

# the Catalyst

Citizens for Public Justice

Spring 2017

Pub. Mail Agreement no: 40022119

## On Canada's 150th, What Are First Nations Kids Losing Out To?

By Jennifer King & Cindy Blackstock

As the federal government prepares to spend half a billion dollars to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, First Nations in northern Ontario are mourning the loss of three young girls to suicide. These tragedies could have been prevented if Canada provided equitable mental health and other children's services on reserve.

For over 10 years, Canada has known about the discrimination in child welfare, education, and other public services on reserve as well as the resulting harm to First Nations children. The government has been challenged on its lack of progress in providing the services other children receive as a matter of course. In response, they like to cite their century-long pattern of "engaging" with partners and "tough economic times" as barriers to action.

Is Canada so broke that the national treasury needs to rely on racial discrimination against children as a cost saving measure? What are First Nations children losing out to? With \$500 million set aside, it would seem that Canada's birthday party is more of a priority.

The belief that First Nations should make do with less is so engrained in government culture that Canada would rather break the law than cease this policy of racial discrimination against children. In January 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found the federal government to be discriminating against over 163,000 First Nations kids. They had underfunded child welfare services on reserve and failed to implement Jordan's Principle to ensure equitable access to public services. The tribunal found that Canada's chronic underfunding of children's services was incentivizing the removal of First Na-

tions children from their families and widening the disadvantage sown by residential schools. It also found that the government had been aware of the situation for decades but failed to take any significant action.

Canada accepted the orders without appeal, yet little has changed. Despite lofty pronouncements of an "historic investment," monies allotted to First Nations child and family services in the 2016 federal budget fell far short of the operational need. Old approaches have been given new labels, with predictable results: the discrimination continues while governments look for sympathy for its "good efforts" and "hard work." The tribunal is so unsatisfied by Canada's failure to implement its orders that it has issued two non-compliance orders.

Canada refused to comply with the tribunal's legally binding order. This underscores the importance of Canadians rising up in greater numbers to demand an end to the government's unlawful and discriminatory conduct against children. A slumbering public is systemic discrimination's best friend. We need to stop waiting for government action; we need to demand it.

Because there are solutions. There are decades of recommendations on the books to guide both immediate and long-term change. At the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, we often say that governments do not create change, they respond to it. Start by writing to your MP to demand government compliance with the tribunal orders. More information about the immediate actions Canada can take to resolve the inequities can be found at [fnwitness.ca](http://fnwitness.ca).

On July 1, we ask that you celebrate Canada for the country it *could* be. If this is truly a country founded on the values of fairness, equality, justice, and universal human rights, then we need to do better. Equity for First Nations children should be more important to us than a birthday party.

Jennifer King is the reconciliation and policy coordinator and Cindy Blackstock is the executive director at the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada.

# In Review

## In the Community

CPJ has been active in getting Canadian faith leaders engaged in the consultation process for a Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. In January, CPJ's **Darlene O'Leary** presented at a United Church webinar organized by EDGE. Darlene and **Joe Gunn** have also led day-long discussions in Toronto and Ottawa for church leaders. Contact CPJ to get engaged in this process.

In February, CPJ sponsored Grounded, a two-day conference in Calgary on faith and creation care. Keynote speakers included **Leah Kostamo** and **Steven Bouma-Prediger**.

## On the Hill

CPJ's Darlene O'Leary and Canada Without Poverty's **Michele Biss** met with Liberal MP **Sonia Sidhu** to talk about housing issues and the work of the Dignity for All campaign. Darlene also joined Joe Gunn to meet with **Miles Corak**, the newly-appointed Economist in Residence for Employment and Social Development Canada, to discuss the launch of consultations on a Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy.

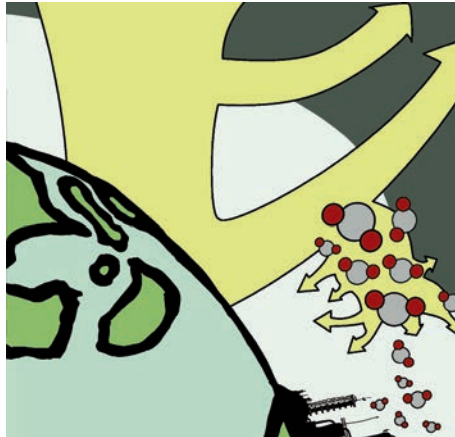


During Citizens' Climate Lobby's annual day on the Hill, CPJ's public justice intern, **Asha Kerr-Wilson**, met with Liberal MP and parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister **Celina Caesar-Chavannes** (above) to discuss Canada's climate change policies. Asha also met with NDP MP **Richard Cannings**, the deputy critic for natural resources.

