

## NEVER GIVE UP!

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS FOR ISARC'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS' FORUM  
ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, JUNE 2, 2010

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*The following reflection was presented at the all-Ontario ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum on the 2010 Social Audit at St. Michael's University at the University of Toronto on June 2, 2010. David Pfrimmer is a former chairperson of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) and served for over twenty years as the Director of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy. He is the Principal Dean and Professor of Christian ethics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Waterloo, Ontario.*



### **A Prayer**

*I invite you to join me in praying in your own tradition as I pray in mine.*

Knock Knock! You know it is us Lord. We are back again just as we have been before. We have come from all directions – the North, the South, the East and the West.

Knock Knock! You know it is us Lord. Yes we are the same bunch that has been here before asking for your help, pleading for your support, begging that you might make another world.

Knock Knock! You know it is us Lord. Yes Lord we demanding bread for the hungry, a home for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, and place to belong for the travelers with not destination.

Knock Knock! You know it is us Lord. Yes Lord it is your warring, dysfunctional and conflicted family asking for Peace, Shalom, Salam for the broken parts of your creation that need the balm of your healing and the hope of reconciliation.

Knock Knock! You know it is us Lord. Yes it is your weak and cowardly ones, who need your courage and your strength for our leaders, our neighbours, our friends and most of all us.

Knock Knock! You know us Lord. Walk with us awhile this day that we might trod the paths untrodden, climbs the hills that challenge, and gaze with you upon the possibilities you have for us and your Creation. Amen.

### **Nothing New**

In thinking about today, I was struck by how some things do not seem to change very much when it comes to hunger, homelessness, and poverty.

*The poor are invisible, they have no public voice, they do not take place in the organized life of the community. They have little hope of Advancement. They represent Canada's*

*“Third Solitude”*. This was shared at the time of the famous Montreal Conference on Poverty that supported the creation of the Canada Assistance Plan. (Report of La Conseil du Travail de Montreal in 1965. *Churches Where the Action Is!* By Stewart Crysdale. United Church Publishing House 1966, p.105)

Some things do not seem to change very much do they?

I remember one of the first projects I was involved in was a Church Leader’s Letter on Poverty. United Church Moderator Dr. Clark MacDonald and I were charged with the responsibility of writing a letter for the signatures of Canadian Church Leaders. The text would be as timely and urgent today as it was then 1983.

Some things do not seem to change very much do they?

The Globe and Mail reported,

*“The fabric of the social safety net is being torn apart and the Progressive Conservatives are to blame, a coalition of Canadian Church leaders says...”* (Globe and Mail October 13, 1993).

Some things do not seem to change very much do they?

Since Canada began to industrialize in the early parts of the last century, and the country began to face the social costs of urbanization, churches and subsequently other faith groups have been working to redress the reality of poverty amidst the affluence of this country. Sometimes it can feel like not much has changed, not much progress has been made, that we are going backward and not forward.

For low income people and those who accompany them in calling for changes in public policies and government programs, it might seem that the Apostle Saint Jude Thaddeus one of Jesus disciples (“The Miraculous Saint”) and known to Roman Catholics as the Patron Saint of “lost causes”, might well be the icon of anti-poverty movements these days.

### **Our Moment Today**

Our communities are in distress. We all know the symptoms of our social crisis – predatory greed and markets run amok, financial collapse for thousands and bailouts and bonuses for the few, real estate markets on steroids and a homelessness emergency in most of our cities with less visible suffering in rural communities and First Nations, declining incomes and increased debt for families while the net worth of the top 10% seemingly has no limits, social exclusion, crumbling social infrastructure, not to mention the groaning of all creation under the ecological crisis is on our door step, most recently manifested again horrifically in the ecological disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. We all know these challenges. Today is about naming them yet again.

In the face of these huge challenges, there seems to be a hardening of our institutions to

human suffering and need. Our political landscape today seems pretty desolate. We have become a *national corporation* and less a *national community*. We have entered a political ice age that has sucked dry the very hope that a more just alternative world is possible.

Our elected leaders, many of who enter public life for the most noble of intentions, seem to be paralyzed in political parties that have lost their value footings and direction. We have conservative parties who do not conserve our communities, liberal parties stalled on the highway of progress for the lack of new ideas, and social democratic parties where solidarity is insufficient to change anything.

As our common life seems to unravel and our social cohesion seems more precarious, we are witnessing what we might call *deconstructive entitlement*. Everyone is entitled to what they want, when they want it with little or no attention no attention what we all need.

It is the “Universe of Me” or as my friend Gerry Vandezande once observed “It is about Just Us not Justice.” Walter Bruggemann once described this as “the royal consciousness” where those in power, position or wealth thought they were entitled to what they could grab for themselves with no responsibilities for others.

That is why days like today are so important ...to summon us back to a re-enchantment of sorts with a commitment to the public in our public life.

That is why days like today are so important to nurture a re-enchantment with the “public” in public responsibility, to remind us of the fundamental religious conviction common to all our faith traditions that “No one is anyone without everyone else!”

How can we maintain hope for justice amidst the persistent grind of this struggle when hope seems to evade us and to be ever further from our reach?

Let me offer a few glimpses of what I found seemed to sustain people facing huge struggles for justice.

### **Stories Matter**

Telling our story is important and hearing those stories is important. Stories are important because they remind us who we are. I tell stories over and over again not because people haven't heard them, though that is important, but because they remind me of who I am. The Social Audit isn't what we hoped it would be – a way for governments to hold themselves to a higher standard just like they do with financial audits. The Liberal Party once upon a time adopted this idea but it seems to have evaporated these days. Stories are important because when we listen – really listen to them – they can be a profound affirmation that those who have not been heard matter. Stories have the power to break the tyranny of the “solitudes”.

### **Relationships Matter**

Not so many years ago, Gustavo Gutierrez was in Toronto. In reflecting on his *Theology of Liberation*, he noted that analysis was important as was theological reflection, but he went on to say how he learned how friendship is vitally important to the work of liberation. I was often surprised in various organizations, how deep passion for the cause, rendered us some emotionally unintelligent with each other. Very bright and intelligent people who wanted to save the world, who could not get along with each other. Make time to build friendships.

### **Sin Matters**

This is the tricky one. I am not talking about sex here. I am talking about all those things that separate us from each other and from God. We are fragile people who often do not do the good we want to do and do what we often don't want to do. In our advocacy for justice, we need to be mindful – dare I say humble enough – to realize what our elected leaders describe as “the politics of unintended consequences”. Every action we take that seems right, good, and just, contains within it the seeds of future injustice. That's in large part why we will always be at it and we need to be always open our minds to change.

### **Critical Self Reflection Matters**

Faith groups need to be self-critical. We do need to earn public moral credibility. We are no longer above question even if it seems unfair. We also need leaders prepared to re-energize the ecumenical movement and who are committed to building a multi-faith movement.

### **Never Give Up**

At the Seminary where I am we have a choir called Inshallah, which sings songs and hymns from our churches in the Global South. One song I particularly like is called Bambelayla – “Never Give Up.” Maybe you have heard it. There are many stories about why it was composed. One has it that it was sung while people rode the grossly over crowded trains during the darkest days of apartheid. South Africa has suffered tremendously with the HIV/Aids pandemic. The song is often used when someone is told of his or her health status. The community, often women, gathers around and sings it over and over again. “Never Give Up” might just be a word for us ... it might be our word when we get discouraged ...

**Let's try and sing it together ...**