the negative impacts be repaired and how long will it take? The oil industry boasts that it is working to "reclaim" the land it has destroyed. However, to date, only one square kilometre has been certified as "reclaimed." Moreover, reclaimed does not mean anything resembling the original state of the land and original ecosystem: a close look at the reclamation site reveals that a wetland-forest complex has been replaced with a dry hilly upland.<sup>26</sup> What are the spiritual and theological implications of destroying whole ecosystems in the human pursuit of unsustainable and unrenewable sources of energy?

The tailings ponds present a longer-term and more difficult problem. The original belief was that the sediment would settle to the bottom of these lakes in a few years but geologists now estimate that it will take anywhere from 500 to 1,000 years for this to happen (25 to 50 generations). Even then, there are no clear plans for what to do with toxic sediments that will remain.

The Sydney Tar Ponds provide an indication of what happens when industry despoils the environment, then moves on. Provincial and federal taxpayers have designated \$400 million in Nova Scotia to clean up 68 hectares. If per hectare costs were similar to clean up the existing tar sands ponds, the cost would be in excess of \$76 billion.

### 3. Greenhouse gas emissions

Enormous amounts of energy are needed to extract, separate and process the tar sands. While conventional oil can simply be pumped up to the surface, most of the tar sand reserves must be heated beneath the ground so the oil can be extracted. Currently, the main source of energy comes from a relatively clean fuel, natural gas. Canada only has about 10 years supply of natural gas remaining.<sup>27</sup> If current natural gas consumption trends continue in tar sands use, by 2012 it is estimated that the amount used will be equal to what will be needed to heat all the homes in Canada.<sup>28</sup>

The tar sands are the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Canada, and if current growth trajectories continue without significant changes in emissions, by 2020 they could be responsible for 142 million tonnes of GHGs, or 25% of Canada's entire allocation under the Kyoto Protocol. In 2007, Canada was already far behind its obligations under the Protocol. While there are other contributing factors, the

tar sands represent one of the biggest obstacles to Canada meeting its Kyoto targets and the even greater reductions that are required in the post-Kyoto years after 2012.

The oil industry is aware of the public relations challenge posed by the tar sands emissions. Responses have focused on decreasing the energy intensity of oil production, meaning using less energy per unit of oil produced. While gains have been made in this area, overall emissions are increasing and will continue to do so in face of plans to increase the overall amount of oil produced from the tar sands. Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS) – pumping the carbon emitted underground and preventing it from entering the atmosphere – is also pointed to as a possible solution to the GHG conundrum. However CCS is still in its infancy, unproven in its ability to work and its high cost for the foreseeable future suggests it is unlikely to become a major solution to the industry's greenhouse gas emissions.

Because the industrialized nations have emitted the majority of the GHGs that have brought the world into the current climate crisis, they also have an extraordinary responsibility in the coming years to make more dramatic reductions than nations in the global South. By ignoring this responsibility, Canada is building up an ecological debt that will have to be paid by future generations and is even now being paid by the poor in countries already experiencing the effects of climate change.

### **Sharing our wealth with the U.S.**

The tar sands have gained prominence by helping to propel Canada into the leading exporter of oil to the U.S., ahead of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Mexico. The majority of the tar sands crude is piped south to U.S. markets. Ironically, at the same time as Canada exports two-thirds of its oil production, it imports oil for markets in Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces due to the lack of East-West pipelines. In 2007, 46.2% of total Canadian oil consumption had to be imported from countries such as Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

What are the ethical questions that emerge from our export of tar sands oil to the U.S.? Are there any implications for peace, identified as one of the four values guiding our discussion of the tar sands? Oil, and control of oil, have figured prominently in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy and military strategy – sometimes directly as in Iraq, and often indirectly by shoring up oppressive regimes as in Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. is keen to obtain oil supplies from stable regions of the world and Canada figures prominently in its overall oil procurement strategy. One could argue, therefore, that replacing oil from conflict-prone regions with Canadian oil could result in less overall conflict. However the U.S. is unlikely to withdraw from oil-rich regions of the world any time soon, despite U.S. President Bush's stated goal of reducing U.S. reliance on Middle East oil by 75%. The U.S. military itself consumes an enormous amount of oil. In 2007, it spent US\$12 billion to procure 144 million barrels of oil.

