

The North End Lives: A Journey Through Poverty Terrain in Hamilton, Ontario¹

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"We have a surprise for you, why don't you stop by at our house tonight!"

After a number of years of employment as a shipping clerk, Jason had become the victim of a factory plant closure. His wife Pam spent much of her time taking care of their thirty-year-old daughter, Brenda, who had a severe developmental disability. Unable to secure work, the family had ended up on welfare, after their unemployment insurance was exhausted. They eagerly participated in many of the Welcome Inn's programs and had recently begun to offer their talents on a volunteer basis.

We entered their small, older home and were given a relaxed welcome, so rare in a busy world. Unfortunately, the room showed evidence of Jason's inability to overcome his compulsion to smoke. This, plus cramped living space and worn furnishings, added up to less than the neatness to which we were accustomed.

Coffee was already brewing. But before I could take a sip from the steaming cup she handed to me, Pam enthusiastically burst out, "Guess what? We've received some inheritance money - four thousand dollars! When the money arrived, we both immediately told ourselves, 'Now we have something to give to the Centre!'"

Opening the envelope that she handed us, we were taken aback to see that the "something" was thirteen one-hundred-dollar bills, just short of one third of their inheritance.

"You can't give that much," we protested. "You need it yourselves. That's a lot more than a 10 percent tithe."

Undeterred, Jason continued, "With the rest of the money we want to get a better stove and some newer furniture. That old couch you're sitting on definitely needs replacing. You know how we like to have people come to our place. But the Centre also needs our help."²

I thought of our own generosity as a family – carefully tracking our modest income and giving 10 per cent to charity. I remembered the substantial loan we had received from our parents so we could purchase a house, plus the occasional extra thousand dollar inheritance gifts, both of which had somehow not played into the tithing equation. I contemplated how a family living below the poverty line could give so lavishly. I had noticed the remarkable generosity of many people who lived in poverty, giving both financially of their meager resources and in other ways. I had to concede that this is the kind of generosity Jesus would affirm.

Mennonite Roots

Growing up Mennonite on a farm in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, I had been taught the value of hard work, saving money for a "rainy day," care in my spending habits, and the importance of a good education. Mennonites who had settled in Southern Ontario in the 1930s and the decades following (as well as earlier), had prospered, so that costly family cars and up-to-date farm machinery were being purchased, new houses and household furnishings were becoming the norm, and people were beginning to travel around the globe in record numbers. We had worked hard and God had blessed us richly.

I had also been taught to give a tithe to the work of the church which includes mission, and to remember the "unfortunate" or "underprivil-

aged”. While these “poor” folk needed our charity, it was argued, they should be encouraged to work and to improve their own lot – as we had.

The poor in Canada should be pitied; they should be helped with emergency food hampers, but ultimately they should be encouraged to get themselves out of poverty. While occasional helpful overtures were made when they sought work on our farm, very few meaningful relationships developed. Perhaps there are reasons for this, as Gerald W. Schlabach’s analysis indicates:

We, our parents, or grandparents have striven mightily to put poverty behind us. Many have succeeded. But we haven’t stopped at a comfortable lifestyle. We strive on. In the process, we draw farther and farther back from the face of the poor at home and abroad. After all, they represent everything we are trying to escape.³

Prophetic Voices

In the 1950s and 60s a growing number of Mennonites began moving off the farms and, as Frank Epp, who himself ran for political office, points out, they began to find their way into the “economic, political, and social structures of our time”:

We have a Mennonite M.P. [Member of Parliament] and political participation on all levels; we have a rapidly growing strata of Mennonite businessmen, of which some are already in the millionaire class, and some approaching it; we have a large professional group entering successfully into almost every vocational opportunity...⁴

Aware that all was not right with self-serving complacency, many of these “off the farm folk” joined major Mennonite Consultations on the Church’s witness to society, with as many as 350 delegates⁵ participating in some of these. Conclusions such as the following urged the Church to come out of its protective community boundaries and embrace the challenges of an urban society:

One of the most encouraging features of our Conference (General Conference Mennonite Church) is the fact that it has recently become aware of its social responsibility and our presence bears witness to the fact that it is prepared to accept this responsibility. We must continue to search and to

study – to search out the problem areas, the people in need, and develop an ongoing program of research and study to enable us to effectively meet their needs in the light of the teachings of our Master⁶

Strongly rooted in the Mennonite Church and its educational institutions, my wife Doreen, and I applauded these discussions. Doreen with her teaching degree and I with a Master of Social Work and 5 years of practice in northern British Columbia began feeling an inner call to serve in the church context, where it seemed the Holy Spirit was nudging the Mennonite church to become engaged with the social problems of the city. Voluntary Service in Hamilton, Ontario became the setting in which this calling could be fulfilled. I still remember vividly how in my application I wrote that I hoped to learn to “integrate my Christian faith with my profession.”