## Safe Third Country Agreement

CPJ wrote to **Ahmed Hussen**, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, to ask him to reconsider Canada's Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States, a policy that disqualifies refugees from coming to Canada after being denied entry into the U.S. We believe the United States' new immigration policy discriminates against refugees on a religious and national identity basis. Read the letter at [cpj.ca/safe-third-country](http://cpj.ca/safe-third-country).

## Climate Infographics



Over the past few months, CPJ posted a series of four infographics on climate change. The infographics, prepared by former public justice intern **Miriam Mahaffy**, cover a range of topics including the basics of climate change, the impacts of climate change in Canada, and a guide for how to measure one tonne of GHG emissions in your daily life. Check them out at [cpj.ca/infographics](http://cpj.ca/infographics).

## Climate Plan Response

Late last year, the federal government released their national climate change plan. CPJ is encouraged by the range of emissions-reduction measures contained in the new plan. Sadly, the target upon which this climate plan is built is out of step with the intent of the Paris Agreement. Read details on how the new climate plan compares against CPJ's recommendations at [cpj.ca/climate-plan](http://cpj.ca/climate-plan).

## Guaranteed Livable Income

In March, CPJ released *Towards a Guaranteed Livable Income*. This paper represents CPJ's current thinking on a basic income and its place within a larger anti-poverty strategy and offers a set of recommendations for guiding the development of a Guaranteed Livable Income. Read the paper at [cpj.ca/GLI](http://cpj.ca/GLI).



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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.

**CPJ annual membership fee** includes *the Catalyst*:  
\$50 / \$25 (low-income)

Spring 2017 (Volume 40, Number 1)  
ISSN 0824-2062  
Agreement no. 40022119  
Editor: Brad Wassink

*the Catalyst*, a publication of Citizens for Public Justice, reports on public justice issues in Canada and reviews CPJ activities.

**the Catalyst subscription:**  
\$20 (three issues)

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# Is This Not the Fast I Choose?

By Karri Munn-Venn

Fasting is not my strong suit.

I have done it occasionally, but not at all gracefully. I really enjoy good food and I've been known, on occasion, to get a little "hangry" (you know, hungry-angry) if I haven't properly fueled my body. For many years, however, I have given something up for Lent.

But now, as I reflect on what I've given up, only three things come to mind: chocolate, sugar, and coffee. While not particularly profound, I think my choices are pretty standard fare, along with alcohol, maybe smoking, and more recently, taking time away from social media. As we approached Lent this year, I found myself reflecting on the purpose of it all.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus regularly went out into the wilderness. There he would fast and pray. He would open his mind to God's wisdom and direction.

The early church looked to Jesus' example and developed a practice of fasting during the 40 days leading up to Easter. This practice has evolved over the years and many Christians now mark Lent by "giving up" a bad habit or distracting practice. This symbolic sacrifice provides us with a space to reflect and refocus, tune-in to our Christian calling, and renew our commitment to God.

But when we give up chocolate or coffee or social media, does it really serve to strengthen our faith or our connection to God?

For me, the answer is a clear "no." If I'm honest, I've treated God more like an accountability partner at the gym, someone who makes sure I show up when my resolve is weak, rather than our magnificent Creator. Sure, I've been glad to have established some positive new habits, and it is possible that I'm a moderately healthier person as a result.

But I really don't think that's the point.

Last year, I turned the idea on its head and rather than giving something up, I committed to bring more beauty into my life. This was a much more significant exercise than earlier efforts to give something up. I slowed down, drew more pictures, and coloured regularly with my daughter.

Somehow, I feel that my practice got a little closer to how Jesus' example suggests we approach fasting. I created space outside of the constant motion, the unrelenting mental chatter, to be present in God's world. By slowing down, I was better able to lis-

ten to my kids, my husband, and my friends. I think that maybe I was also able to be just a little more open to the spirit of God in my life.

