

April 9, 2001

Dear Heads of State and Government, and all brothers and sisters at the Summit of the Americas,

As representatives of churches from the host country of this Summit, we join in welcoming you and in praying for light on your discussions. With millions of our fellow citizens, we are aware that your decisions will have important consequences for life in the Americas.

We welcome also the participants in the Peoples' Summit and similar alternative events. We see in them that hunger for social justice and zeal for participation in public decisions that should animate all of us. Let every voice that is raised in sincerity and concern, whether inside or outside the security perimeter, be greeted with respect in this great negotiation process.

The economic integration agreements that you are negotiating are complex indeed, and you face difficult decisions about appropriate checks and balances. Their complexity, however, does not mean that they should be hidden from the public eye. We call for genuine transparency and for public participation to be restored to your negotiations, including full democratic accountability in your national legislatures.

Your coming together in peace as leaders of neighbouring nations can be a sign of hope, an embrace of new energies, a widening of the road to solidarity. On the other hand, it can symbolize a new and threatening conformism, with elected governments bowing to market-driven forces as if these latter were fated to rule humanity.

As communities of faith in Canada, linked with brothers and sisters of faith throughout the Americas, we call upon you to create not simply a trade agreement, but a framework for a more neighbourly economy (see *Just trade, not just trade: towards a more neighbourly economy*, attached). We believe that the following critical policy points need your urgent attention:

1. Conform any new agreements to the human rights standards in UN covenants.
2. Protect and promote the inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas.
3. Cancel paralyzing national debts.
4. Enhance food security and the security of agricultural communities.
5. Preserve the integrity of publicly funded health and education services.
6. Don't let patents, or trade-related intellectual property rights, block access to public goods like life-saving medicines.

The future of all of us depends in no small part on your doing this great public work wisely, courageously and for the common good of the Americas.

May your deliberations be enlightened and your consciences guided by God who has created all, who has shared our life, and who lives in our hearts today. We offer this prayer for the peoples of the region and for you.

A prayer for the Americas

Gracious, saving and loving God,
from Tierra del Fuego to Pond Inlet, the people of the Americas
enjoy the splendour of your creation.
Create in us new hearts, so that we may live on this lovely earth
as your children, loving our neighbours as ourselves,
according to your will.
Grant us the grace to share justly the riches of creation
and to live in harmony and mutual respect on this land.
Help us to forge right relations between people and the earth, between
one community and another.
Lead us into your future freed from poverty, indifference, and greed.

Your wisdom, O God, is from the beginning and is always new:
grant our leaders inspiration and courage
so that as they meet for the Summit of the Americas,
they might find true paths on which we can move together
to a more generous, sustainable and neighbourly
today and tomorrow.

Amen.

The Canadian
Council of Churches

founded in 1944



Le Conseil canadien
des Églises

fondé en 1944

The Most Rev. André Vallée
President
Canadian Council of Churches

The Most Rev. Michael G. Peers
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The Very Rev. Anthony Nikolic
Polish National Catholic Church of Canada

The Rev. Glen Davis, Moderator
126th General Assembly
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Right Rev. Dr. Marion Purdy
Moderator
United Church of Canada

Just trade, not just trade

Towards a more neighbourly economy

The God who gives life calls us to share in responsibility for all of life. Our linked continents were created to be a true home for communities of life, interconnected and mutually supportive. This purpose of the Creator should be echoed in every human law and policy. Trade in goods and services can be a life-sustaining dimension of human sharing or it can exacerbate inequalities if it is carried out on unequal terms.

In the spirit of the radical Jubilee proclaimed in the Hebrew scriptures, in response to Jesus who invites us to extend Jubilee to the ends of the earth, we believe that the new millennium can see human societies move towards equality and justice. We are not doomed to recycle old wrongs! Our peoples need policies that restore right relationships, preserve responsible communities, shrink economic inequalities, and allow space for all of creation to flourish in its diversity.

During the century that recently ended, a public framework of human rights and ecological sustainability has been developed by the member nations of the United Nations and regional multilateral bodies. These have often proved helpful in providing a constructive context for international relations. Let us not lose what was positive in those developments.

