



isarc

FAITH COMMUNITIES IN
ACTION AGAINST POVERTY

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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2023 Annual Report

ISARC - Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

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**FAITH COMMUNITIES IN
ACTION AGAINST POVERTY**

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Chair's Report

Rev. Susan Eagle
Chair, ISARC

Greetings to our partners and volunteers. Included in the following pages is an outline of ISARC activities for 2023 as well as our financial statements.

The past year offered the opportunity for us to return to some of the in-person dialogue and fellowship that had not been possible since 2020. That absence during the pandemic taught us just how important the person-to-person connection is both for building interfaith relationships as well as engaging in advocacy.

Being able to be present at the Finance Committee hearings on the budget allowed for individual conversations with committee members. And the return to Queen's Park for the Religious Leader's Forum, while still not back to its pre-pandemic attendance numbers, provided the fellowship and networking that is so important to building solidarity and perseverance.

2023 was the year that we hoped the Ontario Government would use some of its surplus 2022 budget to increase social assistance payments or at least index Ontario Works to inflation as is now being done with so many other benefit programs.

We were disappointed to see so little progress made on bringing low incomes more in line with the actual cost of living. As well, the housing crisis is ballooning to swallow up more and more people who are no longer able to find decent affordable housing. Many are losing hope that they will ever be out of the downward spiral of increasingly inadequate, temporary and insecure housing.

One of the high moments of 2023 was the release of the Ontario Superior Court's ruling that municipal bylaws prohibiting encampments are unconstitutional when appropriate shelter capacity is insufficient. While it is certain that municipalities will delay compliance through appeals, bureaucracy and the slow progress of revising bylaws, it is encouraging to see

human-rights based adjudication offered as one bright spot in an otherwise dismal housing landscape.

Perhaps this censure to the eviction of homeless people will be the yeast that leavens the housing issue with a shift in public consciousness to demand that housing not be treated as a commodity but rather as a basic human right. We certainly felt the energy of that conviction as we met for another of the high moments of the year - the Religious Leader's Forum at Queens Park in November.

The ongoing issue of accessible, reliable healthcare is also an issue that has been on the ISARC agenda this past year. There is growing momentum and an ever-broadening alliance of ally organizations and individuals working to keep this issue front and centre with the provincial government. ISARC has been pleased to work with the Ontario Health Coalition as it has led this initiative.

ISARC is a participatory coalition with active members drawn from across the interfaith spectrum who both represent their faith community at meetings and also put in time and energy to help with ISARC presentations and advocacy.

My thanks to all our Steering Committee members and also to our Administrative Coordinator, Natasha Fransblow, who continues to keep our coalition network in functioning order.

We commend to you our ISARC Report for 2023.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Eagle'.

Rev. Susan Eagle
ISARC Chair

2023 In Review

While 2023 saw the re-opening of many institutions from the COVID-19 pandemic, it also revealed deep collateral damage. Continued low wages and social assistance levels left people on low incomes increasingly vulnerable to food and housing insecurity as inflation reached new heights. Homelessness and housing insecurity had become a full-blown crisis, with homeless encampments, and opposition to them, springing up in communities across Ontario. ISARC responded with renewed energy, amplifying the voices of other advocacy groups, reconnecting with its constituency, and pursuing opportunities to extend our advocacy work.

Activities

Pre-budget Submission

In February 2023, ISARC presented its pre-budget submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, with our Chair, the Rev. Dr. Susan Eagle, appearing in person and Greg DeGroot-Maggetti participating virtually. ISARC's submission, while commending the Ontario government for the indexing of ODSP benefits, called for the indexation of Ontario Works to inflation, noting that other benefits, and even the basic personal exemption, are indexed to inflation, benefiting even high-income earners. Not indexing OW robs its

recipients, who are among Ontario's most vulnerable, of real income. ISARC's submission also stressed the need for higher social assistance rates to lift recipients out of deep poverty, increased rent support for low-income households, rent control on new and vacant rental units, and the restoration of tools for municipalities to preserve and create affordable housing.

The Finance Committee chair expressed appreciation for the ISARC presentation noting that ISARC has for many years been a committed and regular participant in the budget process bringing forward an ethical perspective on behalf of faith communities.

