

Heart and Vision – Toronto United Church Council – April 12, 2010

Thank you to the **United Church Council** for presenting me with this award. I especially want to thank **Bruce Mcleod** for presenting it to me. You were one of the only clergy or journalists we could count on a number of years ago when we needed to expose inhumane conditions in homeless shelters. Thank you for sleeping in the men's shelter, for being a witness to those conditions and speaking and writing about them. It produced change.

Andy Barrie how great to see you and not at 7 in the morning!! I'm not a morning person but apparently everyone else is because more people would comment after you did a piece on homelessness than any other media source I've ever been part of.

How wonderful we are here to raise money for the Christian Resource Centre's housing in Regent Park. It was at the CRC that I first began providing health care to homeless people, long before the term Street Nurse even existed.

Yes, I grew up in the United Church but I have to admit my biggest memory was the new dress, hat and shoes I got for Sunday School at Easter. The rest of my experience was I'm sorry to say, a bit bland.

Then, a number of years later something happened that made me take notice of the United Church. I was telling the other honoree tonight, David MacDonald, about it earlier today. The United Church lead a national campaign against the death penalty. They asked the question: **WHY KILL SOMEONE TO SHOW THAT KILLING PEOPLE IS WRONG?** The campaign was **bold and brilliant** and it was won!! **That took heart and vision!** David tells me he voted 4 times in the House of Commons against the return of capital punishment.

Many of you know that when I co-founded the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee it was at a historic time when man made policies created catastrophic conditions – what I call hotspots– clusters of homeless deaths, disease outbreaks, outdoor squats and growing family homelessness. Faith groups played a major role in our work to declare homelessness a national disaster leading to a new federal homelessness program. How often does that happen in our lifetime? The creation of a new federal program.

I have to report to you that the hotspots that I often speak about are joined by a more pronounced and angry 'hotspot' and that is the destructive and painful edge of poverty which is hunger.

I know hunger is not new but ***Hunger is the emerging killer*** - killing people literally and figuratively. Hunger is reducing the lifespan of people living in poverty. It is reducing hope, heart and vision. And once again it is pure and simple government policies that are responsible.

Many Ontarions have suffered very badly since the 1980s cuts to welfare and housing. Then a recession hit. Today, people trying to survive on social assistance got a mere 1% increase in Ontario's spring budget, less than the rate of inflation. Then, to make matters worse the Ontario government cancelled the Special Diet program - simply to save money, not because there is any evidence of abuse by medical or nursing practitioners. We now have a social welfare disaster that will only get worse.

But then on the weekend I saw the policy answer to all this on the subway. It's called EatRightOntario and you can call a 1-800 number to get information on how to improve your health and quality of life through healthy, nutritious eating. So I checked out their website and in the search box I typed in these words: social assistance, ODSP, Ontario Works, Special Diet program and for each I got: **No documents found that match your query**. So then I phoned and spoke to a dietician on their hotline.

Dietician: "What's your question?"

Me: "What are people who are losing their special diet to do now that the program is being cancelled?"

Dietician: "The Special Diet Program is being cancelled? I don't have any information on that? I'll look into it for you."

In closing I want to say that when it comes to fighting poverty, fighting hungry, we must find new ways of demonstrating what it means to have 'HEART AND VISION.'

Here are 4 things you can do in the weeks to come.

- 1) HOME SAFE Toronto – check this film out and use it as a springboard for discussion in your church or organization. It's about family homelessness in Toronto and 905. www.skyworksfoundation.org
- 2) Do the Math at www.dothemath.thestop.org and contact your MPP
- 3) Hunger Inquiry – if you are interested in helping us hold a Hunger Inquiry contact us at www.recession-relief-coalition.org
- 4) Join us the second Tuesday of every month at the Homeless Memorial at the Church of the Holy Trinity. www.tdrc.net

Again, thank you for this honour.

Check with delivery