

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC e-Newsletter, November 2009

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2010 Social Audit: A Faith Community Assessment of the Status of Poverty in Ontario

ISARC is mobilizing again to provide opportunities for the most vulnerable of our society to tell their stories of living in poverty.

In 2010, Hearings will take place across Ontario as part of ISARC's Social Audit. This Social Audit seeks to communicate the social effects of the current Ontario government's policies and actions towards people living in poverty and our society as a whole.



Find out how you can get involved: <http://isarc.ca/socialaudit2010.html>

ISARC Multifaith Forum on Faith Communities and Advocacy with Governments, October 29, Waterloo - by Karen Kuhnert

Karen is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and a graduate of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Karen was born and raised in northern Alberta and spent seven years in Inuvik, NWT, before moving to Waterloo.

ISARC's Multifaith Forum, on the topic of advocacy with governments from different faith perspectives, drew a group of engaged people to the Wilfred Laurier University campus on October 29.



Participants heard from panelists Idrisa Pandit, Muslim Social Services of Kitchener Waterloo; Deba Mitra Bhikku, Buddhist monk, Phommaviharam Buddhist Temple, Kitchener; The Rev. Jessica P. Rodela, First Unitarian Church, Kitchener; and, The Rev. Dr. David Pfrimmer, Principal and Dean of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Brice Balmer, ISARC Director, moderated the event.

David Pfrimmer began by setting out a framework for understanding Christian and faith-based advocacy within the historical Canadian context. He pointed out that advocacy helps keep the *public commons* open for *collective decisions* that support the *common good*, rather than the personal or private interests of individuals, corporations, governments and non-governmental organizations. He went on to say that in every era of our nation's story (from nation-state to national corporation to Canada as community) churches and faith-based groups have been influential. Some politicians have even said participation is a *responsibility* that goes with the enjoyment of *religious rights*. Ethicists have argued that not participating is “abdicating moral agency” and thereby undermining the public good.

Jessica Rodela spoke to the specific theological and logistical challenges and opportunities for advocacy by Unitarian-Universalists. Unitarian-Universalists do not confess a common creed but are committed to working for the good of people in the local community in whatever beliefs they authentically hold. This gets extended to ever-larger group efforts for common justice. She explained that since “the personal” and “the political” are inextricably linked, working for the

advancement of people and politics is a form worship, prayer, and praise.

Idrisa Pandit reframed the notion of perceived Islamic positions on specific political issues. She reminded the audience that Muslims come from diverse ethno-cultural realities, which, as is true for all citizens, shapes political understandings and guides actions. So there are a variety of Islamic positions on different issues. She then outlined a number of root-causes and reasons why Muslim newcomers to Canada tend to avoid political engagement, the primary being not feeling as if it is a safe to engage in this way. From her experience, doing hands-on social services work with people in her community and advocacy at government levels is as essential as worship and prayer. Her challenge, despite the fears, is to lift up the need for justice work among men and women in her community.

Deba Mitra Bhikku provided insight into Buddhist understandings of government and personal engagement in political action. He explained the Buddhist notion of the Wheel of Righteousness – that the government must be committed to just principals of governance and others must ensure that the government remains committed. Inspired by the notion of the “Wheel“, participants encouraged each other to frame advocacy not only in terms of "what we are against” and “what should be” but also in terms of “what we’re for” and “what could be”.

After lunch, participants and panelists discussed the challenges of advocacy for faith communities. It was observed that politicians often make assumptions about faith-based groups, presuming their concerns are just confined to “traditional” moral matters and not issues like poverty or the environment. Faith communities, through patience and persistence, need to let elected officials know that we offer deep resources and alternative solutions for the sake of the public good. Much good could come from visiting politicians together, getting to know each other and clarifying assumptions. This would serve both the pastoral as well as prophetic calling of our faith communities.

ISARC’s Prayer Vigil at Queen’s Park in March was held up as an example of this. It advanced relationships between members of different faith traditions and between faith communities and provincial politicians. ISARC’s plans for another Social Audit next Spring was seen as another example. Because of its connections within Ontario faith communities, ISARC brings a wealth of expertise, analytical talent, and connections that will allow it to make a significant and unique contribution to the reduction of poverty in Ontario.

Participants concluded that our faith communities have deep resources and gifts to “expect something different”, to change what is considered normal and not to accept the continued increase in use of food banks, falling wages and benefits, and the growing gap between the rich and poor in our Province.

