

the Catalyst

Citizens for Public Justice

Spring 2021

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Basic Income Is One Spoke in the Wheel

By Natalie Appleyard

At CPJ we have always maintained that an end to poverty in Canada can only be attained through a suite of comprehensive, rights-based policies. Poverty must be addressed as a matter of health, employment, education, food security, housing, and income. But even more fundamentally, it must be addressed as a matter of human rights and dignity.

To end poverty, we need a comprehensive suite of universally-accessible public programs, regulatory standards, and fair taxation. No one program or sector can do this alone, including basic income. Income alone cannot solve a lack of housing stock or childcare spaces. It cannot replace supportive, culturally responsive, professional services. Advocates of basic income agree that adequate income must be provided in tandem with other rights-based policies and programs to ensure people get the supports that meet their needs.

The experiences of people who were

given a chance to try a basic income should not be easily dismissed. Participants in the 2017-2018 Ontario pilot program speak of a sense of dignity, hope, and freedom from chronic stress. Feeling like they had room to breathe, being able to care for their basic needs while also investing in their futures. To acknowledge the power of this one program is not to negate the need for other social services. Rather, it speaks to the dire need for change from our typical models of social assistance.

CPJ believes that basic income is a powerful policy tool in changing not only people's incomes, but our whole economic system.

Our current patchwork system of social assistance programs varies greatly from one province or territory to another. There are a few commonalities, however. None of them provide an adequate income. All of them have eligibility criteria that force claimants to jump through hoops to

prove themselves "deserving." This leaves many in need with no assistance at all. Far from honouring the inherent rights or dignity of all people, we hear from many applicants that they feel shamed, denigrated, and treated like criminals.

Among its many ills, social assistance as it exists today perpetuates the idea that people should just "get off welfare and get a job." Yet at the same time, it is financially perilous to return to work because of aggressive clawback rates on any earned income. This, combined with poor labour standards and a lack of access to health insurance and affordable childcare, means many people simply cannot afford to go back to work. The choice between a minimum wage job with no health insurance and increased travel and childcare costs versus inadequate social assistance with some health insurance and perhaps fewer expenses traps many in poverty.

...continued on page 3

In Review

On the Hill

Following our October 2020 *Chew on This!* campaign, Dignity for All partners met with staffers for Minister for Women and Gender Equality **Maryam Monsef** in November and for Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations **Carolyn Bennett** in February to share recommendations from our open letter. In January, **Natalie Appleyard**, CPJ's socio-economic policy analyst, attended a meeting of the **All Party Anti-Poverty Caucus** focusing on basic income.

In December, CPJ's executive director **Willard Metzger** joined faith leaders from across Canada for a virtual meeting with Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau** on the theme of the contributions of faith communities in a pandemic. The meeting was co-hosted by the **Canadian Council of Churches**, the **Canadian Interfaith Conversation**, and the **Canadian Multifaith Federation**.

Along with colleagues in the **Ecumenical Circle on the UN Declaration**, CPJ wrote to Justice Minister **David Lametti** in support of Bill C-15, the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act." Minister Lametti later invited CPJ's executive director **Willard** and leaders of national churches and faith-based organizations for a meeting to discuss the bill in more detail.



CPJ's team of policy analysts met with independent Senator **Rosa Galvez** (above) on January 8 to discuss the Senator's white paper, "Building Forward Better: A Clean and Just Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic." They talked about the connections between health, environmental, and social issues, and how they could best all work towards a more just and caring Canada.

The For the Love of Creation Advocacy Group (**Ryan Weston** of the Anglican Church of Canada; **Naomi Johnson** of Canadian Foodgrains Bank; **Joe Gunn** of Centre Oblat; and CPJ's senior policy analyst **Karri Munn-Venn**) met with Liberal MP **Nathaniel Erskine-Smith** on January 19 to discuss the policy proposals raised in the 2020 For the Love of Creation petition that was sponsored by Erskine-Smith.

Along with partners at Campaign 2000, **Natalie** met with staffers for Opposition Leader **Erin O'Toole** in January; MP **Salma Zahid** in February; and NDP Leader **Jagmeet Singh** and MP **Leah Gazan** in March, calling for CERB repayment amnesty for low-income earners.