We welcome efforts to strengthen democracy, to create prosperity for all and to realize the human potential of all the people of the Americas. We have worked on these goals for many years with our counterparts in the churches and human rights organisations throughout the region. Based on that experience, we have addressed this letter to the heads of state and governments who are attending the Free Trade of the Americas Summit, aware of the need to attend to some very serious issues that plague the region lest they undermine otherwise worthy goals.

Adopt a human rights agreement that guarantees UN standards and strengthens implementation

Commitments made under the UN Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally recognized agreements on labour and environmental protection must take precedence over investors' rights as inscribed in trade agreements. Indeed, the test of any economic integration agreement is the degree to which it meets the needs of all citizens.

Another example of an urgent human rights issue is protecting the rights of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers. Trade in goods and services must not be negotiated without ensuring that the rights of people who move from region to region, either willingly or unwillingly, are protected. We call for concrete steps to ensure that international rights regarding migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers are adopted in the domestic law of states, so that uprooted peoples can find effective court protection for these rights.

Protect and promote the inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas

It is time to treat with urgency the challenge of righting the wrongs heaped for five hundred years upon the first peoples of this hemisphere. In Canada, we have invited the people of our churches, and all who care about the common good, to support a goal proposed by many Aboriginal leaders to Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: namely, the establishment of a truly independent public body with the mandate to implement Aboriginal land, treaty and inherent rights. Throughout both our continents, recognizing the rights and dignity of Aboriginal peoples often includes a need to restore to their communities an adequate land base with sufficient resources for sustaining a viable local economy. New agreements should not be made under terms that require extinguishment of Aboriginal rights.

Cancel paralysing national debts

In many countries of the Americas, the burden of repaying public external debt prevents impoverished peoples from enjoying their right to access social services necessary for their health and well being. In some cases, the borrowed money was spent on projects that did not benefit the citizens now forced to repay it with interest. Interest payments are often an unjust burden on struggling peoples, especially when they grow excessively due to unilateral rate increases or due to compounding as new credits are taken out to meet payments on old debts. Debts such as these are chains shackling people to an economically cruel past. They also constitute an enormous barrier to mutually beneficial trade. It is time to break these chains. Economic integration of the Americas should mean a more neighbourly economy, not one that facilitates exploitation.

Negotiations to change a situation of paralysing debt must not impose harsh and unreasonable conditionalities, such as the Structural Adjustment Programs that have forced intolerable austerity on the populations of many countries of the global South.

Enhance food security and the security of agricultural communities

Liberalization of agricultural trade, removal of farm subsidies throughout Latin America, and changes to the land tenure system (e.g., in Mexico) have undermined food security for some populations and have forced millions of rural people into urban slums. Even in more affluent settings like Canada, farmers live from crisis to crisis, with their formerly stable and nurturing communities ravaged. We look to you to craft an agreement that allows for mutually beneficial agricultural trade while respecting the needs and importance of rural communities.

Preserve the integrity of publicly funded health and education services.

Economic integration agreements must not be allowed to undermine democratic governance. Under NAFTA, for example, the investor-state dispute resolution mechanism is being used by some private corporations to weaken government policies designed to protect human and environmental health. New agreements must enhance the right of public authorities to do what governments exist to do — namely, act with authority to protect and promote the common good.

Don't let patents, or trade-related intellectual property rights, block access to public goods like life-saving medicines

The common good comes first. Surely the appeal of a “free trade area” lies in the enhancement of human sharing, to the mutual advantage of all. We look for agreements that will prevent intellectual property provisions (such as those written into NAFTA and WTO documents) from working to protect monopoly profits rather than facilitating shared problem solving. For example: how can public policy help citizens who are living with HIV/AIDS gain access to generic equivalents of costly patented medicines?

It is our conviction that these are among the most critical policy starting points for building a more neighbourly economy and hemisphere. We look forward to learning more about the results of your deliberations, in a spirit of openness, transparency, and accountability.