

Beyond Compassion

Rev. Brice Balmer, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC)

The 34th Annual Community Prayer Breakfast, held at the Waterloo Inn, May 6, 2009

Thank-you for the honour of addressing you this morning.

I always appreciate this gathering of community leaders: politicians, health care and social service, police, faith leaders, business people, government staff, retired folk and many others. We are fortunate to have one another. As I go back and forth to Toronto with other anti-poverty and affordable housing advocates, I hear concretely what advantages we have in this region. Our advantage is ***connection and compassion*** – traits of many in this room and in our region.

Compassion is rooted in all faiths as people are moved toward acts of charity to relieve suffering: illness, poverty, disaster relief, family problems, loss of job or income, mental health issues, etc. Compassion is not just for those we know well but for all people, even those we have never met. Compassion is a deep emotion of love and unity with the suffering of all humanity. We come together to work for the good of all out of compassion.

This is often done through acts of charity. In North America, we like to “do” things because we feel good emotionally and intellectually. We are a “doing culture.” If I can do something to solve a problem, I feel better. It’s much harder for us to just “be” which is often the compassion needed in programs like hospice or in walking with another through grief, sadness, or suffering where we can’t do something. But we can sit beside a person, listen, and work to understand. “Being” is an act of compassion. Many of our prophets and gurus have been leaders who learn to do and to be! They are wise.

Charity becomes inadequate when we are directly involved with a person who suffers. As we reflect on our own and with others, we realize that charity has only “scratched the surface.” The needs and issues are more profound. Our worship and meditation after an act of kindness may help us to see that this is only help for today.

- A young policeman is called to a home because of domestic violence. He stops the violence, separates the fighting couple, and explains the law. He may even remove one of the partners. Later reflecting, he realizes that this is not the solution. He is only stopping a current emergency.
- He feels the same way about some of the “drug busts” which only have minimal effect in the region as new dealers or drugs soon come into the region to fill the vacuum. He begins to see persons with addictions as victims formerly of violence and abuse and now

of the drugs which kill painful emotions from the past. How is one compassionate for persons with addictions and yet keeping the community safe?

- Fellow employees learn to know a new Canadian who is a refugee. Soon she talks about her sibling along with nieces and nephews in the country of origin. The co-workers may help with some money or provide emotional support. They can see her worry; they can do so little; they care about her and her family.
- I get calls regularly from people in the community who ask how they can help a friend or relative who needs supportive or affordable housing tomorrow. “There must be something,” they say exasperatedly. Volunteers in “Out of the Cold” come out of compassion; they wonder why patrons who work full time need this program. Volunteers are helping; no one need spend the night in the cold. They realize the extent of poverty in our community and the lack of options for the homeless.
- Many of us will be getting calls about finding childcare for people who have managed to get jobs and need child care subsidy. Will the federal or provincial government come through with dollars by March 31st, 2009? We know the needs of parents and children! We know how important it is to have a job.
- You have other situations where you or others assist out of connection and compassion. Upon reflection you realize your help is very temporary. It causes tension within.

Compassion does not allow us to walk away from these situations--at least many of us in this room have not done so! We may nurse our anger for a short time – anger is our compassion responding to what seems unjust and needs to be corrected in this world. But when we collect our wits, we decide to work with others to build a better solution in the community.

A recent MSW thesis described “collaboration” in our region. The author was amazed at the friendship networks, the many partnerships among agencies and organizations, the consultations among leaders when problems arose, and ways in which resources were shared. Unfortunately, she found academic studies on collaboration. After working among us a few years, she hopes to continue to explore how we work together. Her compassion will lead to new solutions.

Community development responds to the situations I previous described:

- The family violence centre (needs a new name) at Catholic Family Counselling Centre has emerged to work with individuals, couples, and families facing domestic abuse and violence. An alternative which the policeman sees as positively addressing the issues which he could not.
- Crime Prevention Council is starting a taskforce to work on an Integrated Drugs Strategy for this region; we now have a Violence Prevention Plan. “Harm reduction”, more counselling and additional recovery programs are needed here. Street workers in Uptown and Downtown have made a difference for the cities and the people who live on the street. Community development solutions create safety and health for all.