Virtual Presentations

Karri joined our partners **Faith and the Common Good** and **Ecology Action Centre** to present as a part of **Climate Action Network Canada's** Pathways to Zero webinar series. She and **Beth Lorimer** of **KAIROS Canada** shared information on For the Love of Creation and our joint faith-in-action campaign.

On February 22, **Karri** presented on the panel "Keeping Up the Pressure." The event, organized by the **Parliament of World Religions**, explored the important role that faith communities play in demanding greater ambition from national governments headed into the COP26 climate talks.

In March, CPJ's refugee rights policy analyst **Stephen Kaduuli** and Deacon **Rudy Ovcjak** of the Archdiocese of Toronto presented a webinar on the rights of environmental migrants.

Climate Advocacy

CPJ and our partners in For the Love of Creation submitted an open letter to Minister of Environment and Climate Change **Jonathan Wilkinson** urging him to immediately strengthen Bill C-12, the "Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act," which was introduced in mid-November.

In December, CPJ joined a group of ecumenical leaders in signing on to a letter, organized by **Christian Peacemaker Teams**, expressing our support for the **Haudenosaunee Land Defenders at 1492 Land Back Lane**.

In the wake the cancellation of the Keystone XL Pipeline, CPJ joined Indigenous leaders and social justice organizations in January to call on Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau** to cancel the Trans Mountain Pipeline and follow-through on commitments to bring forward a just transition act.

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Citizens for Public Justice's mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing, and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice, and the flourishing of creation.

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...continued from page 1

Basic income pilot projects, on the other hand, show no evidence that people were deterred from working. They provided people with the security to take time away from work to improve education and training so they could seek better jobs. They gradually scaled back their basic income benefits with earned income. The pilots suggest that most people want to work, and will, given the right opportunity. But basic income also supports those outside the workforce and those working part-time, whether for personal reasons or because of care-giving responsibilities.

While our current social assistance programs are clearly flawed, designing a successful basic income program is no simple matter. But the complexity of this task is equal to its potential: by beginning with the premise that all people deserve a guaranteed basic income, whether or not they participate in the labour force, whether or not they have a diagnosed disability, and whether or not they pass some kind of bureaucratic test of worthiness, we change the narrative. We no longer separate people living in poverty into the “deserving” or “undeserving” poor. Instead, we recognize that all members of society have rights.

The process of designing such a program of income security and complementary supports invites us to reimagine how—and why—our economy and labour markets function as a whole. What if our economy valued the contributions to society of unpaid labour, volunteerism, and actual *people* outside the labour market? What if our economy didn't force people to stay trapped in dangerous or underpaid, insecure working conditions just to put food on the table? What if our economy had a built-in stabilizer to support people through times of boom and bust, the transition to a low-carbon economy, and unforeseen environmental or health crises?

Mere tinkering with our existing income support systems will not take us

where we need to go. The good news is that we have some models of success to guide us.

CPJ advocates for a basic income guarantee that builds on the demonstrated success of programs like the Canada Child Benefit, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and Old Age Security. These programs have offered a kind of basic income to parents and seniors, two groups generally deemed “deserving” by society at large. While critical improvements are still needed to expand the eligibility and adequacy of these programs, they have demonstrated measurable improvements to both the incidence and depth of poverty experienced by seniors, parents, and children.

Comparatively, we have seen little change in poverty rates for single adults aged 25 to 64. Many are ineligible for existing benefits or remain trapped in poverty because of the inadequacy of benefits and aggressive clawbacks. CPJ therefore supports the proposal of a basic income guarantee for people aged 16 to 64. The lower age limit is intended to provide support to youth in foster care or wards of the state who are aging out of care.

Recently, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) demonstrated that when the government has the will to deliver income assistance to people across the country, they find a way. The double-edged sword of this initiative was the sharp contrast between the amount deemed necessary for people receiving existing social assistance and disability benefits and the amount offered by the CERB. This kind of disparity is a telling indication that the government believes some people to be more “deserving” or trustworthy when it comes to income assistance. There were also problems to be fixed related to eligibility, clawbacks, and clear communication.

