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Social Justice and Environmental Activism: Two Solitudes or Common Ground

Burlington, September 22, 2009:

Monday night, September 21st, approximately 75 community members gathered at Community Development Halton's forum bringing together social justice advocates and environmentalists to search for common ground that unites them in the urgent need to address the social and environmental impact of climate change.

Mike Balkwill, a long time community organizer, trainer and group facilitator, opened the evening with the critical questions: How bad is the environmental crisis? How much does society have to change? and What is the social change strategy?

"The Eco-system is collapsing as fast as it can. If it becomes severe enough it could end the conditions that make life possible for humanity and many other species," commented Mike Balkwill. He suggested that global society will have to change radically and he added that the extremes of climate change will bring social chaos and "when societies are stressed there are a range of reactions, from totalitarian state control to revolution and everything in between."

Panellists commented from their own experience. Liz Benneian, President of Oakvillegreen, feels the weight of the profound responsibilities we bear for the world we leave behind. She emphasized the importance of ensuring the survival of the next generation something she said "is not guaranteed." Willie Lambert, President of Oakville & District Labour Council, reminded those assembled that significant transformation of the dominant economic system with its endless search for growth, is a requirement if we are to respect the Earth.

Reverend Doctor Morar Murray-Hayes, Minister of Maple Grove United Church, stressed the need to move away from our secular culture based on the values of power, money, pleasure and comfort, to a culture of care and stewardship of creation. Adding to the dialogue, environmental journalist, Lawson Hunter, pushed the audience to move from measurements of economic productivity to those that make life worth living. He stated "fundamental to our new measures is respect for the Earth from which our collective wealth comes."

Balkwill brought the meeting to a conclusion with the insights of Paul Hawken captured in his book, Blessed Unrest. Hawken wrote: "If you look at the science about what is happening on Earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand

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data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this Earth and the lives of the poor and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse. " All concluded that moment in which we live provides the opportunity for environmental organizations, social justice organizations, labour, faith and indigenous groups to come together in a new unified front that values people and the Earth.

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