

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC e-Newsletter, May 2010

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You can email us at info@isarc.ca to let us know if you can receive our newsletter by email.

If you do not have access to email or would prefer to receive a paper version of our e-newsletter, we are happy to continue sending it to you in this way.



In This Issue:

1. **Religious Leaders' Forum: June 2**
2. **It's about dignity**
3. **Special Diet still needed**
4. **Put Food in the Budget**
5. **Affordable Housing Strategy**
6. **Social Assistance Review**
7. **Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts**
8. **Poor No More**
9. **Telling Our Stories: Disability Should Not Equal Poverty July 7**
10. **How do we pray for our politicians and government? - a Buddhist Perspective**

Religious Leader's Forum on 2010 ISARC Social Audit

Wednesday, June 2 in Toronto

... a provincial gathering to hear and discuss our initial findings

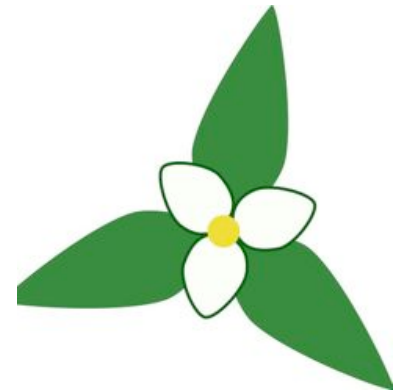
Mark your calendars!

10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Sam Sorbara Auditorium in Brennan Hall

University of St. Michael's College

In The University of Toronto, 81 St. Mary Street



Cost is \$40 and includes lunch. You must register by May 26. Space is limited.

Go to <http://isarc.ca/religiousleadersforum-sign-up.html>.

The book coming out from the 2010 social audit will be called *Persistent Poverty: Dispatches from the Margins*. To make this forum and the forthcoming book representative, we need a good sampling of conveners, rapporteurs, facilitators, and recorders – even more significant, we are inviting two people from each audit who have shared their experiences and perspectives on poverty. ***So, please come.***

It's about dignity

by Bruce Voogd, ISARC Coordinator

“We can be poor, but why do we have to be miserable poor?”

This was the lament of one single mother, at the point of tears, as she tried to relay her struggles of trying to survive on not enough monthly resources, despite her best efforts.

I have had the privilege of hearing many such voices while attending a number of the Social Audits that have taken place around Ontario this Spring. Each has been unique but common themes have emerged from the stories that were told.



And what has stood out has been the strength of individuals, who live under the stresses of poor housing, inaccessible or unaffordable daycare, health concerns due to poor diet, or an assistance system that assumes all clients want to abuse the system. People living in poverty face stresses many of us do not have to – not having enough monthly income to pay for rent, food, and utilities, let alone other things we take for granted. It is nearly impossible to live with dignity under these circumstances.

“It would be nice to have a bit of money to once and awhile afford a night out”. “I work six days a week, eat once a day, haven’t been on holidays in 15 years”. “I make about \$12,000 a year, that’s 46% below the poverty line”. “ODSP is just OW with a brighter ribbon”.

“I always put myself last; kids first”. “Living in lack is not nice”. “Telling your kids they can’t have things is hard”.

“I live in a dump”. “Hydro is often as high as the rent”. “The housing we have does not accommodate well my husband, who is in a wheel chair. If he is in a wheel chair permanently, I might have to move out of the bedroom”.

“Because my wages are clawed back, why should I work? This makes you dependent on the system. I want to contribute and give back”.

“I feel like I am living in a third-world country”. “People know you are buying the cheapest things”. “I feel bad I can’t provide fully for my kids”.

“Applying for welfare was the most demeaning thing I ever went through – becoming a stripper would have been more dignified”. “I cried every single time I went in for welfare”.

“Some workers talk to us like we are mentally challenged, and get rude and abusive when we challenge them”. “A one size fits all’ approach doesn’t allow for specific solutions that are tailored to specific needs. There are 60 different problems that need 60 different solutions”. “Workers need to be trained to be more sensitive and encouraging. A ‘how can we help you be successful’ approach by workers and the system is needed. We are not lazy”.