Yet even with some unresolved challenges, the government pivoted based on feedback from communities. The CERB demonstrated the government's ability to

transfer cash quickly to individuals and made clear the benefits of delivering generous, timely income assistance to provide stability and increase resilience, both in terms of economics and public health.

There are many details to be worked out in designing an effective, equitable basic income program, including technical requirements, agreements between federal and other jurisdictions, the amount of income support to be provided, and how to gradually scale it back based on earned income. But Canada has the resources and know-how needed to develop a federally-funded basic income guarantee now. A lot of excellent work is being done by groups like the Basic Income Canada Network, the All Party Anti-Poverty Caucus, and a number of Senators to develop fully-costed models of basic income and suggestions for accompanying legislation. CPJ is proud to support these efforts and to engage in discussions that consider the interconnections between basic income and our policy areas of poverty, climate justice, and refugee rights.

Far from being a silver bullet, we view basic income as one spoke in the wheel, alongside universally-accessible, publicly funded programs; strengthened regulations and minimum standards grounded in human rights; and fairer taxation. Guided by people with lived experiences of poverty, including some who participated in previous basic income pilots, together we are working toward an income security program designed to build equity and honour the rights and dignity of all people.

Let's dream big. Let justice roll!



Natalie Appleyard is CPJ's socio-economic policy analyst.

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Moving Past Climate Inaction

By Lori Neale and Karri Munn-Venn

It has been a full year since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Many of us have spent extended periods in lockdown, under stay-at-home orders, and facing curfews. Not only has the pandemic had alarming impacts on the physical health of far too many, our response too, has created mental strain spurred by economic uncertainty and the burden of extended isolation.

In the midst of this tremendous challenge a large network of Canadian churches and faith-based organizations came together (virtually, of course) to establish **For the Love of Creation – a faith-based climate justice initiative**. We did so in the face of a global crisis for which there is no vaccine: climate change.

More and more, we are aware of the interconnectedness of multiple crises and the need for comprehensive, coordinated, and multi-faceted solutions.

Late in 2020, the federal government announced, “A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy,” Canada’s new climate plan. It includes a commitment to gradually increase the carbon price so that it reaches \$170 per tonne of carbon pollution in 2030 (something CPJ has been advocating for over a number of years). They introduced climate accountability legislation that offers a starting point, but needs significant strengthening to be truly effective. Important legislation relating to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was also introduced, highlighting the importance of the Declaration to reconciliation and the connection between climate impacts and Indigenous rights. Both of these bills look likely to pass into law this spring.

Still, the world is not on track to hold global temperatures to 1.5°C over pre-industrial levels, as committed to in the Paris Agreement. And Canada, which continues to have among the highest per capita

greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, is not doing enough to bring emissions down. Furthermore, Canada has failed to announce any new funds to support climate change adaptation and mitigation measures for communities in the Global South, who, along with those in the Far North, face the greatest burden of climate change.

The huge number of people who marched in the 2019 Climate Strikes is just one indicator of the deep concern and cry for change felt across the churches and society in Canada. Weighed down with this concern, people are often lost with what to do next? What can I do as one person? One family? One faith community? Uncertainty about what to do can lead to despair, isolation, silence, and inaction.

This inaction indicates approval of the status quo for those in government trying to discern the will of the people in the face of the climate emergency. A potentially fatal consequence.

Now, For the Love of Creation is providing a way for people of faith to channel their concern and take action in an effective and focused way towards climate justice.

In February 2021, For the Love of Creation launched its faith-in-action campaign. It is modelled on CPJ’s *Give it up for the Earth!*, which ran every year during Lent from 2017 to 2020. The For the Love of Creation campaign will run until October 4, 2021. It will also include a public witness event on April 22, Earth Day.