Oil, and control of oil, is central to the U.S. superpower status. In 1973, then-President Richard Nixon put it this way: "We use 30% of all the energy . . . . That isn't bad; that is

good. That means that we are the richest, strongest people in the world and that we have the highest standard of living in the world. That is why we need so much energy, and may it always be that way.” His words still hold true. What does this mean for piping Canadian tar sands crude to our southern neighbour? What do we receive in return? Does this promote peace?

### **Bearing witness to the changes needed**

*Macleans* writer Steve Maich, in a defence of the tar sands, writes tongue-in-cheek: “It’s a shame about the oil sands. It really is. It’s too bad we drive so much, and that we built our cities on a sprawling commuter model. It’s a shame that petroleum is at the heart of so many industries that employ millions and pay the tab for our healthy, modern lives of leisure . . . . And it’s depressing that half the world’s population would rather face the possibility of environmental catastrophe than give up their shot at the kind of affluence and comfort that we westerners now take for granted.”<sup>29</sup>

In other words, while our dependence on petroleum has brought us to the brink of catastrophe, it also makes it possible for many of us in the churches to live lives of relative affluence. Some aspects of this seem harmless: Going to the supermarket and buying a supply of food for the week hardly seems like an unnecessary luxury. But the huge diversity of food on display is largely a result of petroleum as many products come from thousands of kilometres away. The appliances, electronics, furniture, and other household items that we surround ourselves with are likewise made possible by petroleum. Other oil-reliant activities are more controversial: in 2006, the Bishop of London caused a stir when he stated that taking an air flight for vacation was “a symptom of sin.”

Steve Maich claims that those who denounce the tar sands are unwilling to face “the devastating ripple effects that would flow from the kind of moratorium advocated by the most outspoken oil sands opponents.”<sup>30</sup> This is an argument the churches must face squarely in two ways.

### **The ideology of eternal progress**

First, there is a growing realization that the ideology of eternal progress and ever-growing affluence is nearing bankruptcy. Fossil fuels have provided (some parts of) the human species with a gigantic life subsidy and we are only now realizing that the ecological debt accrued may not have been worth it. Can Christians, drawing on our rich counter-cultural traditions, be the leaders in challenging this mainstream narrative?

The Old Testament prophets faced the same dilemma many times. The communities they lived among often fell into dangerous practices of injustice and unsustainability that seemed “normal.” In contrast to what became normative for the community, the prophets’ denunciations and prescriptions for change appeared radical.

In our own time, we could name the same reality this way: “Western materialistic affluence coupled with two-thirds world poverty is normal. A proliferation of cheap and useless consumer goods is normal. Environmental collapse is normal. Dedicating one’s

life to economic growth is normal. People living for the weekend is normal. A throwaway society is normal. Deficit financing is normal. Rapid and greedy resource depletion is normal.”<sup>31</sup>

Dr. John Hiemstra, a professor in Alberta who specializes in studying the nature and significance of Canada’s oil sands boom, applies the same questioning to the tar sands: “Have Christians also accepted that the explosive, distorting and destructive oil sands boom, and our accompanying way of life, are normal?”<sup>32</sup> The complete rethinking of patterns of consumption, travel and living is already well underway in many Christian communities. Might we more collectively adopt some highly symbolic actions as the new normative? What if it became common thinking among people of faith that boarding an airplane for a jaunt to the Caribbean in mid-January is akin to parking a Hummer in your driveway? Mobility has become enshrined as a human right in the Western world, but until we can find non-emitting forms of long-distance travel, staying closer to home may need to become the new normal.