A Stirring in Hamilton

In 1965 a young urban congregation⁷ with a membership of just under 30, consisting of primarily young Mennonite professional folk, finally were able to construct their own church building in the more well-to-do university area of the city. But the participants of Hamilton Mennonite Church were not satisfied with only an inner focus. There must be another reason, one that was missional; this is why they had been led to come together from the greater Hamilton region to form an Anabaptist faith community. With the leadership of Herman Enns, a visionary young pastor, they prayed, talked with city officials, met with community leaders, and literally walked the streets to search out an area of need. Their discernment took them “across the tracks,” 9 kilometres from the church, to the notorious North End, the oldest section of Hamilton, known for its poverty. On June 6, 1966, 8 months after the church building dedication service, they opened up a storefront ministry and named it “Welcome Inn”. With a Voluntary Service Unit headed up by Margarete and Menno Ediger and volunteers from the congregation, programs developed where those living below the poverty line could receive help and interact with those who were more well-to-do.

Our journey with the Welcome Inn began in July 1971, when we sold our home in what was considered one of the better areas of Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and moved with 3 young sons into a 95-year-old house in the inner-city of Hamilton. We came with a strong motivation to serve and to help, but in the course of 18 years we learned how people living in the most trying situations are remarkably

gifted and that God was already present in the North End. As some graffiti that appeared one day at the local school, boldly declared, we discovered that indeed, “The North End Lives!” What were some of the areas of growth we experienced?

When we arrived our mandate at Welcome Inn was not primarily to give hand-outs to the needy. It was not to categorize the residents with psychological illnesses and prescribe clinical professional counseling. And it was not to simply bring people to church or do church planting. Our calling was to be a “Christian presence” in a community where people were experiencing the devastation present in an older section of the city where poverty was well entrenched. We were to listen attentively and respond with caring. As Herman Enns put it on the tenth anniversary:

The Welcome Inn is a place where people reach out and touch people. It is a friendly place where all who knock may enter and experience a hospitality that makes them feel at home... Mennonite evangelism is beautiful... God is love. Persons come to God only as they experience his love ... As the evangelist or the Voluntary Service Worker has won the trust of the person by ministering to real needs, needs which the person has identified, the God whom he or she represents can also become trustworthy.⁸

This “Christian Presence” principle, modeled after Jesus who responded to direct needs in an integrated way whether more physically or spiritually or emotionally evident, became a developing inner motivation that continues to this day. The thoughts that Vern Ridsdale from the neighbourhood expressed continue to be felt by numerous people living in poverty who discover the Welcome Inn:

I feel kind of forgotten by the world here and your home visits are a big help. We sit down and have a real heart to heart talk.⁹

We learned the importance of putting aside our preconceived ideas of service and evangelism and entering the pain of poverty through active listening, through presence, and through building on a glimpse of how God already was at work in the community.

“The Rich and the Poor Meet together”

Today in Canada, in our churches and society at large, a fair amount of goodwill is directed toward those living below the poverty line; the

goodwill is seen in the energy going into collecting food for the food bank and distributing food hampers. While such emergency measures are necessary, this kind of charity places one group of people in the category of “bountiful givers,” people with power, while the others are the “needy recipients,” people with no power.

We quickly discovered that North Enders, while appreciative of these measures, are not interested in becoming primarily the objects of good will. They want to contribute, as local resident, Doreen Hoekstra, passionately stated during the production of a video on the Welcome Inn ministry:

We may not have a lot of money to share and things, but we have a lot of love to share. “Good News” is being able to say to myself that I have something good, and that is that I care about people and help them.¹⁰

Theologically and practically we learned that God created and textured us in such a way that all people have the gift of God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27). As we served those living below the poverty line we also began to recognize and receive their gifts of love and friendship and hospitality and generosity and much more. What would happen if every organization and church that now contributes charity, would feel in equal measure the responsibility to receive the giftedness of the poor? Would our places of worship, our use of financial resources, our educational facilities, and yes the very fabric of our society be any different?

We learned that it is not enough to simply recognize that all people have in common the “created in the image of God” heritage. God intends for all these folk, whether well-to-do or living below the poverty line to interact with one another. As the ancient writer of Proverbs phrases it: The rich and the poor meet together; The Lord is the Maker of them all. (Proverbs 22:2, KJV)

A games evening at the Welcome Inn Center brought a good mix of educated and well-to-do volunteers together with people who struggled daily with personal poverty issues.