Across Canada, individuals will commit to taking action to reduce their GHG emissions, engage in acts of solidarity with justice-seeking communities, and write to federal Cabinet Ministers to call on the Government of Canada to:

- Increase our national GHG emissions reduction target and invest in a just transition to a fair, inclusive, green economy;

- Implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including, but not limited to, the right of free, prior and informed consent; and
- Commit equal support for climate change adaptation and mitigation measures in the Global South.

The campaign has all the elements needed for an easy roll out across the country. Online materials are ready to use in a single faith community or as part of a local ecumenical collaboration. For the Love of Creation’s complementary tools for faithful climate conversations and theological reflection offer opportunities for dialogue and relationship building. All building a stronger base for change, in concert with timely, informed, strategic Ottawa-facing advocacy.

God has gifted churches and faith communities across the land with conviction, talent, and relationships of solidarity. We’re not in this alone and we don’t have to feel stuck. Let’s pull together, speak up, and take action for climate justice!

Join For the Love of Creation’s faith-in-action campaign at cpj.ca/flc-action.

Lori Neale serves as network coordinator for The United Church of Canada General Council Office.



Karri Munn-Venn is CPJ’s senior policy analyst.





Growing Black Political Participation in Canada

By Operation Black Vote Canada

2020 proved to be a challenging year on many fronts. First, we were hit with a devastating pandemic that disproportionately affected the Black community at an alarming rate. Almost simultaneously and under the guise of justice, the world witnessed the horrific murder of a Black man at the hands of police. These two events have catapulted the cause for change as it relates to racism, systemic racism, and anti-Black racism in particular. Never before has North America, not to mention the world, seen more desire for political, legal, and social change regarding anti-Black racism.

But despite these circumstances, not all was lost in 2020. In the United States, Kamala Harris was elected as the first Black, South Asian woman Vice President. Here in Canada, Leslyn Lewis entered the race for leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada and surprised many with the strength and reach of her campaign. A few months later, Annamie Paul won the leadership race for the federal Green Party of Canada, becoming the first Black leader of a national party.

There is now a global movement of citizens from all racial backgrounds calling for immediate change to the status quo regarding anti-Black racism. Since 2004, Operation Black Vote Canada (OBVC) has supported the election of more Black individuals to public office at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. The Black community across North America has proven to have an abundance of learned, experienced, and talented people who would add value to political parties of every stripe and persuasion.

Black political participation is not new in this country. Black political trailblazers—from Lincoln Alexander, who was Canada's first Black Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister to Rosemary Brown who became the first Black women elect-

ed to a Canadian provincial legislature—opened the door that subsequent elected officials walked through. These brave pioneers stepped up and made a difference in the communities they served. Although we have since witnessed political gains in Canada, there is still an under-representation of Black people elected to office and at senior decision-making tables in government.

The problem lies within the political parties' disinclination toward a strategic plan to engage individuals, develop members, and mentor potential candidates within the Black community. Greater political participation among Black Canadians can occur once the community is empowered with the information, tools, and resources that are accessible and tailored specifically to the Black community. This involves organizing training events, summits, and information sessions about the political process to promote civic engagement. OBVC seeks to bridge the gap through various initiatives and by offering regular sessions to help aspiring Black leaders understand political processes like nominations and fundraising, and by providing resources to support a successful political campaign.

We understand the importance of having youth at the table and amplifying their voices when it comes to developing better public policy outcomes on issues they care about. In the spring of 2020, OBVC introduced the 1834 Fellowship, named to honour the year slavery was abolished in Canada.

The first cohort of the 1834 Fellowship included 40 high-achieving Black youth (ages 18 to 25) for an intensive nine-month civic leadership and public policy training program. The aim was to give Fellows hands-on, practical experience and build knowledge around the key issues that policy analysts, policy makers, and

advocacy practitioners face in influencing, developing, and implementing policy. Providing this training for the Fellows not only prepares them for civic leadership roles and supports them in their career development, but it also gives them the inspiration and confidence to take their place in politics and government and influence the policies and legislation that affect our daily lives as Black Canadians.