And that was a good start.

This year, I wanted to take it a step further. I wanted to do something that was about more than just me. I wanted to do something

of consequence that would draw me into closer relationship with God and God's creation.

So, I've committed to **Give it up for the Earth!** I've signed my pledge to cut meat from my diet one day each week. I also committed to stay close to home during March Break to avoid aviation emissions. And I'll give my kids a refresher on the municipal recycling program.

I have also joined my voice with thousands of Canadian Christians. Together, we are

calling on the federal government to make policy changes that will move us further and faster towards the Paris climate change goals.

As Christians, God calls us to love and care for all of creation. And so, I am giving it up for the Earth as an expression of gratitude to God for the beauty and wonder of creation. I am giving it up for the Earth in solidarity with Indigenous peoples in Canada and marginalized people around the world. I am giving it up for the Earth in hope for a better future for my children and all children, each one created in God's image.

In Isaiah 58, the prophet questions the people's motivation for fasting, saying that some did it to be seen and to serve their own interests.

He encourages instead a different sort of fast: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke."

This is the fast I choose.

CPJ's **Give it up for Earth!** campaign is happening throughout Lent. Canadian Christians are making lifestyle changes in order to reduce our GHG emissions and calling on our government to match and exceed these actions with policy changes. **Use the attached postcard to make your pledge!**

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



# Because It's 2017...It's Time to End Poverty in Canada

By Joe Gunn

The year of Canada's sesquicentennial has arrived. Most of us are still learning how to pronounce that word! More difficult yet, we must also decide how best to commemorate this notable moment in our history.

The official celebrations are likely to be upbeat, providing welcome moments to pause in gratitude and count our blessings. At the same time, Canadians know that not all of us have benefited equally from the past. Indigenous leaders have already stated that they do not have much to "celebrate." At CPJ, we've decided that the best way to participate in Canada's 150th anniversary is to renew our resolve to work for public justice and the flourishing of God's shalom in the land.

2017 is an historic moment, worthy of our every effort to show what love looks like in public.

There is perhaps no better way to do this, than by ensuring our federal leaders complete the development and implementation of a robust poverty reduction plan.

*"Canada's poverty reduction strategy needs to have measurable objectives - such as a significant reduction (and elimination) in the number of Canadians living in core housing need. Increasing Canada's stock of affordable and supportive housing, and making housing more affordable through a housing benefit, would help address the most significant cost—and determinant of well-being—in Canadians' lives."*

— **Mike Bulthuis, Executive Director, Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa**

On February 13, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Jean-Yves Duclos, announced the launch of two important steps towards the development of the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. An online consultation process has been opened to the public, allowing all to express their views. Members of Parliament and civil society groups have also been invited to organize roundtable discussions and town hall meetings over the next five months.

*"Campaign 2000 calls on the government to implement robust targets and timelines in the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. This includes a reduction in child poverty by 50 per cent by 2020. Uprooting poverty requires strong federal leadership in creating quality jobs, adequate funding for child welfare for Indigenous children, investments in accessible and affordable childcare and housing, and a social safety net that meets families' current needs and realities."*

— **Anita Khanna, National Coordinator, Campaign 2000**

Since its creation in 2009, the *Dignity for All campaign* (which CPJ co-leads) has advocated for Ottawa to commit to such a plan. Our model poverty reduction plan, released on Parliament Hill in 2015, was five years in the making. They've asked for a plan – and civil society has supplied the ingredients!

Already in 2017, CPJ has organized day-long workshops to help prepare and animate participation in the upcoming consultation processes. Over 30 leaders in faith communities have taken part. They are specifically interested in making their commitments to reconciliation come alive. In the coming months, they will be pressuring government to improve socio-economic conditions and educational opportunities for Indigenous youth. Better

