

Enough for All to Flourish: 2013 MPP Visit Backgrounder

As people of faith, we believe that a socially just society is one in which all citizens have enough to flourish. The Premier's aspiration for a "fair society" resonates with this belief and offers hope to the many people in our province striving for justice¹. Yet our experience tells us that despite the improving economy, the situation in our communities remains dire – so much so that one parish in Welland has opened a hygiene products bank to meet the basic needs of its neighbours.

Accordingly, we are increasingly putting our energies into a vision of prophetic social justice-making. By coming alongside those seeking justice and leveraging community partnerships, we are striving to further the goal of eradicating poverty within our province in order to achieve systemic and transformational change. As part of the renewal of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan, Anglicans across southern Ontario are meeting with their MPPs to ensure bold action is taken towards addressing poverty. The five areas of advocacy for bold action are as follows:

1) **SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES: No one can live on \$626 per month**

We also are acutely aware of the inadequacy of social assistance rates through our various ministries. A single person on the Ontario Works social assistance program receives only \$626 per month for all of his or her needs. This is far below the poverty line and a major reason why more than 400,000 Ontarians each month must rely on food bank handouts to avoid starving.

Many individuals and organizations are calling for a substantial increase for people living in deep poverty. *Brighter Prospects*, the report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, backed the Put Food in the Budget campaign and many others like Bishop Michael, who called upon the government for an immediate \$100 monthly increase to social assistance rates while an evidence-based and more dignified approach was implemented.

What we request: An immediate \$100 increase for single people living on Ontario Works as a down payment on serious poverty reduction.

2) **HOUSING: A deepening crisis of affordability**

Many of our churches are amongst those who are providing a broad range of services and support for the many people in our society unable to find affordable housing. Ontario's desperate shortage of affordable and supportive housing continues to worsen. Affordable housing waiting lists in Hamilton alone have reached over 6,000 households with wait times averaging two to three years. However, this is far from being only a big-city problem; it affects people all over our Diocese and across Ontario. In the Niagara Region, for example, about 5,500 people are on the waiting list for affordable housing. They face a three to five year wait.²

Our Joint Assembly Declaration on Housing and Homeless renewed our commitment to ensuring that all governments "respect, protect and fulfill the right to adequate housing" for all citizens.³ Investments in affordable housing pay off for all of us, in many ways as a decent, safe place to live reduces costs such as healthcare, while enabling students to perform better.

What we request: A provincial investment of \$120 million for new affordable housing as Ontario's share of a renewed federal Affordable Housing Initiative.

¹ The Way Forward: 2013 Ontario Legislature Throne Speech. <http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/news/thronespeech.php?Lang=EN>

² Ontario Non-profit Housing Association *Wait Lists Survey 2012 Report*
http://www.onpha.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Waiting_Lists_2012&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=13281

³ Joint Assembly: Declaration on Housing and Homelessness. <http://jointassembly.ca/delegates/acc/cc/joint-assembly-declaration>

3) MINIMUM WAGE: A job should enable workers to live in dignity, not poverty

An Advisory Panel to provide advice on how to adjust Ontario's minimum wage has been established and will report to the Minister of Labour this fall. The minimum wage plays an important role in protecting vulnerable workers. As an employer, the Diocese has come to recognize the inadequacy of minimum wage rates and as a result all diocesan employees are paid living wages. Our Synod also passed a motion requesting all parish employees earn at least \$12.50/hr by 2014. A single person working at the current minimum wage for 40 hours a week earns only \$21,320 per year, which leaves them living below the poverty line.

While there are a variety of concerns expressed about minimum wage increases, regular increases in the minimum wage have proven to be good for the economy, with additional earnings overwhelmingly spent locally. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that there is no discernible effect on employment.⁴

What we request: An immediate increase to the minimum wage from \$10.25 to \$11.50 per hour. As well as a commitment to the principle that the minimum wage should ensure a full time, full year worker earns an annual income 10% above the Ontario Income Poverty Line [LIM 50].

4) INDEXATION OF RATES: Keeping up with cost of living increases is a matter of fairness

This year the Consumer Price Index is up about 1.1% for Canada on a year over year basis. Many employers, the Diocese included, recommend increases in compensation in order to ensure that wages are fair and maintain their buying power. Unfortunately this has not always been the case for minimum wage and social assistance rates. While Ontario has increased social assistance rates by more than 16% since the Liberal government came to power, the cost of living has risen by 22% during that same time. The effect is a cut to rates – and one only needs to realize that social assistance rates are lower now than they were 20 years ago, with inflation factored in to understand the significance rates that are not indexed.

What we request: Indexing the minimum wage and social assistance rates so that they keep pace with inflation.

5) Set Targets: Reducing poverty for all Ontarians should be a priority

For the past five years, the Government of Ontario has focussed on children in its poverty reduction strategy. This was a good place to start, and we applaud the government's efforts which lifted 47,000 children and their families out of poverty. But poverty affects many more Ontarians. Our baptismal promises call use to strive for the dignity of every human being. So we believe it is time to broaden the province's poverty reduction efforts so that the strategy addresses the poverty experienced by people of all ages, including children.

What we request: Set targets in Ontario's next poverty reduction strategy that aim to reduce poverty for all Ontarians, not just children.

Prepared collaboratively by the Anglican Dioceses of Toronto and Niagara

⁴ Schmitt, John. *Why Does the Minimum Wage Have No Discernible Effect on Employment?* Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2013.