

26 November 2007

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

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Re: Ending Poverty in Canada

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

As nations leaders of Canadian churches and members of the Canadian Council of Churches, we call on our government to take immediate steps to develop and implement a national poverty reduction strategy.

Concern for the poor and a commitment to address poverty are deeply held aspects of our Christian faith, as we know they are for many faiths. We believe we are called, as churches and as Canadians, to address the social and economic structures which impoverish *thousands* of children, parents, and single people in Canada, and keep them in the conditions of poverty.

In his life and ministry, Jesus identifies with and is present among “the least of these.” We see all humans as possessing a profound dignity because all have been created in the image of God. Poverty is an assault upon the dignity of the poor, robbing them of the opportunity to develop and share their gifts with the world. Poverty also undermines the dignity of the wealthy, for when we fail to share our goods and selves

with the poor we fail to live out the image of God who gave his life for the healing of the world.

In Chapter 25:45 of the Gospel of St. Matthew, in the Parable of the sheep and the goats, Christ calls us to acts of compassion: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting those imprisoned. These verses also point us toward a much more profound compassion. It is the nations of the world which are gathered for judgment. Thus we are called, as churches and as a nation, to address the social and economic structures which afflict the poor and keep them in the condition of poverty.

The barriers that prevent people from living fully differ across Canada and between communities. This is why developing and implementing a poverty reduction strategy is important. An effective strategy will pay attention to particular groups with specific needs, such as:

- the more than 750,000 children whose life chances are limited by conditions of poverty;
- the 42% of urban Aboriginals who live in poverty as well as Aboriginal People living on reserves or remote areas;
- the increasing number of immigrants who remain in poverty up to a decade after coming to Canada.

Canada is a prosperous country that can afford to do better. We note the growing level of wealth among the richest in Canadian society, while others lack basic resources such as affordable housing and decent wages for the work they do, face discrimination and racism because of their ethnic, cultural or national heritage, or are prevented by poverty from learning the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century economy.

The growing gap between the wealthiest and those living on the margins in Canada threatens the social cohesion that gives Canada a positive reputation in the world.

Poverty is also an important social determinant of health. Addressing poverty, then, is an essential step in the building of healthy communities.

Reducing poverty in Canada is an achievable goal. Uniting Canadians to remove the barriers that marginalize people and limit their potential to live in dignity and contribute to the development of Canada requires visionary leadership. We are asking you to exercise that leadership.

Together, as Canadian Christian religious leaders, we call on the Canadian government to establish a high level government task force mandated to develop a national poverty reduction strategy. We propose that the task force include people living in poverty, immigrants, and representatives of Aboriginal communities, along with people who work with them.

An effective national poverty reduction strategy in our view must include measurable goals and timelines, publicly comprehensible indicators that measure the poverty in Canada, and a means for monitoring and evaluating progress. Most of all it must include budget commitments that focus on the needs of vulnerable people. Because the lives of people are at stake, we further urge the government to establish this task force and initiate a poverty reduction strategy within the next budget year.

We would appreciate a response from you which indicates what steps your government will take to develop and implement a strategy which will reduce poverty in Canada.

Sincerely,

The Most Reverend Fred Hiltz
Archbishop and Primate
The Anglican Church of Canada

His Grace Bishop Bagrat Galstanian
Primate
Armenian Holy Apostolic Church, Canadian Diocese

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Bellous
Executive Minister
Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec

The Rev. Jeremy Bell
Executive Minister
Baptist Union of Western Canada

The Right Rev. Maurice Hicks
General Superintendent
British Methodist Episcopal Church

Most Rev. V. James Weisgerber
Archbishop of Winnipeg
President
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Dale Dewar
Presiding Clerk
Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

The Rev. Dr. Catherine Hubbard
Regional Minister
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada

The Rev. Bruce Adema
Director of Canadian Ministries
Christian Reformed Church in North America

The Rev. Fr. Marcos Marcos
Protopriest
The Coptic Orthodox Church of Canada

The Rev. Fr. Messale Engeda
Presiding Priest
Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in the Western Hemisphere

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson
National Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

His Eminence Metropolitan Sotirios
Archbishop
Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada)

The Rev. J.B. Suderman
Moderator
Mennonite Church Canada

The Right Rev. Seraphim
Bishop of Ottawa and Canada
Orthodox Church in America

The Rev. Zbigniew Kozar
Pastor
St. John's Cathedral Polish Catholic Church

The Rev. Dr. J.H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Moderator, 133rd General Assembly
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Commissioner William W. Francis
Territorial Commander
The Salvation Army, Canada and Bermuda Territory

The Rev. John Kapteyn
Clerk
Regional Synod of Canada, Reformed Church in America

His Eminence JOHN
Primate
The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

The Right Rev. David Guiliano
Moderator
The United Church of Canada

CC. The Honourable Stéphane Dion, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
The Honourable Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
The Honourable Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party

Members of Parliament

The Canadian Council of Churches is the largest ecumenical body in Canada, now representing 21 churches of Anglican, Evangelical, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. We are one of the few ecumenical bodies in the world that includes such a range of Christian churches. The officers and staff of the Council are drawn from the whole diversity of traditions represented by the member churches.