

The Wealth Gap: Poverty or Justice?

**KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives
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Thank you for inviting me to speak here today.

I love that the word justice is your theme today. Too bad we have to fight for such an honourable and common sense concept.

Imagine this. This past year, since I have been unemployed, yes unemployed as a Street Nurse, I've had the luxury to be able to spend as much time as I want with grandsons: age 4, 2 and the new addition of a 2 month old. Believe me when I say we spend no time on the themes that dominate the rest of my life which include: poverty, homelessness, hunger. We just have fun.



A few weeks ago I was playing a superhero game with the 2 and 4 year old. Suddenly they began to lose their superpowers!! Since I was the wizard I turned to the 4 year old and said "I grant you concentration so you can help focus your brain to solve the emergency." To the 2 year old I said "I give you a heart." This is all related to the Wizard of Oz of course. The 4 year old suddenly stopped his play, turned to me and said simply but very seriously

“Heart is justice”.

Two recent budgets – the federal and the Ontario budget of this week provided no relief for those suffering in poverty. ***No heart there.***

The federal budget was essentially silent on housing. ***No heart there.***

The Ontario budget offered significant cuts in both operating and capital funding for affordable housing. ***No heart there.***

Finance Minister Duncan gave a 1% increase for people on Ontario Works and ODSP. Inflation alone in 2010 was 2.6% and for 2011 is projected to be 2.3%. ***No heart there.***

CBC’s Rex Murphy has said that the concept of home is the essence of our being. He said ‘home’ is a very powerful word, third only to mom and dad.

Home is best understood and articulated by kids. In our ‘Home Safe’ documentary film series (filmmaker is Laura Sky) kids who know homelessness say things like:

“When you have a home, it’s exactly like a protection, sort of like a force field from stuff that are dangerous. So, sometimes, when you are homeless....if you know that you’re getting a decent home and you’re going there soon you kind of get overwhelmed with happiness...(sic)”

We have a long way to go to make home and happiness a reality, a right for all and a policy priority.

So why is it so hard for us to achieve significant social change on the question of poverty, homelessness, hunger?

Well, we simply don’t have enough seed, wind and muscle. Let me explain.

Seeds, Wind, Muscle

I use three metaphors to help me stay focused on the right direction.

The first metaphor is about seeds and it originates with my friend David Walsh, a long-time social justice activist who helped found the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. David said:

“The victories of Gandhi (showing non-violence works), Martin Luther King (civil rights), and the prophetic work of Archbishop Romero (Latin American justice)...sometimes these victories are more like planted seeds that will yield greater victories in future years.”

The second metaphor, which follows the first, is about the wind. The metaphor of the wind is referenced in the Ken Loach film called ‘The Wind that Shakes the Barley’, a title he borrowed from an 18th Century Irish ballad, by Robert Dwyer Joyce.

*“The mountain glen I’ll
seek at morning early
And join the bold united
men, while soft winds
shake the barley.”*

The ballad tells the story of a doomed young Wexford rebel who is about to plunge into the violence of the 1798 Irish rebellion. The reference to barley refers to the fact that the marching rebels would carry barley oats in their pockets as provisions. Years later, barley grew and marked the “croppy-holes”, the mass unmarked graves that the rebels were thrown into. The wind that shakes the barley came to symbolize the regenerative nature of Irish resistance to British rule.

But I first heard about the wind from my friend and long term colleague Beric German who describes ‘the wind’ that moves social change – he means of course that the wind is a people’s movement.

When Beric and I formed Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 13 years ago next month, and declared homelessness a national disaster, when that led to rallies, activism across the country and

when that led to a \$1 billion federal homelessness program – that was the result of ‘the wind’.

TDRC and the 1% campaign

Central to the TDRC campaign was the 1% solution. This was a campaign to convince all governments to reinvest 1% of their budgets into affordable housing, because that’s what they used to spend. Two key concepts of the campaign remain true today.

First, that this disaster was not caused by natural forces and second, that this disaster was man-made. David Hulchanski coined the phrase ‘The weather did not cause mass homelessness’ and internationally recognized social justice advocate and physicist Ursula Franklin declared ‘Homelessness is a man-made disaster...and we have the legal and technical means to end it.’

The third metaphor originates with Naomi Klein, who coined the phrase ‘movement muscle’. She used it to reflect what is needed to fight for climate justice but I think she would agree with me that we need that muscle in a few different places today!

I think of these metaphors – seed – wind – and muscle - to remind me that in our fight against poverty and to end homelessness and hunger we do not need additional research, or provincial or federal inquiries or reviews into poverty, we cannot rely on the charitable endeavours and we can’t just sign petitions or send letters to the newspaper.

We have to do much, much more than that because people are suffering and dying while they are waiting for housing and adequate income supports.

Four people profiled in my book ‘Dying for a Home’ have died.