Building on lessons learned from the 1834 Fellowship, OBVC organized the inaugural 1834 Fellowship Conference in January 2021 that provided opportunities for Black youth to increase their knowledge of civic leadership roles and different career options within public administration. The conference provided non-partisan discussions with Senators, Members of Parliament, and senior bureaucrats in the federal public service along with opportunities to network with other Black youth from across Canada. The second cohort of the 1834 Fellowship will start in the spring of 2021 and will be exclusively for fellows residing in Quebec and Alberta.

As we look ahead in 2021 to greater representation of the Black community in political spaces, stakeholders and decision-makers in these spaces all have a part to play in taking deliberate action to encourage and support Black political participation in Canada. The promise and full potential of Canada can never be fully realized until every community has the access and opportunity to change today and shape tomorrow.

Operation Black Vote Canada is a non-profit and multi-partisan organization that supports the election of Black people to public office. This article was prepared by the Board of Directors.





Measuring, and Ending, Poverty in the North

By Janine Harvey

With the passage of the Poverty Reduction Act in 2019, Canada now uses the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as its official poverty measure. The MBM uses five major components, food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other necessities, to determine who is above, and below, the poverty line.

Now, Statistics Canada is in the process of developing the Northern Market Basket Measure (MBM-N) in order to reflect life and conditions in the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

I have lived in the North my whole life. I now live in Ulukhaktok, a fly-in community in Northwest Territories. To me, living in poverty means no housing or poor housing, overcrowding, no shelters, abuse, addiction, poor hygiene, and poor attendance in education. Our younger generations cannot go to school hungry anymore, you cannot learn on a hungry stomach.

In reviewing the MBM-N, I find it quite surprising that a handful of people can create a metric to figure out how much food I deserve to have in a “basket.” I find it degrading that there is a list provided to me of what I deserve to have, and also the quality of it.

But most of all, fly-in communities such as Ulukhaktok should not be compared to Northern communities that have road access. There is no road access in my community, so we pay for our food to be airlifted. There is a massive price difference in food in comparison between Yellowknife and Ulukhaktok. In my household to feed my family of five costs about \$400 a week. That does not include hygiene products, baby products, or clothing.

Health Canada wants us to follow Canada’s food guide. But how could we possibly do that when the price for fruits, vegetables, meat, and grains are at an alarmingly higher cost here as compared to the rest of Canada?

Budgeting has become a very big part of my daily life after moving back home to Ulukhaktok from Yellowknife. It is not just food. Living in a very remote community means that everything around here is very costly. The price of gas, heating fuel, power, and internet just to name a few. The federal and territorial governments need to look at supplementing the costs of freight for groceries to communities with no road access. The governments need to work with the airlines and local food providers to make sure Northerners have access to healthy food at a reasonable price just like the rest of Canada.

But it’s not just the cost of living. The minimum wage for Northern communities needs to be a lot higher in order to sustain a healthy and comfortable lifestyle.

We also need to be looking at and respecting the Inuit ways of life. The Harvesters Support Grant works for all First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people to sustain our ways of life. Hunting is a big part of Inuit livelihood, and it brings food to the table. But it costs money to travel on the land to hunt.

For example, a three-day hunting trip would cost on average \$800-\$1,000. If you come back to the community unsuccessful, it puts a big dent in your budget. If you come back successful, that would put food on your table for a few months. You would save a lot of money by not having to buy processed meats from the local grocery store. You would have healthier food on your table to feed your family. So, the government needs to invest in this program to honour our Inuit ways of life. It is a healthier way of life and it is a way to keep our culture alive. We talk about decolonization, this is one part of it.

The MBM-N too needs to work with First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people. We should be a part of the team since we are the ones who understand the North and

our unique struggles. In this way, the work of ending poverty can be successful. No decisions should be made for us without us at the table. Our people need to be involved. Governments also need to make improvements on collecting statistics in the North so that we can get accurate counts on poverty.

I see poverty first hand. I’ve seen it my whole life. I see families that are hungry. We know the issues and the problems of the Northwest Territories, so let’s take action and make change to end poverty in the North.

On January 5, 2021, Statistics Canada released “Proposals for a Northern Market Basket Measure and its disposable income.” This paper describes the proposed methodology for estimating the cost of goods and services included in the “basket,” as well as calculating disposable income. This first paper focuses specifically on a measure for the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. A separate study will be conducted for Nunavut.

