

Hope for a New Day: Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy Now On the Agenda

By Karri Munn-Venn

Few would think it possible to get excited about the work of a parliamentary committee. Yet, as news came that the report from the *House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of People with Disabilities (HUMA)* had been tabled, hope for a new day dawned.

The HUMA Committee began their major study of the federal role in reducing poverty in Canada in February 2008. Almost three years later, after extensive hearings, deep reflection, and the requisite politicking, the Committee released its final report, *"Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada."*

There is something about the energy around this study that provides reason enough to hope. After all of the previous resolutions, studies, reports, calls to action, and announcements, will *this one* prompt significant and sustained change?

The HUMA report suggests movement in the right direction. It is clear on the need for a plan. And, it identifies significant actions that can – and should – be taken immediately. For this reason, CPJ's Chair, Mark Huyser-Wierenga, has quickly written to ask Minister Diane Finley to thoughtfully adopt the Report's major recommendations. If the public wants this to happen, this Report could mark a new day in the struggle against poverty in Canada.

Urgent action is clearly needed

Officially, at least 3.4 million Canadians live in poverty. However CPJ's research indicates that poverty increased to 4.3 million as a result of the recession. November's *"Hunger Count,"* by Food Banks Canada reported unprecedented historic highs in food bank use (up 9% this past year, after a record-setting increase of 18% in 2009). Also in November, Campaign 2000's *"2010 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty,"* reported that 1 in 10 children still lives in poverty.

Momentum is building

Increased attention by the provinces, local communities,



Karri Munn-Venn at the *Dignity for All* press conference with campaign partners and MPs from the HUMA Committee.

and the United Nations has served to raise the profile of poverty on the public and political agenda. Since the beginning of the HUMA study,

- Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and New Brunswick have joined Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador in initiating Poverty Reduction Strategies. Other provinces and territories are also developing plans. The need for federal collaboration is repeatedly identified.
- The UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review recommended that Canada "implement a national poverty eradication strategy that incorporates a human rights framework."
- *Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada* (launched by CPJ and Canada Without Poverty in May 2009) has garnered the support of over 450 organizations and 7500 individuals, including 85 parliamentarians, in the call for federal action on poverty.
- Marking 20 years since the unanimous resolution to end child poverty by the year 2000, all parties in the House came together to pass a motion "that the Government of Canada develop an immediate plan to eliminate poverty in Canada for all" on November 24, 2009.

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In Review

Board gathers in Ottawa

CPJ's Board and staff met in mid-November to evaluate our work in 2010, and to prepare for greater progress towards public justice in 2011. Discussions covered a range of topics important to the internal health of the organization (such as a review of personnel policies) as well as our policy work and publications and communications strategy for the future. The Board also expressed interest in holding their next meeting in the Toronto area.

Housing as a Human Right



With the United Nations calling Canada's housing and homelessness situation a "national emergency," the time has come for Canada to adopt a national affordable housing strategy. Indeed an excellent opportunity for politicians to develop just such a strategy has presented itself in Bill C-304, *An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for all Canadians*. In support of Bill C-304, CPJ's **Darryl Exelby, David Pollock, Callie Cochrane, Karri Munn-Venn and Jenny Prosser** participated in the Red Tent rally on Parliament Hill in October. (The tents were later made available to homeless people.) On November 24th, Bill C-304 was debated in the House and sent to Committee to address the jurisdictional concerns of Quebec. This Bill will hopefully soon return to the House with the full support of all political parties that recognize housing as a human right.

Dignity for All

In October 2010, CPJ and Canada Without Poverty were pleased to welcome Make Poverty History as a new campaign partner. Significant new financial resources have been pledged for this work by an anonymous donor which will allow for increased staff capacity and outreach as we work towards a poverty-free Canada.