“If it wasn’t for food banks, support groups, and other services offered by religious and community organizations many of us could not survive”. “Governments are downloading too much to the faith communities and the numbers are way up for people accessing these services”.

“I’ve lost my confidence. We want to be self-motivated to improve ourselves, so we can provide for ourselves and our kids”. “Escaping poverty as a lifestyle you cannot change, it sucks! We all have to get out of this mindset”.

“Our humanity is diminished, we have to beg, and our dignity is taken away”. “I budget my money well, but I can hardly survive”. “There is a powerlessness that comes with poverty”. “It is very stressful living in poverty”.

The people who live in poverty and spoke at the social audits did not choose this as their lot in life. The people we heard from were resourceful, intelligent, full of good ideas, and, despite the hardship of their living situations, eager to get to a point where they could be off the system (or at least partially off) to be more fully part of society.

Despite their best efforts, people living in poverty are struggling to maintain their dignity against very difficult circumstances. They are just surviving, not able to enjoy simple pleasures like eating out or going to a movie that many others take for granted. They can barely make ends meet during the best of times. They spoke of not knowing what they would do if an illness or emergency happened in their lives.

The people we met want to be released from poverty and its stigma. For this to happen, assistance rates need to increase, more affordable housing needs to exist, daycare has to be accessible, and transportation has to be more available.

But there just isn’t enough resources and support to help them do this. Community organizations and religious communities offering social and support services are tapped out. Municipal governments do not have resources to do more than they do now. It is clear, that both the provincial and federal governments have to step up and fill this void.

And if they do, then dignity for all is attainable.

Special Diet still needed

The 25 in 5 Network will release a position paper with principles for the new nutritional supplement program, replacing the Special Diet. Through other contacts, we have learned that the Ontario government has asked for a 9 – 12 month extension before responding to the decision of the Human Rights Tribunal, which recognized the inadequacies of the current Special Diet to provide an adequate nutritional supplement for persons with health issues.

Many recipients of the Special Diet are very anxious that it will be replaced. The government's request for an extension means that changes will not happen soon. However, recipients and advocates should be writing to their Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/member_addresses.do?locale=en] emphasizing how essential the Special Diet is for personal health and safety.



The position paper has five principles and asks that all persons currently on special diets be grandfathered into the new program. This would also include recipients of Canada Pension Program-Disability as well as Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program.

The 25 in 5 Network reminds the Ontario government of its commitment to poverty reduction and is concerned that ending the Special Diet program will increase medical costs since people will not be able to maintain health without sufficient nutrition.

Put Food in the Budget

As the reports of Public Health Departments and Medical Officers of Health have indicated for years, there is not enough money through Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) for recipients to pay the rent and purchase nutritious food. \$100 per month per adult would significantly add to people's ability to cover basic rent and food costs.

Local groups that are part of the Social Audits wish to emphasize to their Members of Provincial Parliament (MPP) how important it is for the government to Put Food in the Budget [<http://putfoodinthebudget.ca/>]. If MPPs have not Done the Math [<http://www.dothemath.thestop.org/>], they should be invited to do this exercise on the web - perhaps with the local Social Audit group present. How much does your MPP think food, rent, transportation, clothing, and other essentials cost per month in your community? How does that compare with reality?

Affordable Housing Strategy

Watch your media and web sites! The Ontario Affordable Housing Strategy has been promised for Spring 2010. Something needs to happen in the next 6 weeks!

Liberal MPPs should be asked when the strategy will be released. As ISARC has talked with Liberal MPPs and government staff, we have been assured that the report will be issued on schedule. ISARC along with local and provincial coalitions will need to analyze and respond to this strategy as soon as it is released.

Social Assistance Review

The Advisory Committee for the Ontario Social Assistance Review has turned in its report in April 2010 and is waiting for Hon. Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community and Social Services, to announce the process for the formal review. Watch the media and web sites! This review was promised (as a political campaign plank) to occur within this legislative term. The next provincial elections are in October 2011, so this review needs to be underway soon to meet this deadline.

Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts

A report released by York University health researchers offers Canadians the opportunity to learn how their living conditions will determine whether they stay healthy or become ill.

Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts shows why these factors are so important for health and documents the state of these living conditions in Canada in an accessible manner for the Canadian public.

In everyday language and with compelling graphics the report shows how Canadians' health is shaped by how much income and wealth they have, whether or not they are employed and if so, the working conditions they experience. A wide range of research is pulled together to show how health is powerfully influenced by Canadians' ability to obtain quality education, food and housing, among other factors.

The report finds these conditions are declining with serious ramifications for the quality and longevity of Canadians' lives, and outlines specific ways that the situation can be improved.

Contrary to the popular belief that Canada is a caring nation with strong supports for citizens, the report shows that Canada has one of the worse records among wealthy developed nations in providing Canadians with the conditions necessary for health. These supports are eroding with significant effects on Canadians' health.

For example, new immigrants have difficulty getting accreditation for their skills, and are forced into service jobs where they can barely afford to feed their families. This leads to a host of problems that directly affect health and overall quality of life.

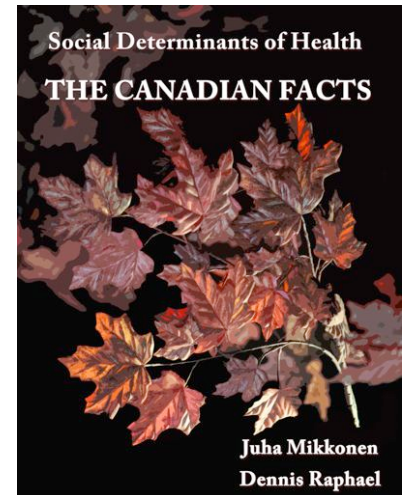
A striking example is found in maps that show a clear correspondence between poverty levels, prevalence of adult-onset diabetes, and concentration of visible minorities in Toronto neighbourhoods.

The report provides concrete recommendations for improving this situation. For example, in regard to the increasing occurrence of hunger in Canada, it recommends:

- Increases in minimum wages and social assistance rates to the level where an adequate diet is affordable.
- Governments assuring that healthy foods are affordable (e.g. milk, fruits, and foods high in fibre).
- Provision of affordable housing and childcare that would reduce other family expenses and leave more money for acquiring an adequate diet.

Sobering statistics cited by the report include:

- 15 per cent of Canadian children are living in poverty, putting Canada at a rank of 20th out of 30 of the world's



- wealthiest nations as defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- Only 17 percent of Canadian families have access to regulated child care. Canada ranked last among 25 wealthy developed nations in meeting various early childhood development objectives.
 - Canada is amongst the lowest in its coverage of total health care costs. Medicare covers only 70 per cent of total health care costs, giving Canada a rank of 22nd of 30 OECD nations for public coverage of health care costs.
 - Canada is among the nations with the greatest gap between men's and women's earnings. Canada ranks 19th of 22 OECD nations in reducing the earnings gap between men and women.
 - Over 40 per cent of Canadians with disabilities are not in the labour force, forcing many of them to rely upon social assistance benefits. Canada ranks 27th of 29 in public spending on disability-related issues.

The report is free to the public at <http://www.thecanadianfacts.org/>.

Telling Our Stories: Disability Should Not Equal Poverty July 7 at Metro Hall Rotunda, Toronto

ODSP Action Coalition is hosting an afternoon to highlight personal stories from people on Ontario Disability Support Program on July 7, 1:00 to 5:00 pm.