I noticed in particular the laughter at a table of four. There were Jim and Kathleen¹¹ living in subsidized housing because of health issues and long-term unemployment. Across from them at the card table sat Henri and Sue. Henri was a successful personnel administrator who was always advancing to more demanding positions that took him into situations with high-ranking civic officials. Sue, also well educated, was a music teacher. Attending professional concerts was important to both. The cost of one of their evenings out would have easily eaten up several weeks of Jim and Kathleen’s grocery money. The economic divide was

colossal, as dramatic as that in the story Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

That night I discovered a miracle taking place right in our midst. I no longer saw the group at this table as volunteers and people on public assistance, as merely a wealthy couple giving their time to the happy recipients of a generous gift. All four were enjoying themselves immensely, joking with each other, their masks dropped. True friendship was beginning to emerge.

Whenever the “rich and poor meet together” genuinely, there is laughter, also in heaven. Such miracles in relationship, like those that continue to happen at Welcome Inn today, become a gift toward the creation of a peaceful world, as God intends.

Lois Corney was developmentally challenged. She eventually became a physically challenged school drop-out who could hardly walk. She lived in poverty, on a government disability allowance with no other financial resources. In her eagerness to contribute she could become abrasive by overestimating her abilities. She had experienced decades of rejection in her life. One day she brought us a poem with the following prayer:

Thanks Heavenly Father for accepting me
When I pray with all my heart.
I give you thanks at all times for helping me
To become one of your favourite children.
This I pray in your name. Amen and Amen.¹²

My response at first was indignation; how dare she claim to be one of God’s favourite children? Then I had to realize that for years there was that old destructive script that had been played over and over again in her mind, “You’re a nobody”. Unfortunately societal attitudes and social structures had reinforced this negativity. When she discovered the “Good News” in the company of caring people, she began to realize that she too was a person of worth. Indeed she was God’s favourite like the rest of us. What a powerful message to those who live above the poverty line. When we learn to applaud Lois’s claim and to give her the God-given dignity she deserves, “Good News to the poor” becomes Good News to the rich as well. Together we embrace the profound truth that we are all “God’s favourite children.”

A Faith Community Emerges out of a Service Ministry

When the founding Welcome Inn Directors returned for a visit and were asked to speak to the emerging congregation at the Centre,

Margarete Ediger's opening words as she stood at the makeshift podium were: "Who would have thought that out of the old green sewing table would emerge a pulpit."¹³

After several years of an expanding service ministry that reached out to people of all ages and responded to both personal and community issues, people started referring to the Welcome Inn as their church. With a new interest in the spiritual dimension and people coming to Faith in Christ, groups were begun to talk about the "deeper questions of life" and to study the Bible. Out of these emerged a congregation that complemented the other ministries of the centre. I will never forget the day when the Welcome Inn sign was changed to say: "Welcome Inn Community Center and Church". In an unhurried and natural way "deed and word" had come together.

Over the years the Welcome Inn congregation has been and continues to be an integrated aspect of the total Welcome Inn ministry. As persons discover the "Inn" with its hospitality emphasis, they are invited to participate wherever they feel comfortable, whether it's in one of the educational groups or a Bible study, a justice program or coming to worship on Sunday morning.

Justice cries out from so many corners of our society. But unless events break into our lives - events like a man peddling for change on a corner or a picture on TV of a child living in poverty - and force us to ask questions, we often do not notice. Unless our lives are interrupted by uncommon means, we tend to keep up business as usual. *We need to be interrupted.*¹⁴

Our lives were interrupted when God, through the Christian community, called our family to move from a suburban culture into the inner city North End culture. Here we daily came in contact with people who through various circumstances found themselves living below the poverty line. Along with other staff and volunteers we began to learn that God desires not only individual salvation but also the salvation of a society in which social, economic, and political forces help to create and keep people in poverty.

When North Enders identified for us that access to the waterfront had been replaced by commercial interests and park space was virtually non-existent, we knew City Hall needed to be confronted. When a single mom who had given in to a pesky salesperson and had signed for an expensive vacuum cleaner came to us, we knew that she was a victim of an unjust economic system that allowed these pressure tactics. When a landlord refused to rent an apartment because of the race of a potential renter, we knew we had to step in and be advocates. Daily justice issues converged on us. It seemed as if the wider social

structures carried a demonic force that was out of control. Once people got themselves into poverty, these forces kept them there.

In our search for answers we found ourselves rereading many of the biblical passages that expanded on Amos's classic words: "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). In particular Jesus' proclamation in the temple where he said, "... he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), and his prompt expulsion from the community, caught our attention. The analysis of this passage by John Howard Yoder¹⁵ and others taught us that Jesus, expanding on the Year of Jubilee, ushered in a new Kingdom, where there would be generous sharing and more equal access to the resources of this world.