The Great Turning



How to shift from Empire to Earth Community? How to create a brighter future? These and other questions were addressed by renowned speaker and best-selling author David Korten

before 300 people at a presentation in late October. The event, co-hosted by CPJ, Kairos Spirituality for Social Justice Centre, Polaris Institute, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Council of Canadians, generated a lot of good dialogue around how to effect local, national and international change. CPJ's former Board chair, **Kathy Vandergriff**, provided a very thoughtful response to Mr. Korten's presentation. (See page 7.)

CPJ on Top of the Hill

As a phenomenon felt disproportionately by the world's poor and with potentially dire future consequences, climate change is very much a moral issue. In October, CPJ's Executive Director **Joe Gunn** met with several MPs to discuss Canada's responsibility to take action on this issue. MPs included Liberals Glen Pearson, Allan Tonks, John McKay, Stéphane Dion, Francis Scarpaleggia, Joyce Murray as well as NDP MPs Paul Dewar and Linda Duncan.



On October 19, Karri Munn-Venn also joined several colleagues in a discussion with MP Josée Beaudin (Bloc Québécois – Saint-Lambert) on child poverty and health. Having been involved for many years with grassroots anti-poverty efforts, Ms. Beaudin was encouraged by and supportive of the work to eradicate poverty.

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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 stewardship.

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- The Senate unanimously adopted the December 2009 report “*In from the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing, and Homelessness*,” which established as its starting point that measures be put in place, not to “maintain” but to “lift people out of poverty.”

To date, the response of the federal Conservative government has been consistently discouraging. They are generally silent, except to say that employment is the way out of poverty. This, despite the fact that working full-time, year-round for minimum wage results in an annual income below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). A more robust response is overdue.

An Emerging Consensus: “Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy”

At a time of intense divisiveness in Parliament, the work of the HUMA Committee has shown that multi-party collaboration is possible. In fact, “*Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy*” demonstrates an emerging consensus among parliamentarians that a minimal role for the federal government is no longer on the agenda.

The introduction to the report states that the time has come for the federal government to address poverty. The first – and foundational – recommendation of the report calls on the federal government to:

Immediately commit to a federal action plan to reduce poverty in Canada that ... incorporate[s] a human rights framework and provide[s] for consultations ... to ensure an improvement in lives of impoverished people.

In an approach that recognizes both jurisdictional boundaries and the imperative of federal action, the Committee follows immediately with a call for “the creation of a new federal transfer (e.g. a federal poverty reduction fund) to support provincial and territorial initiatives.”

The report goes on to outline an additional 57 recommendations, including:

- An increase the annual amount of the Canada Child Tax Benefit to a minimum of \$5,000.
- The development and implementation of a national strategy on early childhood education and care, including the creation of a national public child care system.
- The creation of a federal basic income program for persons with disabilities.
- Increasing and indexing the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors.
- Major help for Aboriginal People for housing, education and social services, including the elimination of the two per cent cap on federal funding.
- The development of a comprehensive, long-term national housing strategy.

Later recommendations also call for a review of spending priorities in existing programs, the introduction and/or expansion of tax credits, and the provision of “fair and adequate” funding to key programs and mechanisms.

Support the Report!

Write to Hon. Diane Finley, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development Finley.D@parl.gc.ca (copy your MP.) Ask her to adopt the Report’s main recommendations, and to inform you of her response.

CPI’s Contribution

CPI was present at many critical moments as this Parliamentary process unfolded. We produced research and analysis on a number of factors relating to poverty, provided testimony to the HUMA committee itself, conducted workshops in churches across the country, offered leadership to the *Dignity for All* Campaign, and consistently engaged Members of Parliament on the critical importance of federal action to address poverty. Our efforts have not gone unheeded.

The HUMA report repeatedly cites CPI: the impact of the recession must be considered in determining measures to address poverty, that respect for basic social and economic rights is at stake, and that a legislated commitment to address poverty is required. The importance of “dignity for all” is also referenced numerous times.

A New Day

“*Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy*” demonstrates a clear understanding of the complexity of poverty in Canada. It shows that MPs across the political spectrum have heard the stories of Canadians living in poverty.