88 people have died homeless in Toronto since my book ‘Dying for a Home’ was published in early 2008. Those are just the deaths we know about.

As Dri from Tent City said: ***“Homeless die everywhere, in the street or in a hospital, about 100 a year in this city. Every three and a half weeks we have a Walkerton-scale tragedy in Toronto.”***

Last month at Toronto’s Homeless Memorial we added 13 more names of men and women to this monthly memorial.

Conditions today

Despite our best efforts, without a national housing program, conditions in Canada and here in Toronto remain intolerable.

Depression era line-ups for food, for shelter, even to use the shower in some facilities.

Shelter conditions across the country and here in Toronto that in many cases do not meet the UN Standards for Refugee Camps. Only a few years ago a yellow school bus was used to shelter homeless people in Calgary during a cold alert. In Toronto on this night 150 people will be arriving in a church basement for dinner and about half will be allowed to sleep over, on a mat, on a concrete floor about 10 inches from their neighbour. Actually I wrote this and then checked their website – guess what the program closed last Saturday.

Homeless people are forced to rely on themselves and create outdoor squats to live in - conditions which rarely provide for adequate heat, toileting facilities or safety.

We have literally rotten infrastructure in existing housing, ranging from rooming houses to high-rises, left that way without federal infrastructure spending.

We have health catastrophes resulting from forced congregate living which includes exposure to Norwalk virus, tuberculosis, H1N1 and bedbugs.

We have growing family homelessness in many cities across Canada and politicians remaining ignorant or resistant to the opening of proper family shelters. In Calgary, as we show in ***‘Home Safe Calgary’***, families with children were forced for years into a nightly

movement from church basement to church basement until community pressure was mounted for the city to open a real shelter. In Hamilton, my nursing students reported seeing children with their parents Out of the Cold food programs – they were there for dinner. Children!

These situations all worsened by the recession and job losses that lead to more homelessness.

We're in SHOCK!

What we are seeing today is what Naomi Klein meticulously delineates in her book 'Shock Doctrine'. I apply her concepts to this situation. We are in the middle of a national social welfare disaster. We are 'shocked' and meanwhile the new agenda of government dominates.

They promote a growing reliance on the charitable sector to replace existing social services. Consider Toronto's 25+ year history with the faith-based Out of the Cold program.

They cut social programs, social assistance rates, housing funding, and most recently the Special Diet allowance here in Ontario.

Yet, despite numerous reports, social assistance reviews and research, there has been almost no movement on the basic issue of hunger.

It wasn't always like this.

Do you know our history?

We once had a national housing program. Most people don't know its origins.

Returning World War II veterans, facing a housing shortage, fought back for their right to housing. In Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver, women's groups joined in. They protested, they held picket signs, they demonstrated, and they actually took over empty buildings like

the Hotel Vancouver and the Kildare barracks in Ottawa and squatted in them. Franklyn Hanratty, the leader of the Ottawa protest said that:

“scores of Ottawa families are living under intolerable conditions”.

That campaign led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency ‘Wartime Housing Ltd.’ that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which came to be our national housing program. The resulting war-time housing, co-op housing, supportive housing, city ‘public’ housing is today evident all across Canada.

CMHC helped to build affordable housing for close to 2 million Canadians until that program was killed.

That program was quietly killed between 1993 and 1995 by both the federal conservative and liberal governments. By 1998 we had a national disaster on our hands.

Where is the money going?

Federal spending has gone to other priorities – for example corporate tax cuts.

Canada’s 2008 spending in Afghanistan could have built 3,500 units of affordable housing. The 2008 military budget of \$18.2 billion could have funded 9 years of a national housing program. The new financial projections for the purchase of F-35 fighter jets, \$29 billion, could fund the next 14 years of a national housing program.

A quote from Friends House, says it all:

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defence than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.”

Thanks to Tommy Douglas and the 'wind' behind his back, we have a national health program. Douglas also recognized the need for a national housing program, calling for a 'million new homes'. We would never let Medicare be cancelled but we let our national housing program disappear and it continues to be a real challenge to get it back.

I'm often asked 'why are people homeless? What do you think is the primary cause?'

Remember that during our national housing program 650,000 new units were built and 2 million Canadians were housed!

So, why are people homeless?

