



Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

News Release – March 31, 2009

Prayer at Queen's Park

Faith groups remember elected public officials weekly as part of the Sunday liturgies and meditations.

In March 2009, the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) had a daily prayer vigil in front of Ontario's legislative building Queen's Park. The prayers were offered Monday through Thursday from 9:00 to 4:00 while the Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs) were at work. Prayers also remembered the many Ontarians who struggled with low wage work or were on social assistance. Because of the recession, prayers also focused on recently unemployed workers.

The tent in front of the steps to Queen's Park welcomed Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Unitarian, Buddhist, and other religious leaders. Daily some people who heard about the vigil and were low income would stop by the tent. Faith groups came from London, Kingston, Niagara, Peel, Toronto, Waterloo Region, and many other areas. Prayers were always ecumenical and often interfaith as different groups joined together.

Bishops, Rabbis, Imams, Monks, Pastors, Chaplains, and Priests led prayers and worship. Mennonite Central Committee Ontario had a staff meeting in Toronto and joined the prayers at the tent over the noon hour. The Reconstructionist Jewish synagogue had members participating several times. Catholic and United Church members from Newmarket brought lower income participants from their weekly suppers for a day of prayers.

On March 18th, "Put Food on the Table" coalition brought soup for more than two hundred people who gathered. Ontario's regional medical officers of health determined that it was impossible on social assistance or low wages to provide rent and nutritious food. The request to the government was for a Healthy Food Supplement of \$100 per month per adult.

One does not know how prayers work! Many MPPs have expressed appreciation for prayer. Participants in the prayers and worship have been moved by the times of prayer, feeling in solidarity with MPPs, the poor, and others who pray. Leaders speak of it being a pilgrimage to have come to the vigil.

For the past two years, a 25 in 5 Coalition – meaning 25% reduction in poverty in 5 years – has had success in persuading the provincial government to establish an Ontario Child Poverty Reduction Strategy. The coalition includes ISARC. Studies have been completed over the past two years showing how people become trapped in poverty, how poverty hurts all Ontarians, and how poverty can be eliminated.

Unfortunately, the provincial budget announced on March 26th did not contain significant additional monies to eliminate poverty. It did include money for affordable housing and an increase to the Ontario Child Benefit. Childcare subsidies will be reduced at the end of 2009, no new funds were included. Increases to social assistance were only 2%, which is the Cost of Living. The Healthy Food Benefit of \$100 per month was not included; social assistance recipients will not be able to pay rent and have a healthy diet.

So does prayer work? Yes, in the commitment of participants to walk in solidarity with those with the lowest incomes. Yes, as faith groups come together to pray for others. Yes, as MPPs feel the support and challenge of the faith communities to be responsible for the unemployed, those with low wage jobs, and those on social assistance. Yes, as people with low incomes hear the call for compassion and justice. Yes, as people of different faiths and communities learn to eat and to pray together. Yes, in ways we do not understand.

The politicians and the poor have not been forgotten. ISARC, faith groups, and coalitions need a time to reflect and then continue to challenge our governments to care for children and adults with low incomes. The poverty cycle can be broken. A social safety net needs to be re-built, especially in a recession. Government resources are needed.

While many have been praying to God, God also challenges those who pray to be people of action, compassion, and justice. Prayer does work.

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To catch a flavour of the Vigil, feel free to go to our website at www.isarc.ca to see pictures, video, and the accounts of each day.