Janine Harvey is a social advocate and supporter of Inuit culture based Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories.





Migrant Workers are Organizing, and Winning

By Sarom Rho

Over one hundred thousand people, many of them low-waged and racialized workers, faced a crisis atop a crisis in 2020. They were on time-restricted work permits that range from eight months to three years. To qualify for permanent residency, they had to complete a minimum of one year of high-waged work—all before their permits expired. Such jobs are difficult to secure even in the best of circumstances, and almost impossible during COVID-19.

To add to these crises, their work permits are non-renewable, which means they can only get one in their lifetime. Workers were being punished for a pandemic that was not in their control, and every day that passed left them deeper and deeper in crisis.

A campaign began in earnest, led by migrant student workers themselves. We pushed for changes to unfair immigration rules that would stop the deportation of tens of thousands of migrant workers.

Within a year, we won.

Here's what happened.

In March 2020, as COVID-19 was hitting our communities hard, Migrant Students United (MSU) organized online information sessions for current and former international students. In March alone, we connected with over 3,500 migrant student workers who joined in and voiced concerns. Based on these meetings, MSU sent a letter to the federal government in April and launched a petition calling for healthcare, income support, and immigration changes. Over 12,000 people signed on.

From coast to coast, MSU held weekly online meetings with hundreds of student workers between May and July. We shared up-to-date information, identified priorities, and supported student workers to establish local MSU chapters.

Thousands of migrant student

workers on post graduate work permits (PGWPs) met in August and discussed being unable to complete the work experience required for permanent residency status because of unfair and impossible immigration rules. Many had lost their jobs because of COVID-19 or couldn't find work. MSU launched a petition calling on the government to #FixPGWP, demanding renewable work permits, the valuing of all work to count toward permanent residency, and full and permanent immigration status for all. Over 4,000 migrant student workers signed.

On September 12, migrant student workers organized a mass rally outside Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland's office. On September 13, we rallied in Peel. On September 20, we joined rallies in Toronto. Our stories and our calls for urgent change were featured in CBC National, Global News, the Toronto Star, and across multiple major media outlets in Canada. On October 25, we rallied in Toronto and installed a giant work permit at immigration headquarters in downtown Toronto. We sent the Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino a letter, urging him to act quickly and make necessary changes. On November 24, we delivered over 16,000 petitions to Minister Mendicino's office while dozens of student workers and allies took action online. In November, we also postered the Immigration Minister's office and the riding, letting him know that he must stop mass deportations. MSU met with civil servants at Immigration Canada.

Faced with our ongoing organizing, the Immigration Minister committed to taking action in Parliament on December 1. But we didn't stop. In December, we took our voice to the federal cabinet. We postered the offices of ministers Carolyn Bennett, Navdeep Bains, Maryam Monsef, and Carla Qualtrough. Hundreds of migrants and allies called and left messages for the

Immigration Minister.

On January 8, 2021, migrant student workers won a major victory. The federal government responded to our demands and, for the first time in Canadian history, over 52,000 migrant student workers on the PGWP could now apply for another permit and have another chance to qualify for permanent residency.

The fight is not over. Many migrant student workers are in essential jobs, but their work is not valued or counted towards permanent immigration status because it is low-waged and deemed "low-skilled." We have seen through COVID-19 that migrant student workers are doing the work that sustains society and our communities—they are stocking shelves overnight in grocery stores, handling packages at warehouses, cleaning offices and buildings, working in food service, and making deliveries through cold and snow. We will continue to take action so that all our work, and the work that we do as migrant and undocumented people, is valued.

These changes are a result of the tireless organizing that migrant student workers have been leading. Clearly the federal government is responding, and there is more to be done to ensure we have equal rights. Time and time again through the pandemic, it has been evident that for us to have equal rights, we must have equal status. We will continue to organize for full and permanent immigration status for all migrant and undocumented people, without exclusion and without exemption—and we won't stop until all of us win.

