

ADVANCING A LIVABLE INCOME

Overcoming Ontario's Poverty Pandemic

By Murray MacAdam

Canada's growing movement for a livable Basic Income got a boost Nov.25 with a virtual forum sponsored by ISARC involving key advocates, politicians, and concerned citizens. More than 55 people took part, most from Ontario, as well as others from as far as Alberta and Newfoundland.

The forum kicked off with an insightful theological reflection by Rev. Lois Wilson, a former Senator and former United Church of Canada Moderator. After reflecting on isolated women in the Bible, she noted, "those of us at the centre (of society) cannot be made whole until those at the edge can be made whole." Basic Income could be part of "a massive shift in social relationships."

Keynote speaker Sheila Regehr, a founding member of the Basic Income Canada Network and now Chair of that organization, outlined the main models for a Basic Income, including the one favoured by her network, which would provide \$22,000 for a single person and \$31,000 for a couple. The key factor in making it happen is political will, she said.

A second keynote speaker, author and activist Jamie Swift, noted that Basic Income has been seen as utopian in the past but more and more people are paying attention to it nowadays. Widespread insecurity, now affecting middle-class Canadians, is one reason why. Another has been the fact that during the pandemic millions of Canadians have benefitted from the Canada Emergency Response Program (CERB), which Swift

called "a watershed moment." He pushed back against the notion that a Basic Income will lead to "an epidemic of sloth and lassitude", noting that research from the Basic Income pilot program in Hamilton refuted that idea.

Representatives of Ontario's three opposition parties spoke briefly, Dolly Begum for the NDP, Green Party leader Mike Schreiner, and former Premier Kathleen Wynne for the Liberals. Schreiner noted that the pandemic "has exposed tragic holes in our social safety net." Begum reinforced that view, noting the huge costs involved with housing homeless people. "All sorts of work by women could be expanded if we had a decent income support program," Wynne told the forum. No one from the ruling Conservative government took part, despite an invitation from ISARC.

Breakout sessions on advocacy, work with congregations, lived experience, and the benefits of Basic Income enabled participants to share ideas and make connections.

Action strategies discussed included getting involved with organizations such as Basic Income Ontario (www.obin.ca) and Basic Income Canada Network (www.basicincomecanada.org). A range of petitions campaigns are underway, including one sponsored by MP Leah Gazan which calls for converting the CERB program into a livable Basic Income. More than 38,000 Canadians have endorsed it. (www.leahgazan.ca/basicincomemotion)



Rev. Lois Wilson



Sheila Regehr



Jamie Swift

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