

His Worship, John Tory  
Mayor of Toronto  
City Hall, 2nd Floor, 100 Queen St. W.  
Toronto ON M5H 2N2

May 6, 2020

Dear Mr. Tory,

Since the beginning of the pandemic, churches in Toronto's Downtown East have stepped up to provide the basic necessities of life for homeless people. We are handing out meals, toiletries, and when available, sanitizer and masks. Our staff, clergy, and laity, who are not health care professionals, politicians or city-operated have been making do, trying to minimize contact while meeting people's most basic needs.

We are doing this dangerous work because like generations of Christians before us, we believe it is our mandate that compels us to protect life. **But we are also doing it because the City of Toronto has failed in its mandate to ensure accessible basic health needs and safe housing accommodations for the poorest people and to ensure the overall safety of all Torontonians.** These two failures have met in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than a month ago we heard Councillor Joe Cressy announce that the City of Toronto was pursuing the acquisition of hotels and vacant residential buildings to provide safe shelter for people experiencing homelessness, accessible hand washing stations with portable toilets and we were most encouraged. We imagined that there would be a swift and positive impact on the people who are using our outreach programs. Once inside their own rooms, people could shelter in place and reduce their risk of becoming infected or infecting others, and churches in Toronto's Downtown East could return to a role improving the quality of life for the most vulnerable neighbours. No longer would we be making and handing out as many as 200 meals a day at every open location. No longer would we be begged for tents and sleeping bags so that people could stay in the ravines, alleys or city sidewalks rather than in unsafe accommodations of shelters.

Since Councillor Cressy's announcement, the lines of people appearing to pick up a meal and other necessities at our churches every day have grown much longer. We are aware of very few people who have been moved into these promised hotel rooms or heard of safe accommodations in the shelter system. **Our volunteers and staff are overwhelmed. We cannot indefinitely shoulder the burden of the City's slow and seemingly reluctant pace.** The virus demands constant vigilance and adequate public health measures. Our resources are not infinite, and our people are beginning to weary. There are significant risks inherent in continuing to operate at such high volumes with our volunteers, staff, and laity.

As we told you last month, downtown churches have supported the call to immediately open hotel rooms and swiftly find permanent housing for those experiencing homelessness. The increasing incidence of COVID-19 in the shelter system indicates that our call for action was well-founded. As cities throughout the world have found, we cannot end this virus until we isolate, test and treat people in congregate living settings that are currently without social distancing and hand washing protocols. If we are to be COVID free, everyone will need a room with a door and a bathroom. **Overstretched churches cannot provide this. The City can.**

We need your help not only to end the massive provision of necessities by volunteers working in dangerous conditions, but to help make these programs as safe as possible in the meantime. We need on-site testing, public health guidance and support, and a steady and adequate supply of PPE for our volunteers and staff.

But the people lining up for necessities need more. They need rooms with bathroom and shower access. They need laundry facilities. They need money to buy food. Until they can obey the order to shelter in place, they will always be at risk.

We are notably concerned about the vulnerability of Indigenous people at this time. As Sandra Campbell of Toronto Urban Native Ministry puts it, *“Presently the shelter system is unsafe, overpopulated, and systematically institutionalized, there is no realistic accessible place for Indigenous street folks and the vulnerable community to wash their hands, take showers, safely defecate, especially at times when everything is closed. Furthermore, some of the vulnerable community members have tried to reach outside the faith communities for extra help. However, they have experienced either being harassed, ticketed, or arrested with handcuffs.”*

**The City cannot take for granted the goodwill of Toronto’s Downtown East churches and their volunteers. They have stepped up in the initial emergency pandemic. They cannot maintain this pace indefinitely. The City must mobilize significant resources to improve the living conditions of homeless people in order to end this pandemic.**

We continue to help meet the needs of vulnerable Torontonians, and we continue to welcome opportunities to work with City Council and staff in serving those in greatest need. We ask that you act swiftly in the basic health needs and house the vulnerable and thereby reduce the transmission of the virus.

Yours faithfully,

Alan Beattie, Sanctuary Ministries

Kathy Biasi, St. James Cathedral

The Rev. Karen J. Bowles, Metropolitan United Church

Sandra Campbell, Toronto Urban Native Ministry

Megan Carver, Metropolitan United Church

Stephanie Cunti, Metropolitan United Church

The Rev’d Dr. Alison Falby, All Saints Church-Community Centre

Zachary Grant, Church of the Holy Trinity

The Rev’d Dr Walter Hannam, St. Bartholomew, Regent Park

The Rev. Sherman Hesselgrave, Church of the Holy Trinity

Ric Hillyer, Toronto Urban Native Ministry

Angie Hocking, Church of the Redeemer

The Rev. James Houston, Church of the Holy Trinity

The Rev. Roshni Jayawardena, The Church of the Redeemer

The Rev. Jim Keenan, Saint Luke’s United Church

The Rev. Leigh Kern, Toronto Urban Native Ministry

The Rev. Canon Steven Mackison, The Church of the Redeemer

The Rev. Jason Francis Meyers, Metropolitan United Church

Keith Nunn, Churchwarden, Church of the Holy Trinity

The Rev. Walter Ridley, co-chair of Peace and Social Justice, Metropolitan United Church

The Rev. Evan ᐃᐅᐅ Smith- Toronto Urban Native Ministry

The Very Rev. Stephen Vail, Dean of Toronto and Rector of St. James Cathedral

The Rev. Canon Andrew Wesley, Church of the Redeemer/Council Fire Native Cultural Centre

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