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Dear friends,

I wonder when was the last time that you had shopped in Woolworths before the news came in the end of last year that the chain was about to close? I know that many of us have fond memories of Woolworths. I can recall going as a child to buy specially recorded versions of pop hits from Woolworths on the Embassy label. I still have them, though it would be many years since I played them. They are part of the nostalgia of my youth, along now with the shops. Most analysts agree that Woolworths' decline into irrelevance for most shoppers was that the chain failed to realise how the world had altered and had not responded to the era in which it now existed. As we know, Woolworths and M.F.I. were but the first of the well-known High Street names to fold in the wake of 'the credit crunch'. With 600,000 redundancies predicted for 2009, others will be going the same way.

The Church of England has been criticised for daring to speak against the way our society has developed and the attempted remedies for the problem. If we are all up to our eyes in debt, and that has been the cause of the collapse, how can we spend our way out of trouble? Spend with what? More debt? Our Archbishops and Bishops have been right to question not only what has been happening, but how we ever arrived here in the first place. Has not the paramount problem been one of unrealistic expectations? We appear to feel that we have a right to so many possessions and a life-style that in global terms is in the top percentile points. Back in November I was in Bulgaria with some of the poorest people in Europe. As we have now hit the coldest part of their winter, with temperatures at minus forty degrees centigrade, I wonder how those huddled around a wood burning stove in November will be coping? Yes they will have blankets knitted by kind folk on Mersea Island, and will be eating rice and pasta donated from across Essex, but life will be very tough for them. In my short time in Bulgaria, and earlier in the year amongst Palestinians, one thing was very apparent, they

did not all have the materialist expectations that we have. Of course some aspired to them, watching glossy television programmes. But most knew such a lifestyle was impossible for them. As was being said in Bulgaria, if the West declines, we will decline further.

However, our parents also did not have these expectations. How many of us grew up with ice on the inside of our bedroom windows in mid-winter? We did not expect to live everyday like greenhouse plants. Much of what has happened with our life-style expectations in the last twenty, thirty or forty years will need to be re-assessed. That is the point that the Archbishops and Bishops have made. I think most people realise that is a sensible point.

One of the most encouraging stories at the end of 2008 was that Crisis, Shelter and other organisations working with homeless over the Christmas period were overwhelmed with people offering to volunteer and help. I spent three Christmas Days in this way some years ago, and they were positive times.

The re-assessment that the senior clergy are calling for is one where we look introspectively into ourselves and ask the relevant questions: What do we put our faith in? Where can we find hope? How can we express love? These are key questions of human life. How we answer these frames every part of our lives. They outline our priorities and can be seen in our actions. These are good questions for the season of Lent, a time traditionally associated with considering big issues. These are the questions we will be considering in our Churches Together Lent courses. We regularly get good numbers at these sessions of input and discussion. Why not consider joining us to consider these and other related questions?

By failing to face up to the realities of the situation, the famous High Street names paid the ultimate penalty. We can bury our heads in the sand and think that none of what is happening makes any real difference to us. Or maybe this is the time to re-examine some of our basic assumptions about life and wonder how we have arrived where we are. Yours in Christ, *Patrick*