

***ST. PETER'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, OTTAWA***  
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***POVERTY IN CANADA: OFFERING A FAITHFUL RESPONSE***  
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### ***ON DIGNITY***

Worth. Honour. Respect.

These terms are included in the Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary definition of dignity. Several others could easily be added: integrity, virtue, self-esteem, independence, pride, strength.

Dignity. It the basis for who we – as people created in God's image – are as human beings, and it is the foundation of international human rights agreements. But how does it translate into our daily lives?

### ***JUSTICE CAMP***

Last summer I had a tremendously profound experience. I was a participant at "Poverty Justice Camp" in Halifax, an initiative of the Anglican Church of Canada.

My three-day urban poverty and homelessness immersion began with a day on the street: no breakfast, no lunch and no money. Just a map of the city and a list of largely meaningless tasks put together in the form of a scavenger hunt.

Almost before the day began I felt vulnerable; I wondered if I would be able to manage without food. By mid-morning, I felt like I was walking in a fog. I was grumpy and uncomfortable – there were so many places I couldn't go inside.

Even though this "day on the street" was just an exercise, that I knew I'd have a meal and a warm bed at the end of the day, the emotional impact, the sense of isolation and exclusion was very real. I was profoundly self-conscious, I felt stupid because my brain was so numb. I was nervous, and even a little fearful.

This experience reinforced my understanding of dignity.

### ***LIVING WITH DIGNITY***

For the youngest members of society, living with dignity is having the freedom to enjoy childhood. It is not having to worry about adult arguments over money or whether you'll have winter boots that fit and keep you warm. Dignity is being able to attend your friend's birthday party – and bring a present.

For an adult, living with dignity is being able to provide for yourself and your family. It is having the confidence to face the challenges of life, it is knowing that you won't be refused service, it is being able to sleep at night in warmth and comfort, unencumbered by concerns of basic survival.

For everyone, young and old, living with dignity is being part of a community, taking pride in your accomplishments, and being valued for who you are.

Poverty robs people of their dignity. It forces unconscionable decisions between buying the groceries or paying the rent. It manifests itself in shame, doubt, and fear. And yet, it is a daily reality for far too many Canadians.

### ***THE REALITY OF POVERTY IN CANADA***

Modest estimates indicate that at least 1 in 10 Canadians currently live in poverty –that is three million people.

Social Assistance and Employment Insurance are inadequate to prevent people from living in poverty. Even working full-time at minimum wage is not enough to bring people out of poverty.

Over 370,000 Canadians have lost their jobs since the economic downturn began. Thousands have had to accept a reduction in hours, compensation or benefits in order to keep their jobs, or have gone from full-time employment to part-time or self-employed. Many of their children have lost the opportunity to take swimming lessons or go on field trips.

Thousands have lost their life savings. Even many with private pension plans are facing uncertain retirements. Some Canadians have lost their homes, while many more struggle with significant debt-loads.

And in this economic crisis, those who were already struggling to meet their daily needs without income security are falling even farther behind.

- The poor are the first to lose their jobs and find it harder to get new work.
- In 2008, over 7,000 people in Ottawa stayed in emergency shelters, including almost 1,200 children.
- In 2009, over 794,000 people across Canada had to turn to foodbanks –up 18% over 2008 (the largest year-over-year increase on record).

## THE RESPONSE

So what are we, as disciples of Christ, to do?

When we look to God's word, there is no shortage of guidance on how we are to respond to the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

Today's passage from First Corinthians is one that I have always enjoyed. For me it speaks to the strength of community, and the of the interdependence of all of society. It also reminds us of the responsibility that God has bestowed upon us to look out for one another, to lift up the weak and the excluded, and to love all of God's children.

Reading again from verses 21 to 26:

*The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!"  
And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"*

*On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,<sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.*

*God has combined the members of the body so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*

*If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*

Far too often, the issue of poverty is seen as something that affects "them," that "those people" need to deal with, and that it is something set apart from us.

But we all live in God's world, we are part of Canadian society, of our local community. Jesus calls us to be agents of transformation, to seek justice for all.

I believe that our motivation to serve and seek justice for the poor – the orphan, the widow, the stranger –

## 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

<sup>12</sup>The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For we were all baptized by<sup>[c]</sup> one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

<sup>14</sup>Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup>If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

<sup>21</sup>The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, **those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,<sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.** And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, <sup>24</sup>while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, <sup>25</sup>so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **<sup>26</sup>If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.**

<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. <sup>28</sup>And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

<sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup>Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues<sup>[d]</sup>? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>But eagerly desire<sup>[e]</sup> the greater gifts.

must come as a compassionate response to the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Certainly the lack of resources, isolation, illness, and fear that are part and parcel of poverty have the greatest impact on the poor themselves. But if we think that it does not also have an impact on “the rest of us,” we are sorely mistaken.

### ***THE SOCIETAL IMPACTS OF POVERTY***

Research has shown that societies with higher levels of inequality have poorer levels of health – among rich and poor alike. Not surprisingly then, poverty also has a serious impact on our healthcare system – the social and physical vulnerability of people living in poverty means that they draw disproportionately on emergency health services (for example). Poverty and inequality also affect the security and quality of life in our communities. What is more, poverty has a substantial financial cost.

And let me be clear, it is not the fault of people living in poverty that we are faced with these challenges. As a society we have failed to treat "the weaker parts of our community as indispensable."

### ***THE CALL TO ACTION***

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus proclaims he is the ease to the oppression, he is the sight for the blind, he is the good news to the poor. What then, is the next logical response? What is our call amidst Christ's proclamation?

There are many ways that we can, and do, respond.

I was struck this week when my four-year-old son, said, “Mummy I want to send food and towels to Haiti.” Later, I was brought to tears when this same child, uttered this unprompted prayer, “Dear God, thank you for my toys, and thank you for the people in the city with the earthquake.”

This inclination to give is certainly something I am going to nurture.

It is a response that we witness in many of our communities and in particular, many of our churches. I noticed here this morning, that calls to support the Centretown Churches Emergency Food Centre, and Canadian Lutheran World Relief were both included in the bulletin. I have also been told that St. Peter’s has a very active service committee.

These are all beautiful expressions of loving our neighbours and living out our faith.

Still, we can do more.

We can work to change the structures that stand in the way of people living out their God-given potential. We can advocate for change at the local, provincial and federal levels.

How do we do that?

By learning more about the situation of poverty in Canada and sharing that learning with others. We can write letters to our local newspapers. We can meet with our political representatives. We can join social justice organizations. We can stand up for what we believe in by participating in town hall discussions and political events.

And, as my little boy reminded me so movingly, we can also pray. We must pray for those who are marginalized, for those that work to care for them, for those that employ them, and for the politicians that are meant to serve them.

Citizens for Public Justice is one of the founding organizations of “Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada.” I hope you’ll join me and Adam after the service as we gather to discuss this initiative and the ways in which you can get involved in efforts to end poverty in Canada.

God has called us, redeemed us, and transformed us to be agents of change. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:10) We will therefore offer a faithful response to God’s call for love, justice and stewardship. **Amen.**

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