

The logo for ISARC, consisting of the lowercase letters 'isarc' in a white, sans-serif font, set against a solid black rectangular background.

**isarc**

**FAITH COMMUNITIES IN  
ACTION AGAINST POVERTY**

# **Bi-Annual Report**

**2019-2020**

Prepared by Elin Goulden & Natasha Fransblow  
Approved by ISARC Executive Committee

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# Chair's Report

Rev. Susan Eagle  
*Chair, ISARC*

Reflecting on the last two years of ISARC work, it is difficult not to feel overwhelmed by the impact of the pandemic that has interrupted and refocused our lives in so many ways.

In light of the pandemic, 2019 seems like it was a quiet year of ongoing routine advocacy and policy analysis - except when we consider the provincial election that happened just six months earlier in June 2018.

Seventy-six (76) seats went to Conservative Party MPPs to form a majority government, and with that, began many cuts to social programs, including the loss of the basic income pilot projects.

2019 was the year we documented roll-backs and cut-backs that further widened the gap between the "have" and "have not" citizens of Ontario - all carried out by a government that received only 40% of the popular vote, but was able to translate that into 61% of the seats.

In our pre-budget brief in the spring of 2019, ISARC expressed concern that a single person on Ontario Works received \$733 per month, which was equivalent to only 45% of Canada's official poverty line, and adults with children received only the equivalent of 72%. As well, there were documented increases in the number of precarious and low-wage workers.

Yet, the Ontario government moved ahead with its promised reductions which included: cutting in half a scheduled three percent increase in social assistance rates, ending the Basic Income Pilot Project, and cancelling a scheduled increase in minimum wage to \$15 per hour. Cuts to budgets for health units, increased impoverishment, and reductions in enforcements of standards created the background for what was to come in the next year.

The year 2020 brought a change that affected all of us, but had drastic consequences for the most vulnerable among us. With COVID-19 pandemic cases rising, elderly seniors living in

nursing homes became a focus for many advocacy groups, including ISARC, as we daily witnessed the heart-breaking news of hundreds of isolated, sick, and helpless nursing home residents left to die alone without even family or friends by their side.

The federal emergency funding (CERB), created to assist those who were laid off or dealing with reduced work hours, was a much needed support. However, it was not available to those with no employment or on social assistance. Additionally, with its \$2000-a-month income, which many complained was too low, it served as a stark reminder of how far behind those on Ontario Works or ODSP have been left.

This gave us renewed energy for advocacy. The federal government's ability to find funding and organize an income distribution system in the midst of an emergency provided proof that when there is political will, there is a way.

CERB provided survival income for millions and far from being a liability that weighed down the economy, it helped to anchor it during the economic upheaval created by all the lay offs and business closures.

During the past year, ISARC has continued to meet and do its work by moving its meetings and even the 2020 Religious Leaders Forum online. The online capability has helped to enlarge ISARC's capacity to reach a wider membership and also to interact more easily with other partner coalitions and community advocacy groups. Our thanks to Natasha Fransblow, our administrative coordinator, who has managed so much of the shift online for us.

During the pandemic months, ISARC expanded its focus to include COVID-related health and employment issues in partnership with the Ontario Health Coalition, while still continuing advocacy around provincial budget cut-backs, and working on the completion of the Voices from the Margins project.

My thanks to all those members of the Steering Committee who have taken on jobs of speaking, writing and representing ISARC in many venues during this time. Often our work is collaborative, strengthened by the interfaith nature of our membership.

In the fall of 2020, we were happy to welcome Brian Beal, who replaced Roger Lawler, both as General Secretary for the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario and also as treasurer for ISARC. However, we were sorry to lose Roger Lawler, a long-time active member of the ISARC Steering Committee. Many thanks, Roger, for your years hosting meetings, handling the finances, and offering your good-humoured wisdom. We will miss you.

During 2020 we also welcomed Rabbi Jordan Helfman, representing Holy Blossom Temple. It is our hope that we will continue to broaden the representation at the ISARC Steering Committee to have stronger and more diverse representation from faith communities as well as broader geographic membership across Ontario.

