

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition's
Religious Leaders Forum
Queen's Park, Toronto
April 30, 2009

Presentation by Michael Creek, Voices on the Street in Toronto

I found myself homeless, and hopelessly lost to the ravages of poverty. I can tell you that those years of living in poverty caused me more harm than the cancer or the abuse that I went through as a child, nothing in my life had prepared me for the humiliation and the shame that poverty brings into our lives.

My life had become a nightmare; I became isolated alone with my despair unable to find anything good about life. Then I found Voices on the Street in Toronto and went through their training program and slowly I felt a purpose to my life, that I was important, that I could make a difference for others, that we could effect change.

The importance of building bridges and friendship as leaders can never be underestimated.

We have a wealth of knowledge when as leaders we unite and put our skills to work. We build trust in each other; we network and share our connections freely.

This building of bridges is fundamental in making changes; it is so much easier to sit down with policy people and government officials when you work together. You don't have to like someone to work with them, if you treat each other with respect and try to understand where others are coming from you will build success.

None of our social programs give you the resources that you need to live. Poverty was my constant companion, I went to bed with it and I woke up with it. Poverty steals from your soul leaving you with little or no hope. It robs you of all that can be good in life. It leaves you isolated, lonely and hungry and that is just the start of it. Every day, every minute was a struggle to keep a little dignity.

I see people in my community of Regent Park suffering from illnesses, cast aside by society, their governments. Thousands use the food banks; children go to schools hungry everyday. Think of the damage this causes to the children. Think of how a parent feels when there is no food to give their children; this is a reality for many in my community. Children from poor communities are more likely to fail in the education system. Youth who are poor are more likely to fall victim to gangs and crimes. The birth of a poor child is the start of a life often filled with deprivation.

There can be no dignity for the person if you live in poverty, the health and social effects of poverty will slowly kill you. The social isolation of poor people in neighbourhoods only magnifies the social crisis in which people in poverty find themselves.