### **A new energy and economic paradigm**

To return to the prophets, the concepts of “Sabbath” and “Jubilee” were radical calls for rest and redistribution of wealth in the midst of the unscrupulous greed and social distortions that had overtaken original visions of justice and equity. What better biblical teachings to apply to the parallel injustices represented by the tar sands frenzy? What might a carbon Sabbath look like if it were implemented by the churches? What would an energy Jubilee mean? How would energy be apportioned and controlled in such a scenario? Would Canada’s oil pipelines still flow south to the U.S.?<sup>33</sup> Would they flow anywhere?

In addition to challenging petroleum-based affluence and demonstrating other ways of living, Christians must also be a part of envisioning and advocating for a different kind of economy for Canada. Thirty years ago, the Canadian churches initiated a debate about which energy path Canada should choose. “Each energy option is the fruit of certain social values, or the product of certain social forces – and each energy option henceforth determines or specifies a whole set of ensuing social patterns or structures. The mode of energy, its production and distribution in other words, increasingly characterizes the kind of society we have.”<sup>34</sup> The oil shocks of the 1970s gave way to economically cheap oil and gas of the 1980s and 1990s and temporarily muted the conversation. However, the spectre of climate chaos and the growing realization that oil and gas are becoming scarcer provides the churches with a unique opportunity to once again make energy justice a focus within our churches and communities.

Turning to sources of energy such as wind and solar runs counter to the current model of large-scale commodification and control of oil and gas. The technology, knowledge, and capital required for oil extraction, refinement and distribution remain the purview of mega-corporations and are beyond what local communities can obtain. Wind, like the spirit of God, cannot be commodified. It blows where it wills and can be harnessed for energy by small communities. Similarly, sunlight covers the whole earth in varying

degrees of intensity and while the technology to capture it for energy in the form of solar panels has not been widely accessible, it is becoming more so.

While some large energy companies have invested in renewables (in some cases for public relations purposes), the extent of their commitment will be limited since profits will never match the billions in profits now possible by concentrating on fossil fuels. Is it possible that the de-commercialization of energy could be a key component in the reordering of the world's wealth and the political status quo that sustains it?

### **Conclusion**

The tar sands represent a fossil fuel intensive economic and energy option that is at odds with the four theological values identified earlier. An alternative energy option, based on radical conservation and renewable energy, is possible in the future. In the short and medium term, fossil fuels will still be needed but not in the current quantities that require the frenzied and destructive extraction as exemplified by the tar sands.

There are serious ethical questions about the ecological, social and economic impacts of the tar sands. In order for the Canadian churches to speak to these ethical issues, they must also become involved in the larger discussions about the relationship between humans and the rest of Creation, employment and equity and about the changes to society that are needed for the long-term viability of our ecosystems. Unless the churches are willing to lead by example, our criticism of fossil fuel development and economic strategies will be blunted.

Constructing an alternative energy vision will require imagination and creativity. The churches will be one partner in a growing coalition that will sketch it out and build it. It will not likely be overly popular initially, as it will require a letting go of privileges and luxuries to which we have become accustomed. But it is absolutely necessary for realization of the values of justice, peace, integrity of creation, and participation that provide the basis for a just society and world.

**KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives** is a faithful ecumenical response to the biblical call to do justice. KAIROS members are the Anglican Church of Canada, the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Canadian Religious Conference, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (Canada Corporation), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and the United Church of Canada.