To view pictures: <http://isarc.ca/multifaithforumOct09.html>

Queen’s Park forum draws 100 people to push for housing

By Murray MacAdam

Ontario’s deepening housing crisis took centre stage at a Queen’s Park forum sponsored by the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) on November 5 that drew 100 people to learn more about the issues and to push for action.

Working for affordable housing is “the work of faith”, said Parkdale-High Park MPP Cheri DiNovo, who is also a United Church Minister. “Things have never been worse” in terms of the affordable housing shortage, she added, noting that 130,000 households in Ontario are on waiting lists for low-cost housing.



ISARC Director, Brice Balmer also underscored how people of faith are responding to the issue from their religious values. “We have a vision of wholeness and community,” he said. “Embedded in my theology is that all people should live with dignity. Why are the essentials of food and clothing not being met for so many people?”

The forum brought together people of faith to hear from experts and propose ways to improve Ontario’s housing situation. Representatives of all three major parties also addressed the forum.

Connie Harrison brought the urgency of the issue with a searing first-hand account of her battle with homelessness while caring for a disabled son. “At one point I was living in a trailer and my husband was bringing in water,” she said. Now she lives in Toronto’s St. Jamestown neighbourhood, which faces severe problems, including poorly maintained buildings and social isolation. “We’ve had so many deaths in public housing. I saw all the suicides. We need lots of housing.”

It’s time for people of faith to take a tougher stance with government on the housing issue, said Ms Harrison. “You guys are too nice sometimes.”

Sharad Kerur from the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, representing 400,000 Ontario tenants, noted that in some ways the situation is actually getting worse, referring to the net loss of 14,000 rental units in the province between 1996 and 2006.

Yet housing success stories were also conveyed, with people speaking enthusiastically of successful housing co-operatives in Mississauga and Kitchener that both provide decent housing and nurture a sense of community among residents.

Again and again the forum heard of the need to keep the pressure up on governments. Because of competing government priorities, funding for affordable housing sometimes gets squeezed out, said Harvey Cooper, from the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada. “Government does

not have to build the housing,” he said, “but it has to enable the partners that can build it”, such as co-operatives and non-profit developers.

Brian Eng from the Wellesley Institute and the Affordable Housing Network of Ontario also affirmed the key role that government has to play. He applauded the role played by voluntary organizations such as Habitat for Humanity in providing low-cost housing, but added: “We need government to do significant investing. There’s no way around it.”

The Ontario government is currently carrying out a public consultation process to develop a long-term housing strategy for the province, leading to a report to be issued next spring. MPP Mario Sergio, parliamentary assistant to Housing Minister Jim Watson, described affordable housing as “a cornerstone of poverty reduction.”

Mr. Sergio noted the steps taken by the government to help low-income people with their housing needs, including the building of nearly 15,000 units of affordable housing in recent years, 35,000 rent supplements and a rent bank that has helped 21,000 families avoid eviction by providing emergency loans to pay rent arrears.

For proceedings and pictures: <http://isarc.ca/religiousleadersforumNov09.html>

Redeemer University College student postcard campaign for affordable housing

One of the highlights of ISARC’s Religious Leaders’ Forum on November 5 was a presentation by students from Redeemer University College on their affordable housing Narrow the Gap postcard campaign, which you can download and distribute amongst your own community. The students delivered the postcards to the Premier's Office that day.

A Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy for Ontario



The Ontario government is developing a new, long-term housing strategy to make it easier for Ontario families to find and maintain affordable housing.

Between now and December 31, 2009, you have the opportunity to provide input. You can share your ideas in a variety of ways:

- complete the online questionnaire,
- review the Long-Term Affordable Housing Consultation Document,
- and/or send in your opinion to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Go to: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page6405.aspx>

ISARC intends to have a submission ready by early December, which will post on our website.

Five benchmarks for social assistance

By Pat Capponi and Jennefer Laidley (members of the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction)
Ontario's fiscal woes come as bad news for the growing number of Ontarians dealing with the fallout from the recent economic storm.

Toronto Star, October 27, 2009. Go to: <http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/716446>

Can we have an adult conversation about taxes?

By Pat Capponi and Jennefer Laidley (members of the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction)
At the risk of insulting a generation of 4-year-olds, it's time we had an adult conversation in Canada about taxes and public services.

Toronto Star, October 26, 2009. Go to: <http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/715565>

ISARC has new contact information

Some of you, or people in your community, are still sending mail or email to ISARC's old addresses. Please ensure that you use the correct addresses below:

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