As we find our way out of the pandemic, we are aware of the urgent need to address woefully low income levels and desperate housing needs for many across our province. As well, the lack of staffing and standards at long term care homes continues to be unresolved. May we find energy, strength, and spiritual wisdom for the days ahead as we continue to work in partnership with each other and many community advocates.



Rev. Susan Eagle  
ISARC Chair

# 2019-2020: In Review

In 2019 ISARC embarked upon an ambitious project of community hearings across Southern Ontario to hear from people living in poverty about the challenges they face, challenges made even steeper by recent provincial government policies. “Voices from the Margins” represented ISARC’s fifth round of community hearings since our coalition was formed in 1986. By spring 2020, ISARC had held ten community meetings in seven communities, with still more in the works.

Yet, before these plans could come to fruition, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, plunging the world into uncertainty and pushing those on the margins into even greater precarity.

Through a year of “normal times” and the past year of pandemic, our coalition has continued to advocate on behalf of Ontarians living in poverty, voicing our concerns about the impacts of provincial budgets, legislation, and policies on the most marginalized of our neighbours. Though we have been unable to meet in person, we have successfully shifted online, hosted successful virtual events, presented advocacy briefs via Zoom, and upgraded our website to be more accessible and user-friendly.

Indeed, the past year has shown that our united voices are needed more than ever. As we move forward into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, ISARC will continue to speak out for investing in the income, workplace, and housing security of vulnerable Ontarians as a pathway to recovery for all. We thank our member communities for their support and invite you to be part of our work.

# Advocacy Highlights 2019

From January 2019 through February 2020, ISARC's advocacy focused primarily on resisting provincial cuts to social assistance and other programs that would adversely affect low-income Ontarians. In January 2019 ISARC's Chair, the Rev. Susan Eagle, was quoted in the Catholic Register voicing ISARC's concerns about higher claw-back rates on earned income for social assistance recipients, as well as proposals to change the definition of disability for eligibility to the Ontario Disability Support Program.

ISARC was represented by Rabbi Shalom Schachter in provincial strategy meetings for the Campaign for \$15 and Fairness, and by the Rev. Alex Wilson and the Rev. Susan Eagle on a provincial roundtable on Social Assistance.

During the provincial budget process, ISARC member Murray MacAdam presented our pre-budget brief at a hearing in Peterborough.

After the provincial budget was released in April 2019, ISARC joined the Advocacy

Centre for Tenants Ontario and other advocacy organizations in speaking out against cuts to Legal Aid and the resultant denial of access to justice for vulnerable and low-income Ontarians. ISARC also joined in the "Stop the Cuts Coalition" to save the Transition Child Benefit, a struggle that was ultimately successful in October 2019 when the province cancelled its proposed cut to the program.

## Gillese Public Inquiry

In January 2019, Rabbi Shalom Schachter continued to represent ISARC in Phase 2 consultations of the Public Inquiry into the Safety and Security of Residents in the Long Term Care Homes System. The report of this inquiry by the Honorable Eileen Gillese was released on July 31, 2019 and included many of ISARC's recommendations on staffing levels, working conditions, and care for residents of long term care homes in Ontario.

ISARC's recommendations to the Gillese Commission inquiry were echoed in our November 2019 submission to the provincial Standing Committee on General Government on Bill 124 regarding public sector compensation. Again, Rabbi Shalom Schachter represented ISARC at the Standing Committee on Bill 124.