- Perhaps the workers join together and actually sponsor the new Canadian's sibling and family to come to Canada. It is a solution for her! In the process they will become familiar with the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support, the Reception Centre, the Multicultural Centre, the YMCA and other programs ... all developed as faith communities and leaders worked with numerous new Canadians and the problems of refugees. Now we have WRIEN, ESL classes, and community centres helping people to settle, find jobs, and learn to assimilate while keeping their culture. Waterloo Region quickly moved to community development as the population diversified.
- Groups and leaders have worked together to develop affordable and supportive housing. Starting in 1995, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to find provincial and federal monies. That is changing with the latest budgets. As we talk about affordable housing at the provincial level, Waterloo Region is at the top with Peel and Ottawa. A strategy to build 1000 units has succeeded; more are coming. I am looking forward to the transitional apartment units for persistently homeless on Erb Street in Waterloo! More is coming as we work toward housing solutions.
- Forces are coalescing on the childcare issue! The child care organizations are here. This issue moves us beyond community development.

Issues like childcare move our compassion into the stream of justice seeking and advocacy. Many compassionate people become nervous because seeking justice can push us into the political arena, which some have trivialized or disgraced. Justice seems complicated with legislation, human rights, policies and regulations, and social analysis. But justice really begins when our compassion – even after community development – runs into a brick wall: lack of money, poor policy, racism, stigmatization, limited options, inappropriate barriers and divides, etc.

Justice is difficult currently because we have come through a neo-conservative era in which there has been prosperity but individualism rather than community and compassion. John Stapleton, a retired provincial economic and social analyst, has researched the social safety policy, finding social and health programs for the marginalized during prosperity start in recession not prosperity. OHIP, CPP, WSIB, EI, and others have begun during times when many citizens felt vulnerable. During prosperity, the social safety net was depleted, foreign aid and statesmanship declined, and individualism and materialism worked to replace community spirit. As Waterloo Region has become a microcosm of the world; community and compassion has been declining. Fortunately our region still has these important values at its core!

Our concept of justice comes primarily from the Abrahamic faiths. All religions have some sense of justice: working toward fairness, equity, and human dignity for all peoples. How do we now work together to strengthen our compassionate community with justice at the core?

Justice issues are often beyond our region:

- Issues of family violence are on the agenda at the provincial and federal level. Can we articulate the visions we have to strengthen families, nurture and raise children, and stop abuse? Can we stop bullying? Can we ask that core issues be addressed so that abuse declines and nurture increases?
- Some of us are asking for federal and provincial funds for developing and implementing integrated drug strategies. Though we need to stop drug trafficking, the best solution is fewer people using drugs. More nurturing families will also raise children who do not wish to involve themselves in drugs and addictions.
- The economic recession has caused nations to work together. We are becoming more globally aware. We seek justice in our refugee system and foreign aid programs. Can we walk with our new Canadians to work for a safer environment in their home country and here? Canada has pledged to provide .07% of GDP for humanitarian assistance to poorer countries. We have not come close. Can we walk with new Canadians to assure safety and health here and around the world?
- This morning at 11:15 am, the provincial legislature is passing Bill 152 – the Ontario Poverty Reduction law. Ontario governments will need to declare their anti-poverty strategies, annually report on its implementation and effects, and involve people with lived experiences of poverty in the consultation and evaluation process. This law has been strengthened because of testimony from anti-poverty advocates and persons who live with low incomes. Greg DeGroot Maggetti from Waterloo Region has been a key player. As seekers of justice, we need to watch and tell the truth. After the 1989 federal resolution to end child poverty by 2000, child poverty has risen. Today's vote is just the beginning of justice seeking!
- Affordable housing monies have begun to flow. Can we evaluate them based on whether they assist us and other communities to end homelessness? Do the programs start to solve the gaps? Can we close down the "Out of the Cold" as has been done in Cambridge?
- It's time to ask our MPs and MPPs how the childcare crisis is going to be addressed. We cannot allow the issue to be thrown back and forth when children and parents will need the childcare as they return to work, enter re-training programs, and strengthen our economic base as a region.

Compassion is our gift to each other. Compassion provides the creative tension to see beyond the surface, to connect with others, to move toward community solutions, and to seek justice. Our faith communities and our regional foundation are built on compassion and connection. It is the framework through which we work together to create the healthy and safe society we all need. Let us continue to work together for everyone!