Adding our voices to those of others

ISARC was invited by the Danforth Jewish Circle to sign on to a February 14, 2023 letter to the Premier and Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Environment, regarding the negative impacts of Bill 23 (the More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022). The letter noted that the legislation threatened Ontario's environment while doing little to increase the supply of affordable housing in the province, indeed undermining municipalities' efforts to create and maintain affordable housing, concerns ISARC had raised in its submission on the Bill in late 2022.

In March, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario invited ISARC, as a representative of faith communities across Ontario, to endorse its Call to Action on Housing and Homelessness. This took the form of an open letter to the Premier, published as a full-page advertisement in the Globe and Mail on March 18, 2023. ISARC's endorsement joined that of 25 other organizations, including the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, Feed Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Habitat for Humanity Ontario and Maytree, among others, calling for the provincial government to recognize homelessness in Ontario as a social, economic, and health crisis, commit to ending homelessness in Ontario, and to work with a broad range of municipal, community, Indigenous, and health partners to achieve this goal.

On August 15, 2023, members of ISARC's Steering Committee joined members of Jewish and other faith communities for a rally in solidarity with striking grocery workers outside the Metro store at Bathurst St. and Lawrence Ave. in Toronto. A letter from ISARC Chair Susan Eagle was read out at the rally. On August 31, after a month-long strike, a new collective agreement was ratified between Metro and Unifor, the union representing the grocery workers.



The new agreement brought in an immediate wage increase for both full-time and part-time workers as well as significant wage improvements for the duration of the contract, along with a new part-time sick leave program, increased benefits and pensions, stabilized scheduling and job protections. This agreement not only made a substantial improvement in the wages and working conditions of 3,700 frontline grocery workers at 27 Metro stores across the GTA, but set a precedent for negotiations by workers at other grocery chains.



The Ontario Legislature returned from its summer break on September 25, 2023, met by a massive rally by the Ontario Health Coalition and partners protesting the increasing privatization of healthcare. September 25 being Yom Kippur, a second day of the rally took place at Queen's Park on September 26. Several ISARC Steering Committee members spoke at the rally to protest both the opening of the Legislature on Yom Kippur and the government's push towards privatization.

Stepping Up Our Advocacy Efforts

In January of 2023, the Ontario Superior Court ruled that municipal by-laws prohibiting homeless encampments contravened s.7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, if there were insufficient local shelter services available for those experiencing homelessness. The following month, the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal issued a statement on the ruling which noted that “Policies and programs designed to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness must be grounded in human rights-based approaches and delivered with respect and compassion...People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately members of groups and communities who have experienced historic and ongoing systemic discrimination.” Yet municipalities across Ontario continued to enact bylaws prohibiting encampments. The City of Barrie even passed a motion that would punitively fine individuals and organizations offering food, water, or other supplies in public spaces to people experiencing homelessness, although it backed down from implementation after widespread protest. However, the ban is still official municipal policy.

On August 3, 2023, ISARC wrote to Premier Doug Ford, Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark and Attorney-General Doug Downey, asking the province to remind municipalities of the Ontario Superior Court’s ruling that municipal bylaws prohibiting encampments are unconstitutional when shelter capacity is insufficient, and to offer support to municipalities to meet their shelter obligations.

A second letter was sent to the Premier, Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy, and opposition party leaders, applauding the announcement of the indexation of the Guaranteed Annual Income System (GAINS) benefit for seniors and reiterating ISARC’s call for the indexation of Ontario Works.

While ISARC has historically concentrated its advocacy efforts at the provincial level, on August 20, 2023, ISARC made a submission to the federal pre-budget consultations, calling for an increased Canada Housing Benefit to prevent more people from falling into homelessness, an interim emergency benefit to support people with disabilities until the Canada Disability Benefit is rolled out, and the implementation of a Guaranteed Liveable Income.

ISARC steering committee members also had the opportunity to meet with members of the NDP Caucus following the Religious Leaders’ Forum on November 23, 2023, to discuss issues around housing affordability and how faith communities could help advocate for more robust housing policies at all levels of government.

Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark resigned in September 2023 in the wake of the Ontario Integrity Commissioner’s report on the Greenbelt Scandal. In October, ISARC wrote a letter to his successor, the Hon. Paul Calandra, calling for rent control on new and vacant units, more tools for municipalities to increase the stock on non-market housing, and restrictions on short-term rentals, and asking for a meeting to discuss these issues further. ISARC did receive a response from Minister Calandra’s office to set up a meeting for early 2024.

