

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC E-Newsletter, September 2009

How about receiving this newsletter by email?

We hope you find our latest ISARC e-newsletter to be a stimulating read! If you are able to receive this newsletter by email we would love to send it to you that way. Emailing, as opposed to mailing, saves us time and resources, and allows you to use the various links we put in the e-newsletter version. 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 more than happy to continue to send it to you in this way.



In This Issue:

1. **Upcoming Events – Mark Your Calendars**
2. **ISARC Social Audit**
3. **Multifaith Forum**
4. **Religious Leaders' Forum**
5. **Do The Math**
6. **Ontario Housing Consultations**
7. **Congratulations Jennifer Posthumus**
8. **How Do We Pray For Our Politicians And Government? – A Jewish Perspective**

Upcoming Events – Mark Your Calendars

Here are two key dates to look forward to this Fall:

ISARC Multifaith Forum – October 29

Faith Communities and Advocacy with Governments

10:00 - 2:00 on Thursday, October 29, at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (Bricker & Albert)

Cost is \$25 and includes lunch. You must register before October 22. Space is limited.

ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum – November 5

Affordable Housing

9:30 - 3:00 on Thursday, November 5, at Queen's Park in Toronto – Rooms 228-230

Cost is \$40 and includes lunch. You must register before October 29. Space is limited.

Check out our website at www.isarc.ca to keep updated.

ISARC Social Audit

ISARC is gearing up again for a proactive initiative on poverty reduction.

In March of this year, our ISARC members made the Interfaith Prayer Vigil at Queen's Park (www.isarc.ca/prayervigil.html) a reality and a testimony to the position of the faith communities on issues of poverty.

Now ISARC is planning for a province-wide Social Audit in at least 20 communities across Ontario. This is a moment to listen to the people with lived experiences of poverty. This is another testimony that comes from our traditions – bringing dignity to people by listening to their difficult experiences, hearing their vision for a future without poverty, and walking with compassion alongside those most marginalized.

The Ontario Liberals had a Social Assistance Review in their 2007 election platform. While the Provincial Government has followed up with the Ontario Child Poverty Reduction Strategy and the current consultations for the Ontario Affordable Housing Strategy, nothing is happening on its promised Social Assistance Review. If and when it does begin, some feel it will only be changes in rules and regulations without any increase in funding or new links to training and employment.

ISARC believes that a timely Social Audit will prod the government to do a proper Social Assistance Review; evaluate other measures to reduce poverty; and tell us if poverty in Ontario and the resultant suffering are decreasing.

Many in our communities are coming to an end of their EI benefits. Before they can access Ontario Works, their assets cannot exceed \$2500. Food bank use is increasing. One food bank executive director sadly remarked that former donors have become patrons.

250,000 people will lose their EI benefits by the end of June 2010. The Federal Government is planning to extend the length of benefits during this recession. Some EI recipients have spouses who are working and they are now living on one income. Some may have found new jobs, but often their new salaries are insufficient.

The 20th anniversary of the Canadian Parliament's resolution to end child poverty is November 24th, 2009. Watch for the Ontario and Canadian Campaign 2000 Report Cards on child poverty over the past 20 years. Is your community calling attention to the needs of children and parents this November? How have your federal representatives responded?

The Ontario Government promised \$45 M for dental care for low-income adults during the past year, but has not implemented the program. Sources indicate that the government is transferring this money to children who already have dental care. Parents on OW and ODSP report that they can only obtain minimal dental services for their children if they are in severe pain. Dental problems can lead to significant medical problems; good dental care is a social determinant of health. The experiences of parents struggling to care for children while suffering terrible pain became evident in the 1998 and 2003 ISARC Social Audits.

Perhaps there are members of your faith community who have lost jobs and had EI benefits run out. Is their experience acknowledged in your faith community? Do they still come to community events? How do sermons, liturgies, prayers, meditation, and other activities nurture them and provide strength?

Is your community a good site for the ISARC Social Audit Hearings with persons on social assistance or earning low wages? Can you work with us to bring together faith groups, unions, social service and health care agencies, and community organizations?

The ISARC Social Audit Hearings in each community will listen to three different groups: people who are poor, people working in the social service and health care systems, and local politicians and government staff.

ISARC will again use the U.N. human rapporteur model in settings, which are safe and comfortable for those bringing their stories and vision. For example, a group of mothers may speak to the rapporteurs at a community centre; single adults' voices may be heard at a soup kitchen; our rapporteurs may visit people in a housing complex. Government politicians and staff, as well as agency workers, may wish to testify at City Hall or a union building. A local Planning Committee will select a facilitator and a reporter. At the end of the day, the Committee along with the rapporteurs will put together a media release as well as a report to ISARC.

For this Social Audit, ISARC is working with the Social Planning Network of Ontario. The voices from the Hearings will be edited and published in a book to be released in late Spring or Summer of 2010. This will be just in time for the Ontario political parties as they plan the last year of this legislature and begin pulling together their 2011 election platforms.

Helping people – especially the marginalized – find their voices is an important function of our faith communities, not just for adherents but for all in the community. The 1998 Social Audit was entitled “Our Neighbours’ Voices: Will We Listen?” This is still a good question for ISARC to ask today as it continues to build a constituency to eliminate poverty in Ontario.



Multifaith Forum on Faith Communities and Advocacy with Governments – October 29

Faith groups advocate with governments in a number of ways and from different theologies. For some, the advocacy is on a very personal level as they assist individuals and families with personal problems by calling local politicians about particular needs. Others support systemic advocacy through policy change whether this is for immigrants from their tradition or for people with specific issues.



