

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

July 2008 Newsletter

HIGHLIGHTS

Campaign for Poverty Reduction

Affordable Housing Still Needed

Charity to Advocacy

Preparation for Thanksgiving

Mark the date: Nov.5 Queen's Park Forum

Campaign for Poverty Reduction:

Many coalitions worked together to contact Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPP) alerting them to the difficult lives of low-income people. Ontario Works recipients had 43% less purchasing power than they did in 1995 and Ontario Disability Support recipients 18% less. Other key challenges we face include the lack of affordable housing, decrease in labour standards and regulation, and the struggles of municipal governments and local charities due to downloading from provincial and federal governments. The provincial government has addressed the fiscal deficit but the social deficit looms large.

Liberal MPPs, especially cabinet ministers, were to have public consultations in their ridings. Hon. Deb Matthews, minister for Children and Youth as well as chair of the cabinet committee for Ontario poverty reduction has held 13 consultations in the province. Reports can be found on www.povertywatchontario.ca

“25 in 5” is the slogan, a coalition, and a name for the movement: Reduce poverty by 25% in 5 years. It follows similar efforts in Ireland and U.K. A strong component of this work is to decide which statistics reveal growth or decline in poverty or inadequate housing. These statistics are based on data collected in Ontario and Canada. Yearly reports indicate the number of children below the poverty line as well as households paying over 50% of their income for housing.

Some indicators of “dire poverty” are also being developed. What does a family or person need to meet their needs? For example, does a family need to go to the food bank regularly? Is a family able to heat their home to a comfortable temperature? Do all persons have good shoes and boots, especially for winter? How many meals per month do family members skip because of lack of food? These indicators of “dire poverty” are being developed.

The Spring 2008 campaign is only a beginning. With rising food and gas prices, MPPs and the government need to hear that reducing poverty is still high on the agenda of residents in Ontario. Summer is a good time to write a personal letters, visit your MPP, and have your congregation pass a resolution or members sign a petition indicating that reducing poverty is essential for Ontario.

Affordable Housing Still Needed

Did you know that Ontario is the only province that has spent less of its own budget on housing in 2007 than in previous years?

Federal and provincial governments are discussing their roles in providing affordable housing. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities will hold a “summit” in mid-September 2008 to press the case for the upper levels of government to provide monies for new affordable housing. Canada is the only G-8 country without a federal affordable housing policy. Ontario’s current spending, which does not meet its campaign platform in 2003 – or 2007 -- comes from federal dollars that the province passes to municipalities. MPPs give figures about Ontario spending on housing, but they are federal dollars.

Visit your MPP. Ask about their 2003 and 2007 campaign promises. Ask if there will be increased funding for housing in the 2009 budget. MPPs can advocate within their caucus for money for housing. It will be helpful if you have a sense of the urgent needs for affordable housing within your riding or municipality.

Summer is an excellent time to visit your MPP in the constituency office! Your voice needs to be heard on poverty reduction and affordable housing.

Charity to Advocacy

The proverb tells us that it is better to teach a person to fish than to provide food hampers. Another proverb tells us we must go further up the river to see why the people are dying and floating down the river.

Faith communities have done a good job of providing charity and compassion. Can our wisdom and compassion help us to look at the cause of people’s suffering, so that we break the cycle of poverty and homelessness? How can your faith community or food bank join the Ontario poverty reduction strategy or “25 in 5”? Could you bring your MPP to the food bank or emergency shelter site? Could you in solidarity with persons, who are economically marginalized, talk with the MPP about the need for employment

standards and labour regulation, increased social assistance, and community services such as affordable housing, child care, and neighbourhood centres?

Preparation for Thanksgiving

Is Thanksgiving about individual gratitude for what my family and I have? Or is it corporate thanksgiving as we provide for everyone in our community? Even as the themes of Thanksgiving move us to donate to food banks and charities, can these ideals also move us to advocate for all in our province who are economically marginalized? These are important questions as ISARC and other coalitions plan a major thrust in October to persuade the provincial and federal governments to build budgets that significantly address poverty elimination.

This winter and spring, Canadians supported a community political agenda that had environment, poverty reduction, public transit, and child care as priorities. How serious were Canadians? Did the political will shift to self-interest as gas and food prices rose and as manufacturing jobs disappeared? Will we work together to form healthy communities? Or will we look out primarily for our families and ourselves? How do we speak to people of faith, asking them to examine and follow the roots of community embedded in all faiths?

The gap has grown between the richest 20% and the rest of us, during the past 30 years. Middle income and poorer family units have seen very little increase in purchasing power while the Canadian GDP has grown significantly. Yet Canada now seems unprepared for massive changes in our society. Was the wealth used to benefit individuals or was it used to find new solutions for a healthier environment, new industries, better infrastructure, and civil society? Can we try spreading the wealth among all Canadian residents? Might we be a healthier economy if all had purchasing power, especially middle and lower income households, who spend their money locally?

If there is a federal election, it will probably focus on environment, economy, public safety, tax reductions, and the war in Afghanistan. Canadians will be asked to choose whether our priorities are individual or community. Political parties will put significant spin on each issue. How do faith leaders proclaim a community ethic? How might we use Thanksgiving not only as a time of gratitude but also a time of concern and advocacy for all, especially the most marginalized? Middle class people may need to shift to a sense of solidarity with the poor in our society, from hoping to “join the rich.” Our faith and our concern for community health can inspire this bold move.

How will you preach, teach and pray in September and October? Will your discussions help people to see truth rather than media spin? Will we vote for compassion and

equity? Will your community understand the choice between individualism and community?

Summer time is an opportunity to read and reflect. The book *Radical Gratitude* by Mary Jo Leddy (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003) is a good place to start, as is ISARC's book *Lives Still in the Balance* (see note below).

Interfaith Web Page

Interested in news about interfaith activities in Ontario or in publicizing an interfaith event? "Interfaith Unity" is a monthly e-newsletter with information about events and organizations. Check out the latest issue at <http://interfaithunity.ca/current/htm> To subscribe – which is free – contact Terry Weller, tweller@openquest.ca

You'll be surprised at the variety of faith activities in Ontario!

Mark Nov.5 for our fall forum!

ISARC is planning two fall events:

- An interfaith forum in mid-October to discuss how faith communities understand and take action on issues of social justice and systemic poverty.
- Our next Religious Leaders Forum will be held at Queen's Park on November 5. The morning session will address systemic poverty in Ontario while the afternoon will focus on affordable housing.

Join over 1,000 satisfied customers! ISARC'S book *Lives Still in the Balance* is an excellent, readable book for information on many aspects of poverty and economic marginalization in Ontario. A good read before meeting with your MPP! We have book-related questions on our web page www.isarc.ca to stimulate discussion for adult study groups. Order *Lives Still in the Balance* through Pandora Press www.pandorapress.com or by contacting Brice Balmer.

ISARC contacts:

To find out more about Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), check our website, www.isarc.ca. Brice Balmer is ISARC's secretary and can be reached at isarc@gto.net