

Five Lessons for the Churches from Justice Tour 2015

A report from the Tour participants
To members of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC)
and
To the participants across Canada who received our delegation

May 2015

In April and May we were part of a delegation of church leaders hosted by ecumenical committees in eight cities across Canada to a) share information about poverty in Canada and climate justice; b) listen to reflections on regional realities that inform action plans for local engagement and advocacy, and c) assess material for a *Church Leaders' Pastoral Statement* to be developed through this process.

The Justice Tour visited Vancouver, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Kitchener, Halifax, Montreal and Ottawa. We reported to the members of the Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches on May 13th at their meeting in Ottawa.

Ottawa: "The cries of the earth and the cries of the poor are the voice of God in our time. Are we listening?"

Background

In 2011 important interfaith statements were issued on both these themes, yet most people in the pews were never made aware of their content. Citizens for Public Justice, an affiliate member of the CCC and co-organizer of the Justice Tour, has used these statements in various

Young Adult Vancouver: "I spend a lot of time defending the church to my peers. It's tough though because we haven't seen the church take leadership on any major issue in our time. We need bold, moral leadership"

educational and awareness-raising opportunities, including publishing [two booklets](#) of reflections and action suggestions, to encourage the work of the churches and engage faith communities in further action. However, we found too few participants who knew of these statements by their leaders, or had used them in congregational education and action strategies. Our churches can resolve to do better in this regard.

These two priority issues for the CCC's Commission on Justice and Peace are especially strategic in 2015 with the civic engagement that will occur during the federal election, and because of two key international events: the UN climate conference in Paris (December), and the

Aboriginal voice Winnipeg: "We need to approach these issues with humility and respect."

UN General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals (September). The announcement that Pope Francis will release the first-ever encyclical on the environment in July may also give these issues greater weight among Roman Catholics and others.

The Justice Tour heard from dozens of experts, local politicians and church members passionate about issues of climate change and poverty in Canada, at events attended by over 700 individuals. At the risk of simplifying this tremendously rich experience, it could be said that we heard five main messages repeated over and over again.

What We Heard

First, it is clear that people in the Canadian churches really care about poverty and climate change. Many people are involved in ministries addressing these concerns in myriad ways, and they called for moral leadership and even risk-taking from their faith leaders as well as substantive action from their governments.

Secondly, people clearly see links between climate change and poverty concerns, acknowledging that Indigenous rights are intertwined with and must be taken into account as we respond. It was often remarked that poverty has many faces, including the faces of Indigenous peoples and newcomers to Canada, but it is the poor that suffer most from climate disruption. We heard that the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor are one and the same, or in another's words, "nature is the new poor." In addressing both issues, it is climate justice and justice for the poor that is required, rather than limiting our churches to charitable responses.

Halifax: "We need to find ways to address poverty and climate justice at the same time. Working on one only can increase the effects on the other."

Edmonton: "We need to help people bridge between cultures. We need to recreate community."

Montreal: "We need to paddle the rabaska (canoe) together."

Third, the Justice Tour heard a communal lament due to the breakdown of relationships: with God, with creation and with each other. Canada, it seems, has changed, but there is a yearning to revitalize communities. It was recognized that faith communities can and must play a role in changing the dominant discourse and allowing the bridging of cultures, re-establishing hospitality and re-creating community.

We were also firmly and repeatedly invited to work in partnerships. This included working with other denominations, other faith groups as well as engaging partners in civil society. While acknowledging that collaboration makes our voice stronger, there were numerous calls to avoid dominant structures but to proceed by always including people with lived experiences of poverty and climate injustice in our efforts.

Vancouver: "This Justice Tour takes us out of our individual denominational laments, into all working together about what's really important."

Finally, we always discerned the presence of hope. People are not giving up, but instead, accompanying all the analysis there was urgency expressed in the need for action for change. Justice Tour participants focused on the CCC's two priority issues (climate justice and ending poverty in Canada), because the 25 members of the CCC firmly believe Psalm 24: "the earth is the Lord's and all that's in it, the world, and those who live in it."

Aboriginal voice Vancouver: "It's time to roll up our sleeves and bring about change!"

Next steps

Drawing on what was learned during the listening tour, a *Church Leaders' Pastoral Statement on Climate Change and Poverty in Canada* will be developed and shared this summer for study and response from church constituencies, candidates for political office and the public. We would ask all CCC member churches to set aside time to participate in the approval process efficiently.

Halifax: "Churches need to educate their constituents. We need to demonstrate that there is political pressure (i.e. not just church leaders taking a position). We need to demonstrate there is a risk to change and we are willing to take the risk!"

Locally-led engagement activities will follow the *Statement*, resulting in various local engagement and advocacy plans, such as meetings with candidates, reflections/prayers/hymns and liturgical activities, etc. We hope our congregations will all receive and reflect upon the *Statement* and we look forward to your feedback, which will ensure this listening and engaging process does not simply end with the visits to these eight cities.

Canadian church leaders will participate in, and report back from the UN meetings with international faith-based partners.

A federal election resource, including sections on these two priority issues, has already been prepared by ecumenical coalitions. It is available on the CCC website, and we encourage you to ensure its broad circulation and use.

Edmonton: churches can play an important role in starting "healthy conversations on hard issues."

We church leaders received these many challenges in good faith during the Justice Tour 2015, and want to express our thanks to all the participants who offered their valuable time and

Aboriginal voice in Saskatoon: "I don't want your handout; I want your hand. It (change) has to start with you."

attention to such serious concerns. The ecumenical participants and the many concerned persons who inhabit church pews are now invited to pick up the causes of poverty in Canada and climate justice and make them your own.

The Justice Tour 2015 delegation included:

Rev. Dr. Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Church in Canada,
Rev. Dr. Willard Metzger, Executive Director of Mennonite Church Canada,
Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches,
Joe Gunn, Executive Director, Citizens for Public Justice