All of the MPs involved are to be commended, but the Conservative Committee members deserve particular mention for their supplementary opinion:

We strongly support the intent of the report and hope it serves as an impetus to get Canadians and all levels of Government engaged in this important discussion with the ultimate goal of finding effective solutions to fight poverty in Canada.

This support may well be the key to moving forward, as it edges the Conservatives to new resolve. In doing so, it opens up the possibility of real action. Still, one major question remains: Will the MPs, who invested such tremendous time and energy in the development of this report, champion these recommendations?

Will they engage Canadians? Will they ensure that every political party puts a plan in their platform? Will they suggest that, now more than ever, we need strong civil society groups to maintain the pressure on politicians and keep the issues before the media?

CPI members and supporters will need the courage to continue to work to ensure that the MPs will act – and deliver positive change.



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A Public Justice Response to “The Great Turning”

By Kathy Vandergrift

David Korten’s assertion that the political turn in Canada will come from the Canadian people, not from our political leaders, presents five challenges:

1. Focus on Citizenship and the Common Good

This shift would entail:

- Greater value for public spaces and greater resistance to the expanding privatization of public domains.
- A shift in our public discourse around taxes to mount a ground-level rejection of the attitude in the Prime Minister’s recent statement that “no taxes are good taxes” and the language of “picking my pocket.” We need vigorous debate about the return of value for our taxes – but we need to insist that it be about public value and fairness in sharing the benefits and burdens of a less stable economy.
- Change our measure of political success from narrow economic growth, symbolized in the GDP (turning from the dominance of the consumer ethos and individual choice) to a multidimensional Index of Well-Being.

2. Be Champions of Space for Dissent

In the last eighteen months there has been a serious erosion of respect for divergent views and basic human rights in the Canadian public square. Exposure of the pattern of silencing dissent by Voices (www.voices-voix.ca) has resulted in some media commentary. But this is still seen as an inside-Ottawa issue. Many Canadians who are not activists would be concerned if they understood the trend. This is key to any other changes and the long-term health of our democracy.

3. Actively Resist the Politics of Fear and the Demonization of Opponents

Charles Taylor, one of Canada’s eminent philosophers, warns us that Canada faces a particular challenge to build a new kind of solidarity among diverse populations on the basis of a “kernel of human rights, equality, non-discrimination and democracy.” Taylor further explains that this should not replace or marginalize religions and cultural traditions. We need to draw on deep religious and cultural roots to build a truly civil but pluralistic society and resist polarization based on dismissing the “other.” More vigorous and lively debate of political directions entails resisting the trend toward polarization based on categories of persons, whether it is “Toronto elites,” the easy use of the labels “terrorist,” “lazy poor people,” or “young people,” as security threats.

4. Turn around the “Anti-Government Ethos”

Turn from the focus on “small” or “big” government to a focus on the particular but limited role of government to ensure justice for all.

In the recent book: *Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, the title is the main message. Equally important, the authors warn about the danger of relying on



government programs to achieve more sustainable and equal societies. They advocate decentralizing the levers of power instead of centralizing them in government.

A challenge for Canada’s social justice community in the next year will be to avoid becoming the defenders of social programs we earlier critiqued, as these get attacked in the name of deficit reduction.

5. Persist in Restructuring our Political System

The myth that we can’t change the system we inherited serves the power brokers, not the public good. Deals can be adjusted when needed. Why treat the Constitution as a stone tablet equal to the 10 Commandments? Why continue the myth that the Charter of Rights protects all our freedoms? Deifying the Charter prevents progress on many international human rights obligations currently ignored in Canada.

Two trigger areas would revitalize the whole system:

- Reform our electoral system to some variety of proportional representation. Despite the failure of several referenda, the weaknesses of the current system are evident.
- Rethink the mix of federal, provincial and municipal powers, giving local government its due. See them as checks and balances rather than jurisdictional walls. Korten’s work rightly emphasizes the local level. Local government is the poor cousin of governments in Canada. We need more serious political reform movements, beyond clicking e-mail petitions, to change our political system.