Sarom Rho is an organizer with the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change and a leader with Migrant Students United. She also works with Gig Workers United (fka Foodsters United).



Photo: MSU at Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino's office.

Ezrom's Journey from Imprisonment to Empowerment

By Rev. Daniel Cho



Photo: The watchtower at Robben Island. Credit: Amina Elahi/Flickr.

“I still can't *fully* forgive them...” He spoke with a tinge of self-disappointment as he reflected on that nightmarish episode from his past. Ezrom Mokgakala was imprisoned along with Nelson Mandela at the height of the apartheid struggle in South Africa. In one of my last conversations with him he shared with me his lingering doubts about his ability to fully forgive. But even so, as I listened to his story and glimpsed into his soul, I was utterly convinced that he surely survived the ordeal with unparalleled moral courage, dignity, resilience, and grace. Ezrom had indeed forgiven his captors—both institutional and political—just not fully; but that's okay.

Ezrom experienced the horrors of racial violence and injustice. Over time, his journey took him from a place of suffering to healing, from dejection to empowerment, from doubt to hope, and yes—from hatred to forgiveness.

In my previous pastorate, Ezrom walked into my office one bright morning wanting to introduce himself as a newcomer to the church. I was immediately struck by his calmness, gentleness, and humility as he opened up his life to me. I quickly realized I was in the presence of an extraordinary human being.

He told me that at age 22 he was arrested, as were many other black protesters, and sentenced to six years for opposing apartheid, 18 months of which were spent at Robben Island. Conditions were extremely harsh and the treatment brutal. He was required to do daily labour in the quarry. Sixty prisoners occupied a cell and there were regular beatings from which Ezrom still carried the scars. In one interview he stated, “we didn't expect any mercy. I was amazed at how much pain and suffering I could take. It was a very hard time and many of us lost hope.” His fellow prisoners included teachers, law-

yers, and many educated political leaders. When Mandela arrived, the brutalization of the prisoners got worse because of the increased tension. But ironically Ezrom said, “his presence was a real inspiration... it was great to have leaders like him.”

Since his release from prison, Ezrom's whole life was committed to the struggle for freedom for South Africa and to educating the young generation in three continents about justice and equality of all people. Meanwhile he became a lay preacher and eventually settled in Canada in 1983.

The season of Lent invites us to a journey of repentance and forgiveness, and the work of transformation. It's a journey that leads to the cross of Christ; it's central to living out our lives as his disciples. This commitment constantly opens us up and orients us to the wide horizon of God's redemptive work on earth. As fellow travellers on this journey we are called to stewardship. This call stretches to communities, systems, institutions, and the earth itself. It's not limited only to our sense of personal piety but calls us as those forgiven and embraced by God to responsible solidarity with the oppressed and powerless, the weak and disenfranchised, the marginalized and voiceless. In our continuous process of spiritual renewal and transformation of heart, we bring the transformative experience to bear in our social, cultural, and political surroundings, the very fabric of our lives. Together we can forge an opening to co-create a new reality and vision for our own hearts as well as for the world.

Mandela famously said, “as I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”

Make no mistake, Ezrom genuinely forgave his captors. But perhaps lingering feelings and residual memories of the bru-

ality of South African injustice were a reminder of the difficulty of absolute forgiveness, whatever that might mean. Maybe Ezrom was just being too hard on himself. But one thing is for certain: he surely exemplified forgiveness in his life though he personally may have carried some doubt; he cast no shadow of the chains he once bore though occasionally he may have felt their gravity; he too left his hatred behind the prison gates though some residue may remain. And he was absolutely committed to embodying the message of peace, justice, hope and yes, forgiveness for this generation and the next. The life he lived after imprisonment, he lived truly free and forgiven.

The example of Ezrom's life was the closest to true forgiveness I have personally known. He left a far-reaching impact on many lives, certainly mine. Sadly last November he passed away, but his life will be remembered and revered for generations to come both here and in South Africa.

Rest in peace, good and faithful servant. I will miss you, my friend.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to announce good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted; to proclaim freedom to the captives, to let out into light those bound in the dark.

—Isaiah 61:1



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