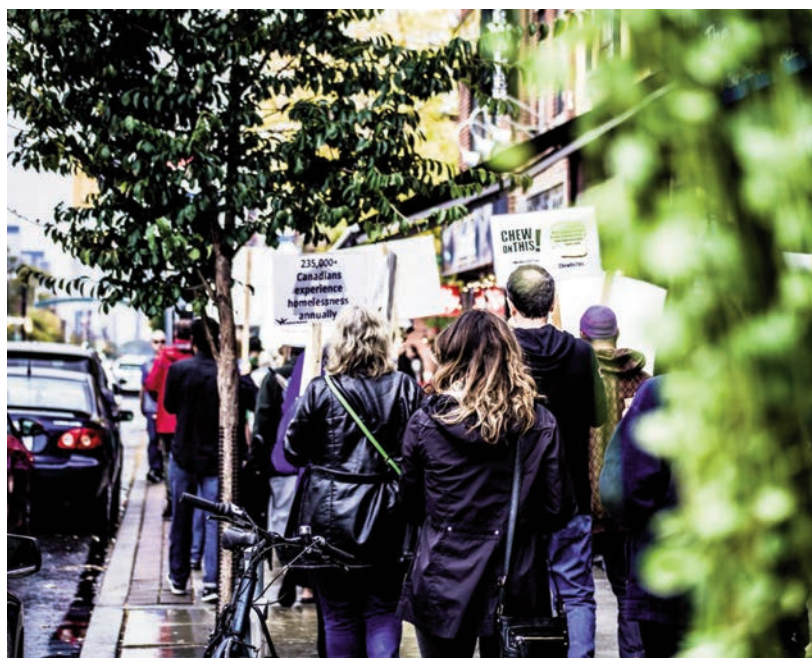
support for refugees and newcomers to Canada was also a focus. And faith leaders are committed to assisting the one in five children still experiencing poverty.

Poverty is a complex phenomenon. No single policy suffices to heal all deficiencies. The goal of civil society groups in these consultations must be to support the active participation of those persons who have lived experience of poverty. They must be the

architects of their own liberation. Meanwhile public justice advocates can supply good research into the most effective policy levers. Most importantly, we need to educate our neighbours and organize our communities to create the societal will necessary to ensure that governments implement the structural changes required to reduce poverty.

This would make Canada's anniversary truly worth celebrating.

CPJ has prepared materials to bolster public engagement in the government's consultation process. Learn more at [cpj.ca/poverty/action](http://cpj.ca/poverty/action).



Danforth Multifaith Community's Chew On This! event in Toronto. Photo: Chris Javier.



Joe Gunn serves as CPJ's executive director.

# An Ice Road to Reconciliation

By Asha Kerr-Wilson

2016 broke the record for the hottest year ever, the third year in a row to do so. The causes and effects of this climatic change are increasingly obvious in Canada. But Indigenous peoples are on the frontlines.

Across Canada, Indigenous peoples are taking action to protect the land, water, and air – and their way of life. In B.C., the West Moberly and Prophet River Nations have mobilized farmers and environmental organizations alike to stop the construction of the Site C dam. The Elsipogtog First Nation put their bodies on the line to protest fracking on their land in New Brunswick. And in southwestern Ontario, the Chippewa of the Thames are just one among several nations who have issued challenges in the courts over the impacts of pipeline projects and resource exploration and extraction.

Climate change affects the lives, lands, and cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples more directly and dramatically than most Canadians. But many communities in the more isolated and northern regions go unseen and unheard.

In December 2016, I had the opportunity to visit the Ojibway First Nation of Pikangikum. I travelled with the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF), the Anglican Church of Canada's aid and development agency. This remote community in northwestern Ontario is on Treaty Five territory. It is tucked into the beautiful forested landscape on the edge of Pikangikum Lake.

Many here rely on outdoor water pumps. This is their only access to water for all household needs, even in cold and stormy winter weather. We were there to meet members of the community and to see the work of PWRDF and our partners to bring running water into homes.

Although the weather makes hauling water a challenge, it is also a key asset to the community. Through the winter, this otherwise fly-in community relies on an ice road for most of their supplies, including food and fuel.

Climate change is putting this ice road at risk. Winters are warmer and start later in the year. And now community leaders are concerned that access to the seasonal ice road is getting shorter and less certain.

During my visit to Pikangikum, I briefly experienced the limited and expensive access to supplies and travel. We spent an uncertain extra day there after flights were cancelled due to bad weather. Yet for the people of Pikangikum, the impact is much more serious. The loss of a reliable ice road will have disastrous

impacts on a community already suffering from limited resources.