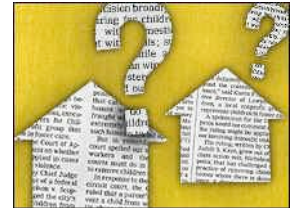
Do you know what other faith communities think about advocacy? Can you articulate your own position based on principles and experience? As we listen to each other, we will learn how to work together as an interfaith coalition.

On October 29th, six religious leaders will be part of circle to describe and discuss how their faith communities see advocacy with government. Other participants will listen. After a break, all will participate in small groups and discuss what they heard and how they see advocacy with governments.

The forum will be on Thursday, October 29 at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary from 10 am – 2 pm. Cost is \$25 per person and includes lunch. To register by email go to: <http://isarc.ca/multifaithforumOct09.html>.

Religious Leaders' Forum on Affordable Housing – November 5

The Province is holding consultations leading toward an Ontario Affordable Housing Strategy. Since so many faith communities are into affordable housing development, it's a time for us to gather our wisdom, "think outside the box", and figure out new ways to work with governments to help those who need Rent Geared to Income.



The Ontario Non Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) and the Cooperative Housing Federation will be present. There will be a panel of tenants. Brian Eng, from Wellesley Institute and the Affordable Housing Network, will report on the government's consultation process as well as the recommendations of the Network. We will be challenged to think of solutions that include, but also go beyond, building more affordable housing units. How might faith communities be facilitators in local communities? What do faith communities want to contribute to the provincial strategy?

All Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPP) will also be invited as our guests for lunch. Contact your MPP to say you are attending. Perhaps you can meet him or her at noon?

The forum will be on Thursday, 5 November 2009 at Queen's Park in Toronto – Rooms 228-230 from 9:30 am – 3:00 pm. Cost is \$40 per person and includes lunch. To register by email go to: <http://isarc.ca/religiousleadersforumNov09.html>.

Do the Math. What Kind Of Life Can You Afford On Social Assistance?

Poverty in Ontario is at an all time high. As the economic crisis grows, so does the number of people relying on social assistance and food banks. Does a single person on social assistance receive enough income to live with health and dignity? What kind of life can you afford on social assistance? Do the Math (<http://dothemath.thestop.org/>) to find out if the rates add up with an interactive budgeting exercise.



Then contact your MPP and encourage him or her to also Do the Math. How much do they think it costs to live? How much do they think social assistance and minimum wage should increase? How would they or their family survive on social assistance?

Ontario Housing Consultations

The Affordable Housing Network (<http://www.stableandaffordable.com>) provides helpful information about the province wide housing consultations that every MPP is expected to host. You are invited to prepare and send in a written submission, tell your personal housing story, or the story of housing issues in your community; mentioning the specific solutions that would make a difference for you and your community.

Attend one of the regional meetings being hosted by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. For more information go to: <http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/get-ready-fall-consultations>.

Congratulations Jennifer Posthumus

Jennifer Posthumus, City of Toronto representative on the 25in5 Network (of which ISARC is also a member), is the recipient of the 2009 Daily Bread Food Bank Public Education Award. This award is presented annually to a person or organization that has put the goal of ending poverty into action by raising public awareness of hunger in Toronto. Congratulations Jennifer!

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

How Do We Pray For Our Politicians and Government? – A Jewish Perspective

By Rabbi Ed Elkin, First Narayever Congregation (www.narayever.com), Toronto. Rabbi Elkin participated in ISARC's Interfaith Prayer Vigil (www.isarc.ca/prayervigil.html) in front of Queen's Park on March 24, 2009.

Jews have a long tradition of praying for the welfare of the society in which they live. The earliest indication of this tradition comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied during the period when the ancient Israelites had been exiled to Babylonia from their homes in the Land of Israel. Living for the first time in a country which was not their own, they were counselled by Jeremiah to pray for its success and prosperity: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have caused

you to be exiled, and pray to God on its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

The earliest text of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah, contains an exhortation to pray for the government, and hints at a darker reason for doing so. "Rabbi Hanina, the deputy of the priests, would often say, 'Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, people would swallow each other alive'." (Pirke Avot 3:2). Rabbi Hanina, who lived in the 1st century, seems to fear anarchy most of all. It is important that the government be strong, because people need a strong hand to ensure order. Otherwise, the darker side of human nature would prevail and the society would break out into violence. According to Rabbi Hanina, that's why Jews should pray for the welfare of the government. It is true that in the course of Jewish history, it has often been mobs who have engaged in pogroms and other kinds of anti-Semitic attacks. However, it is poignant that Rabbi Hanina himself, the author of this statement, was martyred by the Romans – proving that a strong government, unchecked, can also "swallow its people alive".

Since the 14th century, most Jewish prayer books have contained a prayer for the government, in keeping with Jeremiah's injunction. There were certainly times and places when Jews lived under governments which had policies toward Jews which would have made it very difficult, if not impossible, for them to recite these prayers. We in Canada today are blessed to live in a democratic society which respects the rights of religious minorities. Although we may not agree with every policy of a particular government, we can pray for our country and its leaders without hesitation. My own congregation has a prayer for Canada which we recite every week during Sabbath services: "Merciful God, we invoke Your blessing upon this country, Canada, and on its government and leaders. Guide them that they may administer all affairs of state in justice and righteousness. May peace and security, happiness, prosperity, and freedom, forever abide among us. Unite the inhabitants of this great country in all its diversity. Safeguard our ideals and institutions from hatred and bigotry so that the people of this land may fulfill the vision of Your prophets: Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war any more, For all people both great and small, shall know the Lord."



In this way, we pray that our leaders may conduct their difficult work in accordance with the highest ideals of justice and peace found in the prophetic tradition, and that the society as a whole should continue to respect and honour the diversity which is its outstanding characteristic.

ISARC
P.O. Box 25067- SDM, Kitchener, ON N2A 4A5
info@isarc.ca
www.isarc.ca