In Canada the great turning may be more twists and turns, like a mountain road, than a U-turn. We must keep moving in the direction of justice for all and care for our world, and not become discouraged because of setbacks, bumps, or partial gains. Martin Luther King’s persistence reminded us that, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

For more reports on this event, see www.thegreatturning.ca

CPJ’s former Board chair, Kathy Vandergrift, won sustained applause for her remarks in response to David Korten’s recent presentation on The Great Turning. This is a summary of what Kathy had to say that evening in Ottawa.



Persistent Poverty: Giving Voice to Those on the Margins

By Jamie Swift

The House of Lazarus sits on County Road 1 on the outskirts of Mountain in South-eastern Ontario. The brick structure is surrounded by pastureland – not exactly where you would expect to find a food bank.

Yet the sprawling establishment – a thrift shop as well as a warehouse – is like many similar help centres that opened across Canada in the 1980s. It hosts a “Coins for Kids” Lunch Program to help families who often cannot afford school lunches. The ecumenical outreach mission serves some six hundred people from Kemptville to Iroquois.

“It feels like chaos on caffeine most days,” said Executive Director Pauline Pratt. “And yet there’s a serenity in the goings-on that I attribute to the volunteers and staff that run the operations. Many say it feels like home.”

In the spring of 2010 the House of Lazarus helped organize a “social audit” as part of a province-wide initiative of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC).

The result, chronicled in the new book *“Persistent Poverty: voices from the margins,”* gives voice to the voiceless.

The listening session organized by Ms. Pratt and her colleagues heard about hunger and homelessness. They also learned about the harsh stain of stigma.

“Before we judge too harshly, we might remember that it might be any of us if life takes a different twist of fate,” recalled one ISARC volunteer as she reflected on what she heard in Mountain.

“I wonder how each of us would handle having our choices taken away, the need to swallow our pride, vulnerability worn on our sleeves for all to see, the need to wear our neighbour’s shoes and coats, and to have our voices no longer heard? I wonder how we would feel when we hear someone asking why we have a dog and cat when we do not have enough money to feed ourselves. Little do they realize that our pet is the only one that does not judge us, and loves us and sits with us when we cry because we are alone.”

The Ontario social justice campaigners from ISARC – including former CPJ staffer Bruce Voogd – have already produced three such volumes since the 1980s when they started their advocacy work on behalf of their most vulnerable neighbours. The 2010 effort extended to some 26 different communities, from Toronto’s suburban sprawl to a hearing in Ottawa that CPJ helped organize, to villages like Mountain.

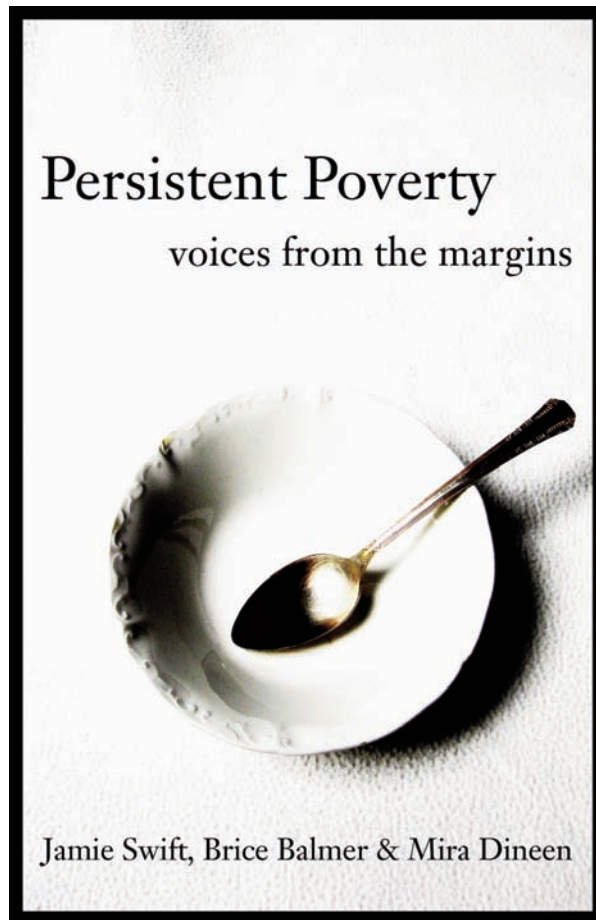
Like five other provinces – and unlike the federal government – Ontario has committed itself to poverty reduction. But the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. And the real test of political commitment is in the budget.