The people of Pikangikum continue traditional Indigenous practices of hunting, fishing, and gathering as part of their cultural heritage and way of life. But climate change is destabilizing the nearby boreal forest. Increased wildfires and insect outbreaks are expected. Plant and animal species, such as the caribou, are already showing signs of population decline. With risks to both traditional and mainstream sources of food and supplies, the community is stuck in a lose-lose situation.

The people of Pikangikum are simultaneously at higher risk of the immediate climate change consequences and the least able to fight the causes and adapt to new realities.

Their power comes from diesel-run generators that serve a local electricity grid. In a community with unpaved roads and heavy snow, big trucks are needed to get around. Even though reductions in GHG emissions are possible, they would have little impact. And frankly, Pikangikum has more immediate concerns. The community struggles with crises of health, social welfare, and crime. These are largely the result of the ongoing history of colonialism along with restricted resources and geographic isolation.

As settler people, we must understand the impact climate change has on the land and people. Only then can we find common concerns that open opportunities to build relationships. Despite these challenges, Pikangikum, like many isolated and northern Indigenous communities, represents an opportunity for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

This is not a new idea. Many fighting for environmental justice recognize the vital stake and leadership role Indigenous people have in this cause. And climate justice is also a part of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

One road to get us there may well be made of ice and serve a small Ojibway Nation in northwestern Ontario.



The streets of Pikangikum.  
Photo: Allie Colp.



Asha is a public justice intern at CPJ. She is also a member of the Board of Directors and the Youth Council of PWRDF.

# A Made in Canada Housing Strategy

By Jeff Morrison

The link between access to safe, affordable, sustainable housing and poverty alleviation is clear.

Without access to decent housing, it is extremely difficult to pursue education, maintain employment, or raise a family. Safe, affordable housing allows individuals and families to work, which helps to ensure that they can break the bonds of poverty.

However, housing systems that provide access to safe and affordable housing are under threat. During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, long-term Operating Agreements were put in place between governments and housing providers. Housing providers use them to provide rent-geared-to-income housing units to low-income Canadians. They are starting to expire. Now, it's uncertain whether housing providers can maintain these units at a subsidized level.

Over the past two decades, the federal government has dramatically reduced its support to expand the capacity of the social housing sector. This despite the fact that demand and waiting lists have grown. There have been sporadic programs over the past 15 to 20 years impacting social housing. But the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) estimates that there are approximately 100,000 housing units that were not built over the past 20 years due to changing government policy.

There has also been insufficient maintenance for housing units built through these Operating Agreements. As these buildings age, they require significant rehabilitation work. In January 2017, Toronto Community Housing reported that they had already closed 425 subsidized units because of lack of funds to properly rehabilitate them.

Given these and other challenges facing the housing system, particularly housing for low-income Canadians, CHRA has long called for the development of a National Housing Strategy. Under a strategy, housing policy would no longer be addressed in a “band-aid” policy fashion. Instead it would be dealt with in a long-term and holistic way. CHRA was very pleased that, in June 2016, the federal government confirmed a consultation on a National Housing Strategy. We expect them to release the strategy at some point in Spring 2017. If done right, this strategy holds the promise to address the housing needs of low-income Canadians for decades to come.

At the time of writing, we do not yet know the details of this strategy. But CHRA has put forth a comprehensive set of recommendations designed to ensure that it is focused on addressing the needs of Canada's most vulnerable populations. These recom-



mendations fall into the following four themes:

- **Strengthen the role of housing as a social good:** Introduce measures to prevent and eliminate homelessness, invest in supportive housing, and introduce a dedicated rent-geared-to-income subsidy.
- **Increase and better maintain social housing supply:** Introduce a dedicated housing financing authority to provide loans and grants for sector growth and rehabilitation, make federal surplus land available for social housing, and incentivize the construction of new social and rental housing capacity.

- **Create a distinct urban and rural Indigenous Housing Strategy:** Given the unique housing needs of urban and rural Indigenous people, create a unique Indigenous Housing Strategy that dedicates funds for urban and rural Indigenous providers, increases federal support to Indigenous service organizations, and compliments the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report.