Since 1966 the Welcome Inn has enjoyed the support of numerous Mennonite congregations and others from southern Ontario and elsewhere. They have contributed much financial support, volunteer time and friendship, offering resources such as their horses for an annual "horse picnic". They have also begun to recognize and receive the gifts of those who live below the poverty line. This growing relationship between the rich and the poor has also confronted Mennonites who are becoming increasingly more affluent. At an annual conference session in the early 1980's, after a gripping skit, one of the pastoral leaders came up to us and said, "The problem with you people is that you always prick our conscience." The drama we were presenting boldly and symbolically portrayed at the front of the assembly a rich person, confident, well-dressed, briefcase in hand, standing near the top of a brand new ladder. Across the sanctuary, on the other side of the stage, was a person showing obvious signs of poverty, standing at the bottom of a small rickety old ladder that had been retrieved from Hamilton's garbage dump.

The 2 monologues were revealing. As the well-to-do person talked, his own poverty became very evident – poverty of being caught up in richness, time squeezes, always striving for more, and struggles with personal relationships. As the person of few economic resources spoke, we heard of the daily frustrations of paying the bills, feeding the family, of looking for understanding, for relationships and for a way out of poverty.

Clearly this is not the scenario that God intends. Amongst the many scripture passages that relate to the "rich and poor" question (Will and Lisa Samson¹⁶ suggest there are more than 3000 such verses) Mary's prophetic Magnificat stands out: the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up; the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty (Luke 1:52-53).

I would suggest that the words of Jean Vanier affirm all that the Welcome Inn stands for, and all that we as Mennonites are learning. While

his thoughts are confrontational, they also bring tremendous hope for Mennonite folk who have a rich heritage of material and educational accomplishments, but also have a theological underpinning that boldly proclaims a “true evangelical faith” that “does not lie dormant” but “feeds the hungry”.

Rich people need the poor. Without contact with them they run the danger of feeling completely self-sufficient, of not needing anyone, of feeling completely secure in their knowledge and power.

The poor tend to disturb the rich in their false security. And if rich people let themselves be disturbed, then the miracle can happen!

The poor can penetrate through the bars of their prison. The eyes of the poor can seep into their hearts and waken them to new life. Through a real meeting of the two, the rich can experience that they really have a heart. Their own hearts begin to vibrate and to love. They also discover their own fears, barriers and search for comfort and security.¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ Title adapted from Hugo Neufeld, *The North End Lives: A Journey Through Poverty Terrain* (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 2006).
- ² *Ibid.*, 54.
- ³ Gerald W. Schlabach, *And Who is my Neighbor? Poverty, Privilege and the Gospel of Christ* (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1990), 36.
- ⁴ *The Church and Its Witness in Society: Study Conference Report* (Winnipeg: Canadian Board of Christian Service, Conference of Mennonite in Canada, Jan 9, 1959), A-3.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, r6 – s1.
- ⁶ *Church and Society Conference* (Chicago, YMCA Hotel: General Conference Mennonite Church, Oct 31 – Nov 3, 1961), 1-10.
- ⁷ See the following anniversary books: John H. Cornies, ed., *Celebrate 1952 – 1997* (Hamilton: Hamilton Mennonite Church, 1997); Hamilton Mennonite Church, *Remember Rejoice Renew 1952-2002* (Hamilton: Hamilton Mennonite Church Editorial Committee, 2002).
- ⁸ Albert Willms, ed., *Welcome Inn –VS, Inner City Ministry* (Hamilton, ON, 1997).
- ⁹ Helen Unrau, ed., *Welcome Inn Community Centre and Church 1966 - 1986* (Hamilton ON, 1986).
- ¹⁰ *All God's People, Edition 9, Let us be One* (Harrisburg, Virginia: Mennonite Board of Mission Media Ministries, 1988).
- ¹¹ Hugo Neufeld, *The North End Lives: A Journey Through Poverty Terrain* (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 2006), 102.

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- ¹² Lois Corney, “Jesus Accepts Us” in *Welcome Inn Community Centre and Church 1966 – 1986*, ed. Helen Unrau, (Hamilton ON, 1986), 51.
- ¹³ *Mennonite Reporter*, 12: 3 (1982), 6.
- ¹⁴ Will and Lisa Samon, *Justice in the Burbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 42.
- ¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1972.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* 149.
- ¹⁷ Jean Vanier, “Welcoming Jesus in the Poor,” *The Canadian Catholic Review* 1 (1983), 14. Male pronouns have been changed to honor Vanier’s inclusive intentions.