The idea is to put *“Persistent Poverty”* into the hands of local social audit organizers, urging them to use it as an advocacy tool. ISARC will also make sure that every member of the provincial parliament and everyone who represents an Ontario riding in Ottawa gets a copy.

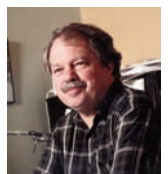
According to ISARC co-ordinator Brice Balmer, the social audit process encourages people to participate in the political process, arguing for the elimination of poverty. Yet it moves beyond the political sphere to help build solidarity. It offered the hundreds of volunteers an opportunity to reflect on the difficult experiences of people on the margins. How do I walk with them? How would I cope? How can we understand justice? How do we get beyond charity?

“Every politician should do a day-long social audit within a month of taking office,” wrote Lawrence Scanlan. Mr. Scanlan, a volunteer at the Kingston social audit, recently authored *“A Year of Living Generously: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Philanthropy,”* a book on the limits of charity.

“The first step to easing the suffering is to educate those in office. Second step: Put poverty eradication on the political agenda. Hit-and-miss charity never did cut it, and the privatization of poverty – while cutting taxes – has come at a colossal cost.”



Writer Jamie Swift is Director of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul in Kingston. He is co-author of *Persistent Poverty* and helped organize the Kingston social audit. You can order a copy of ISARC’s book at www.btlbooks.com



Climate Change as a Moral Issue

Joe Gunn interviews Father Lysack

It is impossible to work for public justice today without including the imperative to care for creation. With this understanding, in 2010 CPJ co-chaired a project to encourage communities of faith to effectively undertake this responsibility. Originally envisioned by University of Calgary Social Work assistant professor Mishka Lysack, who is also an Anglican priest, the project has developed retreats and public panel discussions in Alberta and Ontario on the topic of environmental decline and climate change as a moral issue. CPJ's interview with Father Lysack follows:

JG Fr. Lysack, tell us what this project is all about.

Fr.L The project is designed to create capacity and profile for a strong moral voice and leadership in faith communities around climate change. We want to prepare communities to engage decision-makers in dialogue. There are several ways to address the issue of climate change – as a food issue, a health issue, and even as a “green energy” issue. But the moral frame is one that provides a big vision, and is an excellent way to engage people of faith.

JG Who is responding in the faith communities? Have there been surprises for you?

Fr.L Well, people who are committed to social justice, and especially those who work in international development in the churches, certainly see the need to address global warming. They see the development work of decades being threatened, and understand the growing threats of climate crises as additional hurdles to their work of solidarity. But I've also been impressed by those communities who have made links to climate change and their interest in food and health issues. For example, some communities see how the dietary laws of their religious practices can be threatened by ecological decline, or how a growing threat of disease can be aggravated by climate change.

The World Council of Churches has called on the whole ecumenical family to keep pushing the international community for a “fair, ambitious and binding agreement” on climate change, in view of the UN climate summit that took place in Mexico in December.

JG The United Nation's COP 16 climate change conference took place in Cancun, Mexico, from November 29 until December 10. What should have happened? And what impact did you expect communities of faith to have?

Fr.L I think that Cancun was a missed opportunity for the churches. Several faith communities were more preoccupied with cutting exactly those staff that would have been active on this file. The churches now have a diminished capacity to respond. This should have been an opportunity to deepen Canada's moral stature and



international role. Inside the churches, Cancun could have spawned a public education moment, encouraging people to bring issues to their government. But that didn't happen – with the exception of the “Spirit Express” tour of the United Church Moderator, who travelled by train to 20 communities in Western Canada to raise climate change concerns.