- **Put in place a measurable implementation plan:** A strategy without an implementation plan is meaningless. An implementation plan should include timeframes, national indicators, and a national research hub that can measure and report on progress.

Once the federal government releases the strategy, there will remain a great deal of work in order to properly implement the strategy. It will be incumbent on all of us to ensure that within the implementation plan, we do not lose the overall objective of providing access to safe, affordable housing to Canada's most vulnerable populations.

Poverty alleviation is not a short-term goal. But with the right policies, investment decisions, and leadership, we can take a strong step towards ensuring that housing does not contribute to the problem, but rather plays a key role in fixing it.

Dignity for All's model anti-poverty plan calls for a National Housing Strategy and at least \$2 billion/year in new funding for housing initiatives. Read the plan at [cpj.ca/FedPlan](http://cpj.ca/FedPlan).

Jeff Morrison is executive director of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, the national association representing the interests of the social and affordable housing sector in Canada.



# Refugees Are a Blessing to Canada

By Martha Wiebe

Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric has reached a fever pitch south of the border over the past year. Unfortunately that sentiment has also resonated with some Canadians. During the last federal election, the Conservatives fanned anti-immigrant feelings by politicizing the wearing of the niqab. This narrative suggests that refugees are a drain on society, that they take jobs from Canadians and present a security risk. None of these arguments hold up to facts.

Canada needs immigrants. Demographers note that to sustain our economy with its aging population, we need new people to join our workforce. There is also no evidence that they present a particular security risk. Most attacks have been perpetrated by people who grew up in Canada. This was evident again in the recent murderous assault on Muslims at prayer in Quebec City.

For nearly 40 years, Ottawa Mennonite Church has sponsored refugees from around the world. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive. They have not only contributed to the life of our congregation but also to our community and our country.

Our most recent experience was welcoming an extended Syrian family of nine, the last three of whom arrived in early November 2016. After leaving war-torn Syria and spending time in Lebanon waiting for resettlement, they are adjusting to life in Canada. Not surprisingly, the children have learned English more quickly than the adults. When necessary, they serve as translators for their parents and grandparents. But the adults are also attending daily English classes.

## Our congregation has been enriched enormously by hundreds of refugees.

Even before the first year of sponsorship came to an end, several members of this family found part-time jobs. Elias dreams of becoming an engineer. But in the meantime, he is advancing rapidly in language courses at Carleton University while holding down several part-time jobs. After arriving in Ottawa, George quickly got a job at a barber shop owned by a Lebanese man. This family has come through difficult and traumatic experiences. They have shown remarkable resilience and are motivated to adjust to Canada and make a life here. They are not a drain on our society but rather have quickly become contributors.

Fifteen years ago, our church sponsored a Somali woman who had been living in Yemen with five young children. She escaped

an abusive domestic situation and the war raging in her country. Her young daughter Faduma was about five years old at the time. Faduma recently received the Spirit of the Capital Youth Award and was also chosen by her peers to be the valedictorian at her high school graduation. She is a young Canadian of whom we can be very proud.

Jamila is an Afghani woman who came to Ottawa with several children years ago. Our congregation had the privilege of sponsoring her and her family. When she realized she would not be able to teach in Canada, Jamila started catering for small groups.

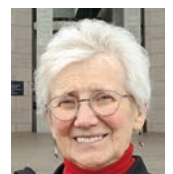


Jamila and her family at their citizenship ceremony.

I arranged for her to provide the food for events that I organized. Through word of mouth, she found more opportunities to cater and soon started her first full-time job. She later commented to me how pleased she was to be working and to be paying taxes. Since that time she has had regular employment, and I think she actually works too hard!

There are many other examples I could point to of the richness that refugees bring to our communities. Rather than fearing them, we need to embrace and celebrate newcomers who make up the wonderful cultural mosaic that is Canada. At a time in our society when open expressions of division, hatred, and violence are all too evident, churches must be a voice of love, inclusion, justice, and peace. The Christian imperative is to welcome the stranger. We cannot remain on the sidelines. As one of the placards at a recent demonstration stated succinctly, *Silence is Violence*.

Both as churches and as individuals, we need to bridge the divide by reaching out to our brothers and sisters from other faiths and other cultures. Through refugee sponsorship and social activism, churches must stand in solidarity with those discriminated against and marginalized. Individually, we are challenged to confront Islamophobia and racism wherever we encounter it and to change the public narrative about refugees.



