

Interfaith coalition conducts social audit in Mountain

by Amanda Smith-Millar
Press staff

MOUNTAIN — For the rural poor, a small community can be a source of strength, but also shame.

That was one of the key findings of a hearing at the community hall in Mountain last Thursday (April 15).

The village was one stop in the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC)'s social audit tour of the province.

About 30 hearings are taking place in various communities, and

the House of Lazarus worked with the coalition to organize a meeting where local residents who have been affected by rural poverty could give first-hand accounts of their struggles. The findings from the coalition's audit will be published in a report.

Organizers said a handful of people from many walks of life — including the working poor, those on social assistance, and seniors — contributed their stories during last week's audit. In the afternoon, local politicians attended the event.

Happy Face Nursery School had a play station set up for any parents needing daycare during Thursday's session.

In a small town, everyone knows if you're poor

The hearings were closed to the media, but organizers spoke to the *Winchester Press* afterwards.

"Community is so important," said Bruce Voogd, co-ordinator of ISARC.

He pointed out that while a rural area might be tightly knit, every-

body knows everyone else's business — including who's poor.

"The flip side is, there can be different levels of shame," he said.

Voogd told the story of a lady who bought garments at the House of Lazarus' thrift shop, and was later approached by a well-meaning woman who spotted her old clothes on a new owner. The second-hand store is open to the entire community (in fact, as many customers as possible are wanted, as the store generates roughly 60

per cent of the charity's income). Nonetheless, Voogd said that incident made the woman uncomfortable, and would be unlikely to occur in a city.

Transportation, neglect of seniors, inadequate access to the internet, and loss of income due to illness also emerged as key themes.

Pauline Pratt, executive director of the House of Lazarus, said many audit participants went through their fair share of tissues Thursday.

"Some people were sharing some very difficult stories," she said.