JG Have you noticed a “Copenhagen trauma” after the disappointing conference there, perhaps causing less interest – or are people getting engaged?

Fr.L Absolutely. Even in myself, there was a feeling after Copenhagen that “all was for naught.” But we've also seen another group of people, who lived through the disappointment and have moved to get active again. Yet, in many faith communities there is a third large group of people who were “missing in action.” They just weren't previously involved in this issue, and thus suffered no trauma; they're just starting to get active now.

JG What are the next steps and future opportunities for the project?

Fr.L There are a number of issues people of faith may decide to address, and that we'd like to support. One issue is to advocate for the elimination of subsidies for the fossil fuel industry – currently worth \$1.4 billion in Canada – and to divert such subsidies to the promotion of a green economy. And of course, the climate change conference in South Africa takes place at the end of 2011.

But the thing to keep in mind is that churches are one of the few places for community and values-based reflection to take place, and where alternative values may be able to be expressed. The values of faith communities are not all about consumerism and hyper-individualism, but more aligned to community and compassion. So faith communities have the “antibodies” that real change strategies need. No tradition says, “Blessed are the greedy.” And being part of a faith community that is anxious to encourage environmental sensitivity provides us all with the support necessary to avoid being vulnerable or to fall prey to these societal pressures, by ourselves.

Canada Lags in Prioritizing Child Development Policies

By Mariel Angus

In 2005, the federal government was poised to implement a publicly-funded national childcare plan that would provide quality, affordable childcare for pre-school children across Canada.

Unfortunately, an election and subsequent change of government that year led to the proposed plan being shelved. A federal income supplement policy for families with young children – the Universal Child Care Benefit – was introduced as an alternative. However, the \$100 a month taxable benefit that it allocates per child has not been sufficient to mitigate the often high cost of care, and has not contributed to the creation of more childcare spaces.

Since 2005, the need for quality childcare has only grown. Yet our political representatives have not responded adequately to address this need. This was particularly evident in October, when the Leader of the Official Opposition, Michael Ignatieff, announced that “Canadians should not be expecting Liberals to unveil plans for national childcare” in the next election campaign.

It is disheartening that after years of public debate and advocacy for a national childcare plan, we are still far from realizing such a goal. Research has shown that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – a combination of quality care and education for pre-school aged children – can provide multiple benefits compared to other types of non-parental care. Many European countries provide universal childcare for children under the age of six and have found that it can both strengthen child development and support families.

Although Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we remain one of the few that lacks a national policy on early childhood development. A failure to adequately address this is having a detrimental impact upon many young children and their families in Canada. Childcare is currently characterized by uneven levels of quality, high cost and a significant shortage of spaces. (In Quebec, however, a publicly-funded provincial program offers care at \$7 a day per child.)

A National Policy on Early Childhood Development

A national child development policy – including a childcare program – would contribute to the dignity and well-being of young children and their families, particularly those who are poor and marginalized. It would help promote child development, support families and strengthen women’s equality.

A lack of affordable, accessible childcare limits the developmental potential of young children, does not treat all children equitably, and contributes to poverty and gender inequality.

The best interests of children should be a primary consideration in the development of a national child development policy. ECEC has been found to improve child development, strengthen social skills and improve school readiness. Positive early learning opportunities have also been found to have long-term benefits. States have a responsibility to respect children as citizens and provide opportunities for their growth and development, and a childcare policy at the national level would help ensure that children have equitable access to quality care.

CPJ understands government’s role as promoting just relations between people within God’s creation and fostering conditions that enhance the common good. The federal government has the opportunity to play a more active role in creating public justice through the provision of accessible and affordable childcare options for young children.

A national child development policy could promote public justice by helping to ensure that parents have sufficient resources and services to raise their children in dignity and well-being. Such a policy must be part of any national plan to reduce poverty.