Well, without housing ministers and their governments actually doing their job, without the funding and construction of affordable housing in an actual program – surprise, surprise homelessness is worse today than in 1998. Today in Canada:

- 8 million people are precariously housed* (Wellesley Institute)
- 1.8 million people lack adequate shelter and are in 'core housing need'
- 300,000 Canadians are homeless
- Thousands sleep outside
- 60,000 are youth
- Over 22,000 are children!!!* (Wellesley Institute)

Here in Ontario the numbers are equally staggering. Our provincial slogan "**Yours to Discover**" allows us to discover this:

- 2006: 122,426 low-income households are on social housing waiting lists
- 2011: the list grew to 142,000 households
- 2011, 2012: there was no new housing money in the Ontario budget
- Ontario Association of Food Banks says that over 400,000 people in Ontario are forced to rely on food banks each month (28% increase since the 2008 recession)

The United Nations has even been forced to weigh in. Miloon Kothari who was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Affordable Housing has toured our country, even spoken with kids in our film and said:

“As a very wealthy country, with significant surplus in federal budget, immediate attention is required for the most vulnerable part of the population living in inadequate housing and living conditions. There is no justification for not massively engaging in the improvement of the situation of all those that face inadequate housing and living conditions throughout Canada.” (March, 2008)

New ways of working are needed. Over the last thirteen years TDRC has worked on homeless issues in a variety of ways.

We’ve done action based research including shelter inspections, we’ve held rallies, press conferences and different actions to call for more shelter beds. We’ve used secret video cameras to expose inhumane conditions, taken people on disaster tours and even facilitated ‘under cover’ visits to shelters by journalists. Larry Scanlan devotes an entire chapter in his book ‘The Year of Living Generously’ to his experiences with us.

Beware new dangers!

Today, governments and conservative policy gurus look to the private sector to solve our housing crisis and that includes support for home ownership models and even the idea of privatizing Canada’s largest landlord Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

Municipal housing solutions are now influenced, believe it or not, by the New York model. George Bush’s homelessness czar Philip Mangano, has spent a lot of time in Canadian cities promoting his ‘Housing First’ model and what are known as ‘10 year plans’ to end homelessness.

Housing First policies function as the overall umbrella for practices that include policies that target homeless people, new laws that criminalize visibly homeless people, the closing of shelter beds, street

counts of people who are homeless, streets to homes type programs and the de-funding of survival supplies and outreach.

Policies that target range from the types of street furniture cities choose to where police cameras are situated.

Streets to Homes programs are one of the primary tools used to target the most visibly homeless, and it is doomed to failure without adequate, affordable, safe housing for people to move into and enough money for people to live on and eat.

Rules that prohibit city funded agencies from providing life-saving outreach supplies such as hot food and sleeping bags, seem the ultimate insult to basic human rights.

Without fighting these practices, we will see a growing intolerance and hate directed towards people facing housing need.

What can you/we do?

Challenge our traditional way of thinking, talking and doing.

For example, it's time to put into plain language and to make the connections about what is happening on the global scale to here in Canada, in Toronto. In 'Shock Doctrine' Naomi Klein makes it clear, it is about privatization, government non-responsibility and funding cuts to social programs.

A primary example is the language around poverty reduction.

Would we call for reduction in violence against women? Reduction in gay bashing? Reduction in child abuse? NO.

Enough time has passed that we have to accept there is not a sincere attempt to 'fight' poverty at the provincial or the national level. More studies we don't need. More panels we don't need.

And finally, there is something I hope you will adopt.

1/3, 1/3, 1/3

A shift of our response to poverty, homelessness and hunger can be structured by what I call the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 approach.

I recently spent time at a church food program and you know at these programs there are anywhere from 50-100 volunteers involved, making delicious hot food for people who are homeless.

A nursing class recently collected socks for TDRC.

My housing co-op recently held a food drive.

A Scarborough resident called us last week to learn where he could donate his old sleeping bag.

These are all thoughtful efforts but: imagine this. Whether it is your time, your energy, your passion, your writing skills or your money – consider allocating:

- 1/3 to front-line services. Help support front-line organizations in your community that help people with food, shelter, clothing;
- 1/3 to help house people. Support community organizations such as St. Clares' Multifaith Housing Society. One of our current projects is a 190 unit building near Queen and Dufferin that will be both affordable, offer housing supports and house families.
- 1/3 to the advocacy work. Support the anti-poverty and homeless/housing advocacy groups that do not receive government funding but help to plant the seeds, create the wind and flex their muscle.

I know there are many resources out there for you. Citizens for Public Justice (www.cpj.ca), a respected Christian-based advocacy organization that will have an online election resource posted by April 1; and your own Kairos Justice Coalition (www.kairoscanada.org), which is supported by the Anglican Church; [Candidates Against Poverty](#), is working to encourage all election candidates to pledge action to narrow Canada's growing rich-poor gap; GOOD FRIDAY WALK FOR JUSTICE, April 22. Please come out to the April 9 rally

to call for Respect from City Hall for our communities, our services and good jobs.

I'm going to canvass this afternoon for the federal candidate I am supporting. I hope you will do the same – if you haven't done it before the easiest way to get involved is simply walk into their campaign office and say I'm here, I can give you x number of hours, and ask 'what can I do to help?'

In the long term we need your support for our Constitutional Charter Challenge on the right to housing.

Housing is a Human Right.