# Voices from the Margins

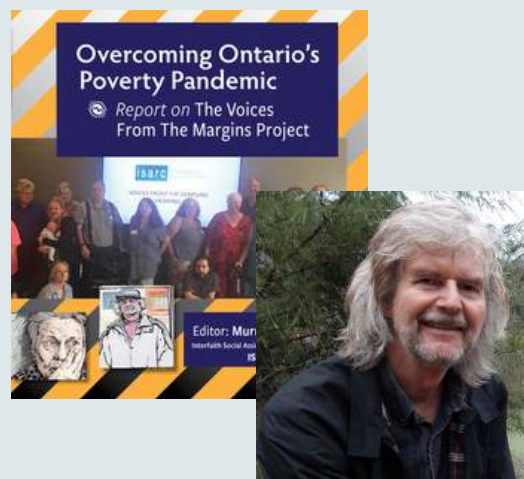


Two photos of the Hearing in Kingston, ON

In April 2019 ISARC launched its fifth round of community hearings on poverty in Ontario with a hearing in Kingston, Ontario. Over the following months, similar hearings were hosted in Brockville, Peterborough, Orillia, Hamilton/Niagara region, Kitchener, and Toronto. In each hearing, faith leaders, advocates and other community members were invited to engage in deep listening as participants with lived experience of poverty described their life situation, the obstacles and challenges they face on a regular basis, and whether their situations have improved or worsened in recent years. On the principle that people are the true experts on their own life experience, participants were also invited to offer recommendations for changes that would make a measurable difference to their lives.

Further hearings were planned for spring of 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no in-person events could be held. Instead, ISARC's Murray MacAdam sent follow-up surveys to Voices hearing organizers, asking them to report on how the pandemic had affected the lives of low-income people in their communities. The stories they sent back confirmed the harsh impacts of lower incomes in terms of rising food insecurity and greater risk of eviction and homelessness. Social isolation has also increased as drop-ins and community meal programs were shuttered or moved to take-out due to pandemic restrictions.

ISARC is grateful to all who supported the Voices from the Margins project through donations, organizing hearings, and taking part as participants and rapporteurs.



The full report of the project, edited by Murray MacAdam, was published as *Overcoming Ontario's Poverty Pandemic* in early 2021 and is available for purchase from ISARC's website:

<https://isarc.ca/bookstore/>



# Religious Leaders Forum 2019



*Catholic Bishop Douglas Crosby, addressing the plenary*

ISARC's annual Religious Leaders Forum at Queen's Park in November 2019, ***Marginalized Ontario: Listening to our Neighbours***, included reports from Voices from the Margins rapporteurs and participants in Kingston, Peterborough, and Hamilton/Niagara, as well as a hearing for Toronto participants. Many of the Hamilton/Niagara participants had experienced a brief reprieve from poverty through the short-lived Basic Income Pilot, and spoke feelingly of the way in which that program had improved their lives. "I could afford to live again," said Alana Baltzer of Hamilton. Unfortunately, the cancellation of the pilot project left many recipients worse off than they had been before.

The 2019 Forum attracted nearly 70 attendees and 7 MPPs from all four parties.

Forum participants received a package including an updated ISARC brochure and information on current initiatives. After the presentations, attendees discussed how to take the recommendations from the Voices project forward in renewed advocacy.



*Afternoon Working Groups*



*ISARC member Rev. Alex Wilson asks a question during the morning plenary session.*

# Advocacy Highlights 2020

2020 began, like any other year, with ISARC's pre-budget submission to the provincial government. ISARC members Greg DeGroot-Maggetti and Danny Bourne prepared the budget brief, "Mobilizing Ontario's Resources to Serve All Its People." Danny Bourne also prepared ISARC's submission to the provincial poverty reduction strategy consultations in early 2020.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no provincial budget was presented in spring 2020. As the first wave of COVID-19 advanced, it rapidly became clear that the impact of the pandemic fell most heavily on the most vulnerable in Ontario: residents of long-term care, low-wage essential workers, and people living in poverty and homelessness. In April 2020 ISARC wrote to the provincial Cabinet Ministers calling for affordable childcare and adequate supplies of PPE to essential workers, a moratorium on evictions and rent increases for the duration of the pandemic, and the provision of vacant hotel rooms to supply room and board to homeless individuals. ISARC also wrote to the federal government urging an expansion of

the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a freeze on internet rate hikes, as well as the implementation of a federal \$15 minimum wage and the creation of a national basic income program.

On May 6, 2020, the Ontario Health Coalition released a report showing a significantly higher death rates from COVID-19 in for-profit long term care homes compared to non-profit and municipal long term care homes, based on research conducted by ISARC's Rabbi Shalom Schachter. Following up on these concerns, ISARC wrote to Premier Ford and the Minister of Long-Term Care Merillee Fullerton, calling on the provincial government to fully implement the recommendations from the Gillese Inquiry, especially those related to staffing of long term care homes, and making recommendations for Ontario's Long Term Care Commission. Over 150 faith leaders endorsed this letter.

