

Standing in Solidarity

2019 Social Justice Vestry Motion

In view of the drastically rising economic inequity in our province and in the world, and because governments at various levels often appear indifferent to the needs of the most vulnerable, this year's vestry motion asks your parish to make a commitment to protect and stand with all who are living in poverty, through direct local and parish outreach and through meaningful advocacy, calling on governments to fulfill their responsibilities to all our citizens, and speaking out clearly when these obligations are not met. We make these commitments based on our baptismal vows, and understand them to be an imperative of our faith.

Because we follow Jesus Christ as Lord, who preached good news to the poor, who declared that whatever we do for those who lack food, drink or clothing, the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner, we do for Him, and who commands us to love our neighbours as ourselves,

And because our baptismal covenant calls us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being,

We, the vestry of the parish of _____ commit to standing in solidarity with those living in poverty by taking the following actions:

- 1) Increasing our direct outreach activity by _____
and
- 2) Increasing our advocacy by _____.

Suggestions for Possible Action (choose at least one from each column)

We commit to increasing our direct outreach by:

- Increasing our parish FaithWorks giving by 10% over last year
- Researching and pursuing options to expand our outreach to our neighbourhood, with a report on results to the 2020 vestry. (Options may include establishing or expanding a community meal, Deacons' cupboard, or clothing exchange; starting a community garden to donate fresh produce to the local food bank or meal program, etc. Remember to do your homework first – what needs exist in the community that are not already being met?)
- Other: _____

We commit to increasing our advocacy by:

- Partnering with groups and coalitions working to maintain the minimum wage increase and labour protections of Bill 148, and advocating for these policies ourselves
- Collaborating with groups and coalitions working to establish a minimum income threshold (whether through basic income or an increase in social assistance rates) and essential health benefits
- Building alliances with groups providing, and working for, housing for all
- Standing in solidarity with those providing safe injection sites and other harm reduction services
- Standing in solidarity with Indigenous people whose treaty and other rights are under threat, and working to support justice for them
- Other: _____

Standing in Solidarity

2019 Social Justice Vestry Motion Backgrounder

Canada is, overall, a wealthy country, and Ontario a wealthy province. Even so, 16.8% of Canadians, and 17% of Ontarians – more than 1 in every 6 people - live in poverty.¹ Poverty rates are even higher for children, especially children in single-parent families. Thirty of the fifty-nine federal ridings in the Diocese of Toronto have child poverty rates above the national average. Nine of these are among the thirty federal ridings with the highest child poverty rates in Canada, including Toronto Centre, where 40% of children live in poverty, Scarborough-Guildwood (32.9%), Etobicoke North (30.8%), York-South Weston (29.9%) and Don Valley East (28.7%).² Poverty rates are also higher than the national average for single people with disabilities, racialized, and Indigenous people.

Across Ontario, income levels for the most vulnerable have not kept pace with inflation, much less with rising housing costs. Social assistance rates remain between 30% and 50% below the poverty line. In Mississauga, food bank use by seniors has risen by 52% in the past two years, reflecting a growing gap between pension benefits and the cost of living.³ Even in a relatively affluent area like Barrie, the number of people living in poverty has increased significantly, with food bank use up by 36% since 2011.⁴ Ideally, employment would provide a pathway out of poverty for most people, but the rise of precarious (part-time, temporary and casual) employment has trapped many workers in poverty, which is exacerbated by lack of access to affordable childcare for working families.

Planned increases to social assistance and changes to social assistance rules that would have begun to ease the burden for the most vulnerable people in our province have been cut or put on “pause”, perhaps to be cancelled, by the new Ontario government. While the increase of the minimum wage to \$14/hr in 2018 represented a significant gain for low-wage workers, the freezing of this wage until 2020 and the repeal of key protections for precarious workers, including pay equity, two paid sick days per year, and scheduling provisions will make it harder for low-wage workers to escape poverty, particularly if they have to choose between taking a sick day and being paid, or making childcare arrangements and keeping their job.

Poverty is not just about money. Poverty makes people sick, when they cannot afford dental care or prescription medications, cannot afford to take a day off to recover from an illness or injury, or must choose between nutritious groceries and paying the rent. Poverty exacerbates mental and emotional stress on individuals, couples, and families. It erodes people’s dignity and their sense of belonging to and participating in the wider society.

The language used to deny and erode protections for the most vulnerable exacerbates this loss of dignity. People on social assistance and in minimum wage work are often publicly derided as lazy, lacking in ambition, and fraudulent. The reality is that people go on social assistance because of employment, family, or health emergencies – the kind of misfortune to which none of us is immune. Many minimum wage workers work long hours, often at multiple jobs and in demanding conditions, to make ends meet. And the rate of fraud is no higher among social assistance recipients than in any other walk of life.

Jesus came to “bring good news to the poor” (Matthew 11:5, Luke 4:18), declared that whatever we do for those in need – “the least of these” – we do as if to him (Matthew 25:31-46) and called us to “love our neighbours as ourselves” (Mark 12:31). As followers of Jesus, we are called by our baptism to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. We must, therefore, protect and stand with our neighbours living in poverty, not only by reaching out to meet their immediate needs but by calling for public policies that enable them to live in dignity.

¹ Poverty Trends 2018, Citizens for Public Justice. Source: Statistics Canada: After-tax low income status of tax filers and dependents based on Census Family Low Income Measure, by family type and family type composition, 2016 income year.

² <https://campaign2000.ca/child-poverty-by-federal-ridings/>

³ <http://www.themississaugafoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Face-of-Hunger-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.simcoe.com/news-story/8382666-why-the-number-of-low-income-residents-has-grown-in-barrie-since-2006/>