

Campaign Against Child Poverty: (A sermon used in some United Church congregations; feel free to adapt it to suit your circumstances, since it is written from the perspective of one involved in the 'Campaign Against Child Poverty' from the beginning. It may also be linked to some of the illustrations found in the Power Point presentation on Child Poverty.) Lillian Perigoe

Thanks for invitation and welcome! On this Outreach Sunday, you have invited me to talk to you about the Campaign Against Child Poverty....

Let me begin with Fiorello.

Fiorello LaGuardia was New York's mayor from the depths of Depression through World War II. Adoring New Yorkers called him 'Little Flower' because of his name, because he was short, because his lapel always sported a carnation.

A colourful character, he rode New York's fire trucks, accompanied police raids on 'speakeasies' during Prohibition, took entire orphanages to baseball games, and during a newspaper strike, went on the radio to read Sunday comics to kids.

One cold January evening in 1935, the mayor turned up at night court in New York's poorest ward. Dismissing the evening's judge, La Guardia took over the bench. Soon, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter whose husband had left her, was ill; her two grandchildren were starving.

But the shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop charges. 'It's a real bad neighbourhood, Your Honour,' the man said. 'She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson.'

LaGuardia sighed, turning to the woman, to say, 'I have to punish you. No exceptions in the law. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.' But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor reached into his pocket, extracted a bill and tossed it into his hat, saying, 'Here's the ten-dollar fine, which I now pay; furthermore I'm fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines; give them to the defendant.'

Next day, newspapers reported that \$47.50 collected in that hat had been turned over to a bewildered woman who had stolen bread to feed her hungry children. Fifty cents of that amount came from the grocery-store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, traffic violators, and New York City police officers, each of whom paid fifty cents for the privilege, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

We need more politicians like that!

In 1996, some people from a synagogue and my neighbouring United Church congregation in Toronto, together with June Callwood, began an interfaith movement we called 'Campaign Against Child Poverty'. Soon Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others, religious and secular, joined, along with partner organizations like Campaign 2000, Citizens for Public Justice, and

ISARC.

Since then I=ve met children who suffer: because mother doesn=t have enough food to give them breakfast, or they shiver in clothes that aren't warm enough, or they know Saturday morning means a trip to the Food Bank...

We say: our faiths tell us that=s wrong. Our faiths tell us: worship and work to keep children well and strong. Our faiths tell us: educate and advocate. Reach the public. Reach the politicians.

Jesus= words: >Love God; love your neighbour as yourself.=

Isaiah=s words: >The fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to share your bread with the hungry...=

The Prophet Mohammed=s words: >None can call themselves believers who eat their fill while their neighbours go hungry.=

A Buddhist Prayer: Let us find the faith and hope to plant seeds of hope for children and thus flourish as one Family in the world.

The central message of all these faiths and others is the sacred duty to care for the most vulnerable among us.

LaGuardia=s words:I=m fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat.

God=s word - in all our sacred texts B says: connect faith with justice, connect life with compassion.

November, 1989: a resolution unanimously passed the Canadian House of Commons: This House... seek(s) to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.

It seemed the Canadian government would act. But promises ARE broken. Political will to implement the promise weakened, as Canada moved through recession and prosperity, through deficits and surpluses. Prime Ministers and Premiers of all parties reiterated the promise ...

And yet, by 2000, the number of poor children in Canada had increased 55% from 1989 - children living in working poor families up 55%, in unaffordable housing up 91%, in poor 2-parent families up 55%, in poor single-parent families up 49%. In 1989, about 1 child in 7 was poor, according to low-income cut-off figures defined by Statistics Canada. By 2000, 1 child in 5 lived in poverty, a hike in real numbers of 402,000. Recent data shows little improvement.... The Toronto Star, January, 2007: "Tragically the number of people living in poverty has grown, not dropped, in recent years despite economic boom times in many parts of this nation. Today, one in six Canadians, including 1.2 million children, live a miserable existence on incomes well below anyone's definition of poverty."

Some say, with puzzlement: child poverty in Canada? How can that be in a country ranked among the best to live in, by various indices? How, indeed?

Think about the dismantling of welfare in the 90's, of cuts to employment insurance, and to reasonably priced child care. Remember how both Ottawa and the provinces stopped building social housing in the '90s, creating a severe shortage of affordable accommodation in Canada's cities. As families had to spend increasing portions of income on shelter, parents turned to food banks to feed their children and skimped on everything from clothing to school supplies.

And then, after 9/11, it became difficult to hear anything above clamorous calls to strengthen security.

CACP has tried to advocate for change, in public education messages like these: (show power point slides, if available, or paper copies of messages hung on a wall....)

Yet by 2005 a UN report disclosed a stunning and shameful reality – the extent of poverty affecting children, in what the world thinks of as 'Rich countries'.

- The section on Canada begins "in 1989, an all-party resolution committed the Government of Canada to 'seek to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000.'" It goes on to point out that by April, 2005: Canada was ranked 19 out of 24 with a rate of children living in poverty of 14.9%. Compare Finland, number 1, at 2.8%.

It is obvious to UNICEF, to the world, that Canada's promise has been broken.

The costs are enormous. Children who live in poverty grow up to be less healthy than others, less able to cope with stress, less educated, more at risk for society's problems. Poverty is feeling ashamed; sensing family strain when the school requests money for field trips; being away, ill, more than other kids; pretending you forgot your lunch, that you can read when you can't because you've had to move and switch schools 12 times in 4 years.

Put simply, investing in children now pays huge dividends for the future, including its 'security'. Investing in children is >a bottom line= for people who think that way. Investing in children is living into God's promise for people of faith.

It's time to act to end child poverty. My colleagues and I, Jews, Muslims, Christians, others, work together on messages to government: >What we need is a comprehensive solution, federal and provincial. What we need are budget benchmarks that affect kids' lives.= What can you and I do? Prayer alone will not, cannot, end child poverty. So - pray B always. But also call on your elected representatives to do their part. Pray, phone, fax, e-mail. Click on www.childpoverty.com to send a message to the Prime Minister and the Federal Government. Get the message through.

(if you are using the Power Point presentation, show slides here.)

The good news is that money is starting to trickle back into housing, welfare, children's benefits and early learning. The bad news is that, at the current rate, it will take a generation to fix the problem. That is why CACP continues to push towards new targets, new commitments.

Giving up is not an option, if we follow God, practise Isaiah's fast, hear Jesus' words. We will continue challenging governments at all levels to keep their promise. That's our promise, made in faith, with prayer.

Let me end by playing a song written for CACP and recorded by children from the Canadian Opera Children=s Chorus. Play CD 'The Promise', projecting the words (see PowerPoint presentation), if possible.