In June 2020, ISARC members Murray MacAdam and Rabbi Shalom Schachter wrote an article for Our Times magazine calling for protections for front-line workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, ISARC actively participated in online consultations on provincial legislation. In June 2020, Rabbi Shalom Schachter appeared on behalf of ISARC before the Standing Committee on the Legislative

Assembly on Bill 175, the “Connecting People to Home and Community Care Act.” ISARC’s submission raised concerns about transferring key provisions regarding home and community care from statute to regulation, resulting in reduced transparency and accountability. The same month, the Rev. Susan Eagle and the Rev. Alex Wilson represented ISARC at the Standing Committee hearings on Bill 184, the “Protecting Tenants and Strengthening Community Housing Act.” ISARC expressed concerns about the erosion of tenants’ rights and fast-tracking of the eviction process, particularly during a pandemic.

ISARC also wrote to Premier Ford in June 2020 calling for the withdrawal of provisions of Bill 161, the “Smarter and Stronger Justice Act,” which would create new barriers to families seeking to launch class action suits against harm done to family members in long term care homes. In November 2020, Rabbi Schachter submitted ISARC’s written

submission on Bill 218, the “Supporting Ontario’s Recovery and Municipal Elections Act,” calling for greater Workplace Safety and Insurance Act protections for workers affected by COVID-19.

ISARC followed up on these concerns in our oral and written submissions to the 2020 Fall Budget. The Rev. Susan Eagle made an oral presentation at the online pre-budget hearings on October 14, and Rabbi Shalom Schachter and Jack Panozzo prepared the written submission. In these submissions, ISARC urged the government to prioritize investing in people as a pathway to economic recovery, calling for a universal basic income, paid sick days, supporting secure and affordable housing through funding and policy measures, increased pay for front-line workers, increased hours of care in long term care facilities, and increased mental health supports accessible to all Ontarians.

## Website Update

As the world moved online during 2020, ISARC invested in a website overhaul to improve its functionality and make it more attractive and easier to navigate for visitors. The new website was developed by Artistic License Creative, with further additions and ongoing management by our administrator Natasha Fransblow. It was launched on October 31, 2020, shortly before the fall Religious Leaders’ Forum.



# Virtual Religious Leaders Forum 2020

On November 25, 2020, ISARC held its first virtual Religious Leaders Forum, bringing together some 57 participants from across Ontario, as well as several from Alberta and Newfoundland. MPPs representing Ontario’s three Opposition parties also attended the Forum; no government MPPs attended, despite invitation from ISARC. The Very Rev. Honorable Lois Wilson, former Senator and former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, brought the theological reflection.

The theme, “Achieving a Livable Income in Ontario,” featured two keynote speakers: Sheila Regehr of the Basic Income Canada Network and Jamie Swift, former

ISARC executive member, author and activist. Both speakers noted the increased interest in Basic Income since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as more and more Canadians have experienced economic insecurity and have benefitted from the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB). Breakout sessions focused on the lived experience of participants in Ontario’s Basic Income Pilot project, the benefits of Basic Income, and how to advocate for Basic Income before government and within faith communities.

A recording of the Virtual Forum is available on ISARC’s website and YouTube channel.



*Rev. Lois Wilson*



*Sheila Regehr*



*Jamie Swift*

## Financial Summary

2019		2020	
Opening Balance	\$33,190.71	Opening Balance	\$31,612.01
Revenue	\$20,632.76	Revenue	\$27,418.73
Expenses	\$22,211.46	Expenses	\$17,604.20
Closing Balance	\$31,612.01	Closing Balance	\$41,416.54

# 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](http://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.

## **Bi-Annual Report: 2019-2020**

**ISARC - Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition**

Email: [coordinator@isarc.ca](mailto:coordinator@isarc.ca)  
Website: <http://www.isarc.ca/>