- <sup>1</sup> *Energy and Power: Christian Reflections on Canada's Future*, Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice. Unpublished paper, 1980.
- <sup>2</sup> The Inter-church coalition GATT-Fly, for example, published *Energy to Choose: Canada's Energy Options* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1981).
- <sup>3</sup> See [www.kairoscanada.org/e/ecology/climateChange/EnergyPolicyPaper\\_KAIROS\\_December2007.pdf](http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/ecology/climateChange/EnergyPolicyPaper_KAIROS_December2007.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Speech to the Canada-UK Chamber Commerce, July 14, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> See *Canada's Toxic Tar Sands: The Most Destructive Project on Earth*, Environmental Defense, Toronto, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, page 16.
- <sup>7</sup> *Economic Impacts of Alberta's Oil Sands*. On-line paper. Canadian Energy Research Institute (CERI), 2005. All dollar figures in this paper are Canadian unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>8</sup> These may be conservative numbers, as the 2005 study assumed a long-term price of \$32 per barrel.
- <sup>9</sup> "Oil: Tar sands less damaging than coal, insists Shell," *Guardian Weekly*, August 1, 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> Source: Statistics Canada.
- <sup>11</sup> "Barrelling Ahead," *Globe and Mail*, May 8, 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Most "ethical funds" include a range of energy companies in their portfolios.
- <sup>13</sup> See Gibson, Diana. June 2007. *Spoils of the Boom: Incomes, Poverty and Profits in Alberta*, Parkland Institute.
- <sup>14</sup> Alberta Government Employment and Immigration, 2007. *2007 Alberta Annual Labour Market Review*. Page 8. Note that the Alberta government does not separate mining jobs from those in the oil and gas sector.
- <sup>15</sup> "Why Nova Scotia Shakes in the Echo of this Distant Boom," *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 29, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> "Temporary Foreign Workers: Alberta's Disposable Workforce," *Union*, Winter 2008. Page 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Murphy, Tim. "Temporary Labour or Disposable Workers?," *The Dominion*, Issue 48, Autumn 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Statistics Canada. May 2007. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*.
- <sup>19</sup> See Bird, Lindsay. "Working Full-time: The work camps of Fort McMurray," *The Dominion*, Issue 48, Autumn 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> Rolbin-Ghanie, Maya. Oilsandstruth.org. "For many women, Alberta's boom a bust". Undated.
- <sup>21</sup> "Lessons from Germany's Energy Renaissance," *Globe and Mail*, March 22, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> For more information about government subsidies to the oil and gas industry in Canada, See *Pumped Up: How Canada subsidizes fossil fuels at the expense of green alternatives*. 2008. KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives.
- <sup>23</sup> See *Canada's Toxic Tar Sands*, as well as numerous reports by Parkland Institute, Pembina Institute, and other major Canadian environmental organizations.
- <sup>24</sup> *Canada's Toxic Tar Sands*. Page 7.
- <sup>25</sup> As cited in Harkinson, Josh. "Scenes From the Tar Wars," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2008.
- <sup>26</sup> See Hildebrand, Joyce. "Reclamation Illusions in Oil Sands Country," *Wild Lands Advocate*, June 2008, Vol. 16, No. 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Laxer, Gordon and Dillon, John. May 2008. *Over a Barrel: Exiting from NAFTA's Proportionality Clause*. Parkland Institute and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Page 17.
- <sup>28</sup> Woynillowicz, Dan et al. November 2005. Pembina Institute, *Oil Sands Fever: The Environmental Implications of Canada's Oil Sands Rush*.

<sup>29</sup> Maich, Steve. "It's too bad that we need the oil sands," *Macleans*, June 4, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See Brian Walsh, foreword by Tom Wright, *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time*, Bristol, UK: Regis, 1992. Page 17. As quoted in Hiemstra, Dr. John L. "In the Belly of the Beast: A Christian Exploration of the Ideological Entrails of Canada's Oil Sands Boom," unpublished paper sent to the author.

<sup>32</sup> Hiemstra, Dr. John L. "In the Belly of the Beast: A Christian Exploration of the Ideological Entrails of Canada's Oil Sands Boom," unpublished paper sent to the author.

<sup>33</sup> Under the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Canada does not have the option of closing its pipelines to the U.S. The so-called "proportionality" clause binds Canada to providing the U.S. with a fixed percentage of Canadian production.

<sup>34</sup> *Energy and Power*. Page 2.