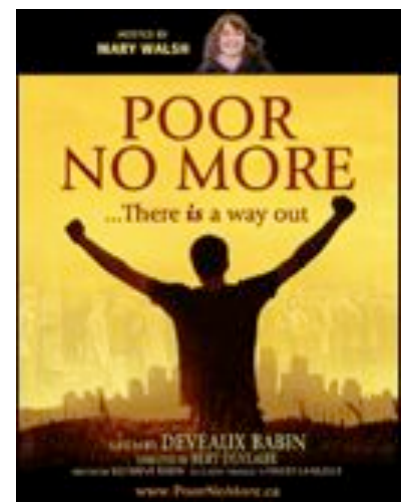
ODSP recipients, family members, and the general public are invited for an afternoon of sharing what it is really like to live on ODSP. The speaking agenda will include a panel discussion on human rights and ODSP, as well as personal stories from four people with direct experience living on ODSP. The event will also include informational displays and an area where you can share your own story.

Go to <http://www.odspaction.ca/story/join-us-july-7> for more information.

Poor No More

A new film, Poor No More [<http://www.poornomore.ca/>], offers solutions to Canada's working poor. The film takes three Canadians to a world where people do not have to beg, where housing is affordable and university education is free. They ask themselves: if other countries can do this, why don't we?

Hosted by TV and film star Mary Walsh, Poor No More offers an engaging look at Canadians stuck in low paying jobs with no security and no future. Mary then takes us on a journey to Ireland and Sweden so we can see how these countries have tackled poverty while strengthening their economies. The film offers hope to those who have to work two jobs a day and to those who cannot even find work.



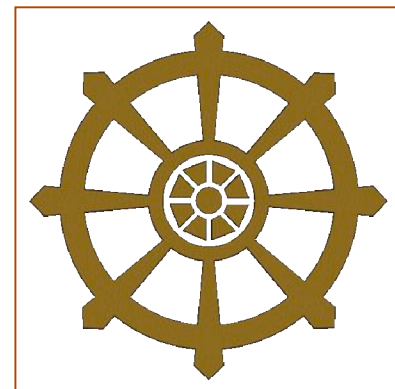
Our diverse religious traditions have different approaches to how we pray for our politicians and government. This series explores the question from the perspective of our various religious communities. Our latest response is from a Buddhist perspective.

How do we pray for our politicians and government? - a Buddhist Perspective

by Deba Mitra Bhikku, Buddhist monk, Phommaviharam Buddhist Temple, Kitchener. In conversation with Brice Balmer.

In Buddhism, the government is a contract with society and the politicians and employees are called to be righteous, wise, and merciful with equal respect for all people. Buddha has advice (*Dasaraja Dhamma*) for the king in a number of sutras. The good leader is concerned for the welfare of all society. So monks and lay people call their leaders to ethical standards.

However, Buddhists do not pray for their government politicians and leaders. They wish the political leaders to be mindful of their ethical commitment and responsibility to secure righteous governance that includes the economic and spiritual welfare of the subjects, justice, and peace in the country. They expect politicians to act out of selflessness, moral uprightness, mercy, and political wisdom.



Many perceive that Buddhism is apolitical - it is not. But politics is always messy. Therefore one must be clear about the situation and one's own perspective. Is one acting in mercy? Is one on a path of wisdom? Is one concerned about all the peoples and the welfare of society, not just a personal agenda? Meditation provides a peaceful mind to discern, clarify, and gives necessary insight to know how to address the preceding concerns. Buddhist political activism, however, does not confine to meditation cushion. The history of Buddhist societies, including the recent events in Myanmar, provides countless evidence of Buddhist practitioners – both monks and laity – engage in peaceful public demonstrations to get across their concerns.

Contemporary Buddhist political activism often highlights the issues related to human rights, democracy, political autonomy, righteous governance, and accountability.

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INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION

ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum

2010 Social Audit

a provincial gathering to hear and discuss our initial findings



Wednesday, June 2, 2010, 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Sam Sorbara Auditorium in Brennan Hall

University of St. Michael's College

In The University of Toronto, 81 St. Mary Street

Cost is \$40 and includes lunch. You must register before May 26. Space is limited.

REGISTRATION - ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum June 2/10

Name: _____

Faith Community: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____ Email: _____

Please make cheques payable to WLS—ISARC. Cost: \$40 (includes lunch)

Mail to: Religious Leaders' Forum Registrar
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