2023 Financial Summary

Opening Balance	\$45,577.47
Revenue	\$24,425.91
Expenses	\$24,647.59
Closing Balance	\$45,355.79

Advocacy Priorities Survey



At ISARC's annual summer retreat in June 2023, Steering Committee members identified the need to consult our wider constituency about their advocacy priorities. A small working group was convened to create the survey, which was sent out in late August to the Steering Committee, and sent out to our full mailing list after Labour Day. Members were encouraged to share the survey within their own faith community networks.

A total of 134 responses were received from participants across Ontario. The majority of respondents identified themselves as members of Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities, with others identifying themselves as belonging to Mennonite, Non-denominational, Unitarian Universalist, Lutheran, Salvation Army, Free Methodist, Orthodox, Baha'i, and Metaphysical traditions. Despite this wide variety in faith expression, homelessness, housing affordability, hunger and food insecurity were the top priorities for survey responses across all regions and faith traditions.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS FORUM

Returning to Humanity: Human Rights and Dignity through Income Security and Housing



After three years of holding the annual Religious Leaders Forum online, ISARC returned to an in-person forum at Queen's Park on November 23, 2023. The event featured a panel of speakers including Tom Cooper, Director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and co-founder of the Ontario Living Wage Network; Shannon Down, Executive Director of Waterloo Region Community Legal Services, and constitutional lawyer Sujit Choudry. The

speakers addressed the skyrocketing increase in homelessness and food insecurity, and the growing attempts by municipal governments to see marginalized people as "problems to be dealt with", through a human rights lens.

The Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right to life, liberty, and security of the person, and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with fundamental justice. Laws and regulations that criminalize people experiencing homelessness and/or those who seek to meet their needs, are thus open to a Charter challenge, as happened in Waterloo. However, making the legal argument is onerous, requiring extensive documentation and witness statements. It is better to try to persuade local governments and members of the public to adopt a human-rights based approach, before engaging in litigation. As all faith traditions call their members to reach out to those in need, people of faith have a key role to play in supporting the human rights of those being pushed to the margins.



Tom Cooper
Keynote Speaker



Shannon Down
Keynote Speaker



Sujit Choudry
Keynote Speaker



Rabbi Ryan Leszner
Theological Reflection

Rabbi Ryan Leszner of Congregation Darchei Noam offered the opening theological reflection. He discussed the Jewish practice of tikkun olam, or mending of the world, as searching for the sparks of Divine light that have been scattered throughout the world. We must look with intention to discern those sparks of Divine light in our broken world.



The Forum attracted 65 participants from communities across southern Ontario, as well as leaders of the three provincial opposition parties, who also offered comments to those gathered. Premier Ford did not attend, but sent a written message, which ISARC Chair Susan Eagle read out to the assembly.



Conclusion

2023 saw ISARC return to pre-pandemic activities such as an in-person Forum as well as expanding its involvement in advocacy both on its own and with local partners. We look forward to building on this work in the coming year.

At a time of increasing anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and marginalization of those experiencing housing and food insecurity, ISARC's unwavering commitment to the values of human dignity, social and economic equity, mutual responsibility, and interfaith cooperation continue to bear witness to the possibility of more just and humane society.

About ISARC

The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) is a non-partisan provincial network of faith groups working together for greater social justice and to eliminate poverty in Ontario through education, advocacy and work with low-income people. ISARC was born out of the hope that faith groups working together can contribute to new public policies based upon greater justice and dignity for Ontarians marginalized by poverty. We work with faith communities, other social justice partners and with government and politicians from all parties.

Learn more: www.isarc.ca

Our Values

Human Dignity - The right of all people and their communities to be treated with justice, love, compassion, and respect, and their responsibility to treat others likewise.

Social Equity - The right of all people to adequate access to basic resources, to full participation in the life and decision-making of their communities.

Mutual Responsibility - The obligation of communities to care and share with their people, ensuring that basic needs are met.

Fiscal Fairness - The right of all people, communities, and institutions to fair fiscal treatment and the responsibility of all to contribute fairly for the well-being of all.

Ecological Sustainability - The obligation of communities to practice responsible stewardship of the earth and its environment, so that creation might be preserved for generations to come.

Economic Equity - The right of all people and communities to adequate access to the resources necessary for full lives, including access to worthwhile work, fair employment considerations, and our communal responsibilities to use such resources responsibly.

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