Martha Wiebe is a member of Ottawa Mennonite Church as well as CPJ's Board of Directors.

## St. Patrick's Anticipatory Interruption

By Shawn Sanford Beck

**I bind unto myself today, the strong name of the Trinity,  
by invocation of the same, the Three-in-One, and One-in-Three,  
of whom all nature hath creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word.  
Praise to the Lord of my salvation; salvation is of Christ the Lord.**

— *St. Patrick's Breastplate, C.F. Alexander version*

Nestled in the liturgically purple lenten desert is a tiny green shard of resurrection.

Like a verdant weed sprouting up in the newly-ploughed spring garden mud, the feast day of blessed Patrick feels like it should belong to the Paschal season, rather than the penitential 40 days which precede it. But on March 17, almost a month before Easter Sunday, the emerald festivities break out. Sackcloth and ashes are put aside in favour of Irish music, colourful parades, frisky leprechauns, and veritable rivers of green beer. Now, if I were a liturgical purist, I would break into a dour sermon on the corrupting nature of cultural churchianity.

But instead, I'm drawn to St. Patrick's Day as a parable: a tiny, homely hologram of the power of the Spirit to break in where she is not expected, an *anticipatory interruption*.

I love St. Patrick. Something in my quasi-Celtic DNA resonates with the many stories and teachings which come from this early episcopal missionary. One of my favourite tales of Patrick involves his confrontation with the Irish High King at Tara. It was right before the great fire festival of Beltane. Custom dictated that all the households would extinguish their own fires to give the honour of the first new spring fire to the king, who would then be seen as the source of fire for the people. Now, we're not sure if Patrick knew about this custom or not, but he went ahead and lit the Paschal flame on a nearby hilltop before the king lit his.

Well, all hell broke loose. The king was furious, and his druid advisers warned that if the flame of Patrick wasn't extinguished then and there, it would continue to burn for ages to come. So the warriors were sent out to fetch Patrick's head.

This is where the legend gets a bit mixed up. In some versions, Patrick engages with the druids and defeats them in a contest of miracle and magic. Other versions of the story report Patrick and his companions singing and chanting the *lorica*, or "breastplate prayer," which has come down to us in hymnody. The lit-

tle congregation is transformed (some-what *shamanistically!*) into a herd of deer. The soldiers pass by unaware, and Patrick's herd is able to make its escape.

For me, what is most interesting in this particular portion of the Patrick lore is not the somewhat predictable conflict between

Paganism and Christianity. Rather, it is Patrick's courage in defying the custom of the king. Kings and emperors (and plastic presidents) throughout the ages show an unswerving devotion to the exercise of dominion. Power is key: power to manage the religious impulses of the people, power to control the landscape, power to appear godlike in nature.

For the High King of Ireland, the sacred calendar of the druids was a potent tool to reinforce his "divine mandate" to rule. But, wittingly or not, Patrick contradicted that power with a counter-power of the gospel. Or rather, the Spirit lit Patrick's Paschal fire as a sign of resurrection reality breaking into the tightly controlled domain of royal politics. The Easter fire came at the "wrong" time, and it preceded the fire of the king. It was an *anticipatory interruption* of spiritual freedom and joy in the midst of the pre-Beltane shadows. No wonder the king wanted heads to roll!

I hope I don't stretch the parable of St. Patrick's feast too far when I suggest that it has lessons for us in this particular place and time. The powers-that-be in our world are hell-bent on consolidating control. Whether its rejecting refugees, pushing pipelines through Indigenous lands, or perpetuating colonialist agendas, the High Kings of our world are showing their true colours, and by gum, they are not green!

For those of us seeking justice, loving kindness, and trying to walk humbly with our God these days, we are in dire need of that Easter fire. May we, like blessed Patrick before us, find ways to challenge the control of the king, and to become *anticipatory interruptions* of the life of the world to come.

Rev. Shawn Sanford Beck is an Anglican priest, the author of *Christian Animism*, and the founder of the Ecumenical Companions of Sophia. He and his family live off the grid, on a lakeshore homestead, near Thickwood Hills, Saskatchewan, in Treaty Six territory.