It can also improve gender equality for women. Despite significant gains made over the last number of decades, women continue to perform a disproportionate amount of domestic responsibilities, including childcare. These responsibilities can limit the extent to which they can engage in paid labour, which can negatively impact their lifetime earnings and place them at risk of poverty.

Affordable childcare can assist women in participating in the paid workforce if they choose, which in turn can assist in reducing their family’s vulnerability to poverty. It can also allow them to balance their paid work and caring responsibilities to a greater extent.

Family-Friendly Public Policies

Publicly-funded childcare is one of many policies, including parental leave policies and income supports that governments can implement to provide families with support and choice in fulfilling their responsibilities as parents and citizens. Providing accessible and affordable childcare is one policy that can strengthen parents’ choices in how they can provide quality care for their children.

Our political leaders have the opportunity to foster a more just society through the creation of policies that promote the common good. A national child development policy that includes universal ECEC would be a step towards such a society.



Mariel Angus was CPJ’s Public Justice intern in 2008 – 2009, and is now doing graduate studies in Montreal. Visit www.cpj.ca to see CPJ’s Position Paper on ECEC issues.

Groundings

When God is a child

By Iona MacLean

We met her in a village called Santa Marta in El Salvador. She was about four years old. She had been born in a refugee camp in Honduras and had lived there most of her life. A few months before our visit, she and her family and several hundred other people had finally been allowed back into their own country from which they had fled because of the war and government terrorism. They were starting from scratch to rebuild their community in an environment still poisoned by violence, fear and poverty. Yet, for all the horrors and hardship these people had suffered, they welcomed us.

The leaders of the village told us their story. Their words and the white flag flying above the village expressed the desire to live in peace. As we were shown around, a group of old men played guitars. The women were bathing their children in the stream or cooking over open fires. The people gathered for Mass, a rare and precious event because priests had such difficulty getting permission from the military to visit the community.

But of all the memories of that day in Santa Marta more than twenty years ago, the clearest and most moving is of that little girl – born a refugee, born into poverty and uncertainty, witness to the worst that humans can do.

Yet there she was, watching us with curiosity and seemingly without fear, smiling shyly when asked if we could take her picture. A vulnerable child in the midst of overwhelming and frightening circumstances, she nevertheless gave us a “garland instead of ashes,” to use Isaiah’s words [Isa. 61:3], beautifying her surroundings and our lives.

It is profoundly important that God comes among us as a child.

We see a child and we marvel at their vulnerability and dependency. We know that what we do in the present will affect the child in the future. Whether the children in our own family or the children of the world, they need love and safety, food and shelter, education and peace in order to grow. Children who are brutalized by war, domestic violence or extreme need often become brutal, abusive, or irresponsible adults continuing the destructive cycle. If we can provide a protective, loving and nurturing environment for children everywhere, we go a long way toward the peaceful world God intends.

A child makes us think of new beginnings and touches us with hope.

How do we worship a God who is revealed as a little one? What change happens within us if we pray with all our hearts and minds to a God who identifies with us even in our smallest state, vulnerable and fragile, needing love and tenderness?



Photo by Andrea Davoust

- Might we not be reminded of God’s purpose, as expressed in Mary’s song, to scatter the proud and bring down the powerful, to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things? [Luke 1:51-53]
- Might we not be reminded of Jesus’ words as he took a child by his side: “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”? [Luke 9:48]
- Might we not truly realize that we honour God when we honour the powerless and fragile ones in the world, when in the name of Christ we bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners? [Luke 4:18]

We see a child – our own child, a newly baptized child, a neighbour’s child, a poor child, a refugee child – and want to make the world a better place for that child. When God is a child we know that the world can be a better place. That is why God came to earth in Jesus Christ, to overcome the darkness with light, to show that love is stronger than hate and even than death.

“When God is a child,” we know that a new day has begun and our hope for the future is assured. God incarnate in a child evokes gladness and wonder. In a world often ugly and frightening, we are given beauty and delight, a “garland instead of ashes,” a reason to celebrate life itself.



Iona MacLean is a Presbyterian minister serving in Pictou, Nova Scotia.